Svetlana Romashina & Svetlana Kolesnichenko (RUS): “In elite sport you have to fight for your place under the sun”

Anna Kozina, FINA Media Committee Chair (RUS)

Svetlana Romashina made an unforgettable comeback after giving birth to her daughter in 2017 and won three gold medals at the 2019 FINA World Championships in Gwangju: one in free solo and the two others in duet with Svetlana Kolesnichenko. The two stars of Team Russia differ in age, experience and number of titles. At the same time they have more than one thing in common. And we are not talking about similar legs, which are definitely important for the judges.
and outlook on life. They are soulmates and this is the key to success. And ultimately they shared the top prize in 2019 since Kolesnichenko also claimed three gold medals, one in technical solo and the two others... you know that.

So here is a joint interview with the two outstanding artistic swimmers of our age.

Well, we have two Svetas in the duet. How does your coach Tatiana Danchenko address you so as not to mix you up?

For example, in the case of Anastasia Ermakova and Anastasia Davydova everybody called them Nastya and Asya respectively.

Svetlana Romashina: I had a good answer to your question back in 2013. Sveta was a newcomer in the duet at that time.
Danchenko was focused on her. As they say, she made her sweat. That’s why it was like “Sveta…” (calmly), addressing me, and “Sve-e-ta!!!” (with impatience or annoyance), addressing the young and inexperienced duet partner Svetlana Kolesnichenko. As for now, Danchenko marks us out with gesture not with intonation. Although if I make a mistake she can use the respectful patronymic we have in Russian culture, Svetlana Alekseevna, just for fun.

“What was the story of building your duet?”

Svetlana Kolesnichenko: I vividly remember that day. I was driving a car and received a text message from Sveta: “Would you like to join me in the duet? It’s not a joke.” I was shocked, surprised and flattered by the attention paid to me. I knew that to be a part of the first-ranked Russian synchro duet is a huge responsibility. But I could hardly refuse such an offer. Many thanks to Sveta and Tatiana Danchenko for their choice.
Did coaches take your opinion into account?

Romashina: There were three of us who made the decisions: Tatiana Danchenko, Natalia Ishchenko and me. We also had a vote in favour from Asya Davydova, who was training in team routine for London 2012. She worked in a pair with Sveta. According to Davydova, Kolesnichenko was hardworking, with good feeling of the water and trainability. Besides, Sveta had beautiful legs with almost ideal for our sport leg lift and she had no problems with technique. That’s why we all came to the conclusion that Sveta was the perfect candidate. Nevertheless, I remember at the very beginning she was nearly crying during our training sessions. But she choked back tears and repeated the element again and again.

Kolesnichenko: Oh, I burst into tears in the evenings. I called my mum and asked her: “Why did they pick me? My skills are awful!” I was a multiple world champion in team but I was not good at all as a duet partner during the first months. I used to train differently as member of the team routine. Working in duet is something absolutely different. It was hard to make this change. But I set a goal to come through this challenge.

Sveta, I remember your reaction on your debut in solo in 2017. You were also self-critical. Is that your character feature?
Kolesnichenko: It’s always frightening to think of some new experience, some changes in your career. As I have already said, it was a huge responsibility. I couldn’t fail the team, the country with great traditions in synchronised and now artistic swimming. I didn’t want to be the person who spoiled and destroyed everything. I must confess I can be too self-critical and that’s why I never watch my performances. But, to my mind, it’s better than to be self-assured with a virtual crown on your head.

She is going home and starting to work again – as a mother

Both of you faced a hard period when your partners decided to take a break. How did you cope with the situation?

Romashina: Natalia Ishchenko and I were a team for eight years. We spent more than 300 days in a year together. We even had a joint vacation after the Beijing Olympics. On one hand, I was mentally ready to hear Natasha’s announcement about her maternity leave. I knew the time had to come: she was married, she wanted a baby. At the same time I had the feeling that I’d lost a part of my heart. We live in different cities now, but we text each other, I went to Kaliningrad to see her. But I still miss her as a person. When you have spent so much time together you become familiar with one another, what’s more, you became like twin souls. I can’t say that we are the best friends. I’m sure Natasha will confirm this statement. But we have some special relationships, a ‘chemistry’ that appears between two sportspeople who are partners.

Kolesnichenko: Sveta and I don’t have such a long story. We worked together in 2013. Then I paired up with Daria Korobova, Varvara Subbotina and Aleksandra Patskevich. But Sveta was my first partner and mentor and ‘big sister’. She
encouraged me, helped me with advice. So I was waiting for her comeback. It’s a real pleasure and great privilege to work with such an outstanding athlete and person. Just imagine: she has the same training loads as me but while I’m ready to collapse from exhaustion after training in the pool, she is going home and starting to work again – as a mother. She is worth raising a monument to!

Svetlana, you’ve also tried your hand at coaching. What did you feel watching Kolesnichenko and Patskevich performing as a duet in Budapest (2017 World Championships)?

Romashina: I was not jealous in the common sense of the word (laughing). It was a strange feeling not to be in the water myself. My tummy was growing day by day but I was not ready to retire in my head. In Budapest I understood that I wanted to come back, that I had desire, energy, mental and physical power. Speaking about coaching as such, it was more interesting for me to work with a junior duet, Karina Tashagadgieva and Milena Meretich. We were preparing for the European Championships. I was the boss in this duet. I had my own plan, my own training system. And I was the assistant coach for Kolesnichenko and Patskevich. I helped Danchenko, I took her place when she was away. These are two different roles and styles of work. And I’m grateful that Danchenko gave me the opportunity to have this experience. As a distinguished coach she knew that a decorated athlete has ambitions and high goals in every undertaking. By the way, Tashagadgieva and Meretich won gold at that junior Europeans. They came up with a 110 per cent performance in the final. Although the warm-up was terrible – I wanted to melt into the ground.

The coach is yelling, you listen mutely and learn

What kind of coach are you? Do you follow in the steps of Danchenko and/or head coach Tatiana Pokrovskaya, do
Romashina: I try to keep calm like Tatiana Danchenko, to explain everything with patience and in an easily accessible form. But sometimes you lose your temper and can’t stop yelling at your athletes. Once in 2017 Sasha Patskevich was standing nearby and asked: “Hey, why are you shouting at the top of your voice?” The next year she started coaching the team in our club. I could ask her the same question. When you put your heart and soul into your work it’s hard to control yourself. After my new experience I talked with Pokrovskaya and confessed that I fully understood why she was yelling at us at times...

Kolesnichenko: Senior sportspeople are more self-consistent, more reliable and thinking. But kids and junior swimmers like nobody else need the carrot-and-stick approach. Words of praise won’t make them work hard day after day and improve. The hardline approach is normal for us.

Romashina: It doesn’t mean that strict coaches are bad. The head coach has to keep the team focused, to keep 12 people on their toes. Because all of them are fighting for their place under the sun. Especially in Olympic years. Only eight girls are going to compete at the Olympics, including the duet. Many of the girls are sitting on the volcano: are you going to Tokyo 2020 or are you going to wait for another four years? I’ve learned this lesson since childhood: the coach is yelling, you listen mutely and learnt. When you grow up, get titles and popularity it becomes difficult to keep your mouth shut. I know that at first hand. There was a moment when I started arguing with Danchenko. But it didn’t last for too long. And now after having a baby I have calmed down. I can mutter something under my breath and keep training. There is no sense in picking a fight with your coach or partner.

Sveta, do you see these changes too?

Kolesnichenko: As a swimmer, she has become more determined and aspiring (it’s all too much). As a person she has
become calmer, more self-restrained, steady-going and understanding in some situations. She is cool. What else can I say? I love it when big champions remain good people. You can be the greatest of all time but you still have a heart. Svetlana is a person like this.

She is talking about you with esteem. It's nice to have such a partner and friend, isn’t it?

Romashina: Yes, you are right. This attitude is a motivation to be better, to eradicate shortcomings which I have. It’s impossible to become ideal. But it’s in my power to be human, caring and not indifferent in our selfish and self-interested world. This situation makes me sad. And I try to make the world a better place. It’s not about sports achievements, it’s about human values.

We'll see who will deserve the place in the team
Kolesnichenko: I don’t like to guess the future. We’ll see. But I can say that mentally I’m ready to step after the girls.

Romashina: Sveta is secretive. She doesn’t like to tell a lot about herself.

Agree. Sveta got married last year. But I found that out by chance…

Romashina: You know, we are similar in that way. I got married in 2015. I had a training session in the morning, Natasha braided my hair and I left the swimming pool to register marriage in a civil ceremony. Last year Sveta told me: “Don’t look surprised. I’m getting married tomorrow.”

Kolesnichenko: There was no sense for me in a grand ceremony with a banquet. We had been a couple for a long time, we lived together as a family. Nothing actually has changed after our registration.

You prefer to live without fanfare. I couldn’t find any photo in the wedding dress in your social media. How does this
Kolesnichenko: In my ordinary life I have an even temper. But in sport you need to harden your character. I worked a lot to become a good soloist. My ‘Amazon’ routine, the image of a warlike woman, was symbolical. I had a goal and I did everything to achieve it.

Speaking about goals, dreams and fighting for the place under the sun… There are such standpoints in sport as “if you are leaving, leave” or “make way for the young”. Svetlana, have you ever thought that you are taking somebody’s place?

Romashina: I joined Team Russia at 15. I was the youngest. It’s still a record. I was in one routine with Ermakova and Davydova, who had a battle with Kiseleva and Brusnikina for the opportunity to perform the duet at the 2004 Olympics. And they won it. This is elite sport. You have to fight every day. I came back but it doesn’t mean I cross ways with the
young. Probably I make it tougher and longer. But they should keep fighting, keep working, keep improving. I’m not against rivalry. Do you see another duet claiming for number one position in the team? I don’t. I have a motto: “Those are lucky who are on the rudder”. It works both in life and sport.

Besides, our coaches count on experience and good name.

Kolesnichenko: I was that young member of the team before London 2012. Through my very own example I had to realise that I wouldn’t get in the Olympic team just because of the feat of having already gained three golds at the Worlds. My time hadn’t come yet. Nevertheless, I didn’t give up, I didn’t stop training. On the contrary, I worked even harder. I think it’s good when Olympic champions come back to the team. It’s a challenge for the others, a try-out for their physical and mental strength. We are on the road to Tokyo. There are many contenders who want to take part in the Olympics. We’ll see who will deserve the place in the team. Anyway, it will be an invaluable experience for all of us.