

## **Xin Xin (CHN) “I think open water was calling me and waiting for me”**

Xin Zhou, FINA Media Committee Member (CHN)

“Am I champion? Am I champion?” Xin Xin asked the first Chinese coach she met after she stepped on to the pontoon.

“Yes, you are the champion!” Then, chanting like a kid, Xin ran into her coach’s arms and asked, “Am I good?” “Perfect!” said her coach Jin Hao.

Xin is the first Chinese swimmer in history to win an open water event at the World Championships. She beat Haley Anderson of the United States by 0.90 seconds to win the 10km, while Rachele Bruni of Italy came away with the bronze. A total of 64 swimmers competed in the race, in which defending champion Aurélie Muller of France, who won in 2015 and 2017, ended up in 11th place, missing Olympic qualification.

Xin competed in the 800m freestyle at the 2012 London Olympics, finishing 24th overall, but after switching to open water she claimed fourth place in the 10km marathon at the 2016 Rio Games at Copacabana Beach.

### **“We are still young and inexperienced in this event”**

Congratulations! You have won the first open water world title for China. Did you expect to be the world champion before the race?

*Never! I was 11th two years ago in Budapest. I just wanted to enter the top 10 and earn a ticket to the Tokyo Olympic Games. It was a surprise to me too. I did not think about the medal. I thought it was too difficult to finish top three. In fact, I did not bring my clothes and shoes for the victory ceremony with me. My teammates had to run back to the hotel and bring the clothes to me. And then I borrowed shoes from my teammate.*

What was your feeling after you made history for China swimming?

*I was greatly honoured to win the title here in Gwangju. It was always the dream for every athlete. China has only competed in the open water competition since the 2007 Worlds. We are still young and inexperienced in this event. I was glad that I made the dream come true for all of our Chinese swimmers and coaches.*

What were your tactics for the competition? How did you prepare?

*Most of the swimmers did the same tactics in open water, I guess. My coach and I talked about the tactics last night and in the morning before the race. I just tried to swim as relaxed and comfortable as possible in the first five laps. I tried to save more energy and kept the best for last.*

Did you follow all your coach’s words during the race?

*It’s always been competitive in the open water race. I did my best and exactly executed the instruction my coach told me on every lap. During the race I kept my pace and stayed with the pack of the world’s fastest swimmers. I tried to improve my position from 50th, 40th, 30th and 20th until the last split. I started to accelerate my speed and I gave it all in the last lap. There was someone who dragged me in a mass in the last 300 metres, I thought I must sprint to the finish line as fast as possible.*

## **“I am always the one who jellyfish like the best”**

You broke the Asian record in the women’s 800m freestyle at the 2013 National Games in Liaoning, China. Why did you move from pool swimming to open water?

*I think open water was calling me and waiting for me. I found excitement and unpredictable fun in it, though it is a hard sport which requires strong physical and mental power as well as experience. On the other hand, I still train in the pool most of the time. I just swim open water in the race.*

Could you introduce yourself, when and how did you learn to swim?

*I was born in Jinan, Shandong province, in China. One of my older relatives was a swimming coach and my father, aunt and uncle were all swimmers. I learned to swim when I was six. I won my first national championship in the 800m freestyle in April 2012. Then I entered the national team and set a goal for myself, to raise the national flag at world-level competitions. At the 2013 National Games, I was fortunate to win both events in 800m free and 10km open water. It was the first time I competed in the open water and open seemed a new world to me.*

What was the biggest difficulty you met in open water swimming?

*The jellyfish. I am always the one who jellyfish like the best among a group of swimmers. I guess that helps me get faster because I just try to run away from the jellyfish and finish the race as soon as possible. Once we went to Yantai for the preparation of the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, I couldn’t count how many jellyfish were around. But we had to swim in that environment. I couldn’t sleep until 2 or 3 in the morning because the bites were so itchy and painful.*

## **“I hope my world title may attract more swimmers”**

How many Chinese swimmers compete in open water? Is it a popular sport in China?

*Our long-distance swimmers and young swimmers usually compete in open water races for training. In our national championships there are about 130 swimmers. It is good for both pool swimming and open water. I hope my world title may attract more swimmers to take part in open water.*

What is your target for Tokyo? How do you prepare?

*I will start from zero. I am confident in myself and I will try to stand on the podium in my second Olympic (open water race). The competition will be much closer, with fewer fights around the buoys, because there are only 25 swimmers qualified for the Olympics. I will be more concentrated on my own race.*

## **The coach’s call**

Jin Hao, former Asian champion in butterfly, has been coaching Xin for seven years.

What is Xin’s character in your view?

*Xin is a simple and determined girl. You can see her emotions in her face. On the other hand, she is consistent and straightforward in swimming as she overcame many difficulties in the sport. She is full of power inside her heart. She is an excellent swimmer and is getting more mature and understanding of the sport.*

How did you value Xin’s victory in Gwangju?

*She did her best, she is a treasure for Chinese swimming. We lack experience in open water since China has competed in this discipline (only) since 2007. Even our coaches have no clear idea on training and competitions, while Xin has accumulated a lot of experience thanks to her own races. That is good for her and for us to learn from the sport.*

Do you always set the same tactics for Xin?

*It depends on the situation. But Xin did a very clever job this time as she followed our plan and burst out in full speed for the last 200m sprint. She had to deal with all the situations in the water herself but she was*

*able to handle that. It was a victory after a hard battle, I am proud of her.*

What is your plan for the Tokyo Olympic Games?

*We will continue to swim the FINA World Series this year and compete in other open water races as many times as possible in the following season. I hope she can realise her dream in Tokyo.*

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