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## Aleksandr Maltsev (RUS): "I knew that I took the right path"

Anna Kozina, FINA Media Committee Chair (RUS)

**Aleksandr Maltsev was told he had no future in artistic swimming. But he took the path and he didn't want to**

**switch. Negative opinions and even offensive words from representatives of the "stronger sex" couldn't make him**

**change his mind. Now he is four-times world champion and four-times European champion. He is one of those,**

**alongside Bill May, who have influenced the development of this sport. Aleksandr is 24 now. He is not one to look**

**Olympic appearance on his profile.**

**Aleksandr, people call you a pioneer, a trailblazer. Do you really feel like the first man on the Moon?**

It seems to me I've always had a feeling that I'm doing something that nobody has done before. At least in Russia. I was the first man in synchronised swimming in our country. It was a challenge to come a long way alone. I mean I have been the only one - boy, teenager and man - in the sport for many years. Then I became world and European champion. Inspired and encouraged by my performances, other boys have started taking up artistic swimming. It's so nice to hear some good words and gratitude from their parents, to realise that I'm a role model for someone. I was a pioneer and these newcomers have a window of opportunity. The stereotype that artistic swimming is a female sport has been dismantled. The attitude towards men in the pool has changed greatly since the 2015 World Championships in Kazan, where the debut of mixed duets took place. It's night and day. Not everyone, but the majority of people have accepted the fact that mixed disciplines are the future of our sport. The onwards and upwards for us are the Olympic Games.

**I knew that I took the right path**

**Who are those newcomers in Russia who can watch you and – who knows – one day replace you on the podium?**

My partner Maya Gurbanberdieva and I had a training camp with Team Russia in October. Another three mixed duets were invited to join us: Mikhail Vasiliev and Kristina Averina from the Moscow region, Artur Korshunov and Anna Gordeeva from Tatarstan and Dinara Ibragimova and Vyacheslav Rudnev from Uzbekistan. Unfortunately, Vyacheslav got injured and didn't come. Dinara worked for two, because she is the mastermind of the duet and coach as well. Thanks to her efforts Uzbekistan was among the participants at the World Championships in Gwangju. It's a pity we have a limit: only one duet can represent one country at the Worlds. For example, Vasiliev and Averina replaced Maya and me at the European Cup in St. Petersburg and won gold. So their level is quite good, they are able to compete and to be achievement-oriented. But they can't prove themselves at Worlds. The more mixed duets we have in one country the better. The inner rivalry moves the needle, helps to develop our sport. But we must give them a way to grow and improve on the global stage. What I can do from my side is to help, to give advice, to share experience. And I do it with pleasure.



Aleksandr Maltsev and his partner Maya Gurbanberdieva in the Mixed Duet Free.

**You have mentioned that it was hard to be the only men in the female sport. What helped you to keep on going?**

I knew that I took the right path. I've faced misunderstanding or negative reaction, but I was confident that those people were mistaken, not me. It was obvious for me that the evolution of synchronised swimming was connected to men. A balanced and harmonious sport can't be separated into male and female. The Olympic Charter says that gender inequality is unacceptable. But we had rhythmic gymnastics and artistic swimming doing that. This means they violated the rules. All the more, the status of our sport has changed. Mixed duets were recognised by FINA and LEN. It's logical to be included in the Olympic programme as well. I talked about this problem in my speech at the 2017 FINA Gala when I was named the best male artistic swimmer – and I will keep promoting mixed duets to be part of the Olympics. But at the very beginning of my career I was just training because I loved the sport. I wanted to improve, to learn something new. I watched the best performances of the best soloists and repeated after them. I believed that one day the situation would change. And it finally happened.

## **Swimming with Dedieu, Mengual, Fuentes**

**I know you had to leave one of the sports schools. They simply didn't have a programme for boys and athletic title**

**and category for men in synchronised swimming. How could you train and improve your skills in such conditions?**

Of course, I came up against some obstacles. But I was willing to self-educate. I watched so many videos on YouTube, putting the routines on pause and trying to analyse the technique, to repeat the elements in the pool. I also met so many good people – coaches, choreographers. In 2010, at the age of 15, I had two training camps with the Russian national team. It was a great impulse. I had only one and a half hours of training in the water in my sports school. The national team worked eight hours a day in the pool and two more in the gym. I withstood the loads. I worked with enthusiasm. This was my chance. I didn't want to miss it. Head coach Tatiana Pokrovskaya supported and encouraged me. She told me I should continue training. I followed her advice and trained in Olga Kuzhela's school (she won team gold in Beijing 2008) in my native town of St. Petersburg. I moved to Moscow in 2013 and started working under the leadership of Maria Maksimova and her daughter Gana, who is now the personal coach of our mixed duet. It was a new chapter in my life. Choreography, improvisation, plastic expression – I've never dealt with these aspects before.

**You've said that you watched the videos of the best athletes. Who inspired you? Did you have an opportunity to get**

**acquainted with them personally later on?**

It was Virginie Dedieu – a great professional in terms of technique and a wonderful actress. We did a duet at a gala after the World Series in France. It was almost improvisation. We had only 15 minutes to prepare our performance. But it was perfect because of her charm and electricity. Both of us were pleased, the audience was delighted. I also performed with Gemma

Mengual and Andrea Fuentes in Barcelona. I admire these incredible swimmers. I could hardly have believed ten years ago that one day I would swim mixed duet with them.

**I'm not a chief or commander**

**Aleksandr, you have had so many partners in the mixed duets. Is it true the girls from national team gave you a**

**nickname "Don Juan"?**

That's right. For a joke. But I really had four partners in my career, three in the national team.

**Joking aside, I don't think it's so easy to make a fresh start all and over again?**

Yes, it's hard to work well together. It doesn't depend only on technical skills. It's important to be on the same wave length, to find common ground. I think that I made that connection with Maya. We took part in Maria Kiseleva's Show of Olympic Champions just one month after our duet was created.

**Are you always the frontman in the duet?**

Depends on what do you mean. I definitely don't hog the cover. It doesn't work like that in duet. And I'm not a chief or commander. Yes, I'm more experienced. That's why I give Maya support, help her to get up for the performance. But in training we are shoulder-to-shoulder. We learn to understand one another, to make a compromise.

**Maya told the journalists that you both were similar in legs. That was one of the reasons the coaches chose her. It's**

**true that you stretch your toes like the girls do. But some people think that men in mixed duets should be more**

**muscular, more dominant...**

Disputable statement. To my mind, the man's figure in artistic swimming should be harmonious. A bag of muscles will be useless. We need mobility, plasticity. The muscle mass should be lean. The same criteria as for ballet dancers. We have workouts in the gym: weightlifting, chin-ups, push-ups and stuff like that. We need strong arms to push out from the water in inverted position and strong legs to jump out of the water so that judges can see our hips.



**I've read that you were always good at this element. Water polo coaches were willing to lure you away...**

I had a proposal in fact. Both water polo players and artistic swimmers have the same exercise: the “eggbeater”. But in our sport the level of difficulty is higher. Here is another example. We have a swim series: 75m freestyle plus 25m underwater part with one breath. 400m in total. Artur Korshunov from Tatarstan is a former swimmer. But it is difficult for him to “survive”. Artur is 18. He has been an artistic swimmer for a year. But I see his progress. I know that he does his best and works 100 per cent. I tried to help, to join him in out-of-pool training while he was working with the national team at our base camp.

**And now I get incredible emotions**

**Are you going to be a coach in the future?**

I did a master's degree in coaching and embarked on postgraduate studies. I will do thesis research. I'm interested both in theory and practice. I like to teach, to explain, to build programmes. I have told you that when I was young I had to do some elements by feel. It was cut-and-try method. But it gave me valuable experience. And now I get incredible emotions. I'm so happy to see when other sportsmen overcome their fears, improve their weak spot with my help and assistance.



**I think you have come to another level. I've talked to Bill May in Gwangju. He was not on the podium but he enjoyed**

**every moment of the competition, he was excited to see the progress of the medallists and other participants...**

I understand him. Artistic swimming and particularly mixed duets event are not only about competing and fighting for medals any more for me either. My goal is still to be a champion. But now I see the reason not only to fight but to build up – to make my sport popular, spectacular, to encourage progress. Men have their own role in artistic swimming and it will develop in this direction. Maybe we'll see men competing in solo soon. And of course my dream is to take part at the 2024 Olympics as part of the mixed duet competitions.

