



FÉDÉRATION  
INTERNATIONALE  
DE NATATION

Published on *fina.org* - Official FINA website (<https://www.fina.org>)

---

## Coaching legend: Jane Figueiredo (ZIM)

Elena Vaytsekhovskaya, Olympic champion diver, FINA Aquatics World Magazine Correspondent (RUS)

**She is well-known in Great Britain as Tom Daley's coach, having guided the platform maestro to Olympic bronze in**

**2016 and his second world title in 2017. Few, however, may remember that 20 years ago Zimbabwe-born Jane**

**Figueiredo steered two other great divers to the very top: Russians Vera Ilyina and Yulia Pakhalina, who won the**

**synchro springboard final at the 2000 Sydney Olympics.**

**Your career is surprising: a girl from Africa becomes an outstanding diving guru. How did it happen?**

The majority of white girls and white boys grow up in an African country like Zimbabwe outdoors. We were swimming, we were diving, we were outdoors. I don't know if you remember but we had a diving team that went to Moscow 1980, the first Olympics (for Zimbabwe) because they were banned before that. Antonette Wilken reached the final and Debbie Hill just missed it. We had a girl who went to the Los Angeles Olympics, who was seventh in 1984 in the 3m springboard. We did diving in high school, we swam in high school. Actually, once growing up, diving kids all went to the US on diving scholarships.

**Like it was with the Russian girls at the end of the 90s?**

That is correct. Vera Ilyina was the first one, Yulia (Pakhalina) came later. I think the question was always the same: was she going to return in a better or worse condition?

**(GB Diving National Performance Director) Alexei Evangulov told me once: “Jane became a professional coach**

**because she had a possibility to work with the high-level divers.” Is it true?**

He's absolutely right. I always coached foreign athletes and, before Vera, Yulia and Nastya (Pozdnyakova). I had a British girl, my first diver, who dove at the World Championships, World Cups, all the Grand Prix and obviously she wasn't the same level as Vera, Yulia and Nastya. So very quickly I had to learn a lot of things. When I started travelling with the Russian team, that was very challenging for me. Why? Because Vera's coach was still part of that team and he was very possessive, very jealous. So I just tried not to interfere. And the same with Yulia. The agreement was with Yulia that I would coach her in America (at the University of Houston) and when she returns to Russia, she works with Vladimir (Pakhalin). I respected him tremendously but mostly because I understood that she was his daughter and he was looking to do certain things with her that were very different from what I was teaching her. An example: I wanted her to reach her arms, he wanted her just to jump. So very different techniques to apply. So what it ended up like when she was with me, we worked arms. We started to change the technique and her 205B became easier, better, faster and just great.

**Were you involved in this situation when there were three girls for two places and Alexei (Evangulov) had to make**

**the decision about Irina Lashko?**

Yes and no. 'Yes', because I understood what was happening, but 'No', because I didn't understand how that related to us because we were so far away from it. Fortunately, Vera won the nationals and picked Yulia, and Lashko was left out. That kicked off the process of the partnership between Vera and Yulia. I think for Yulia it was so difficult because she and Irina won the (1998) World Championships in Perth in synchro one or two years before. So for Yulia, it was a very difficult decision because she liked Lashko, she was very close to her. After Vera and Yulia had won the gold medal in 2000, Yulia's dad said: "If you want to go to America now, you can go." I was so happy because obviously for my university team to have Yulia was like 'wow' – we could go and win everything. And Vera now was living in America, so Vera helped me and told Yulia to come. We won silver in Athens (2004 Olympics), and Yulia also had a bronze in the individual event, while Vera was fourth.

**Alexei Evangulov moved to Great Britain after 2008. When did you feel it was problematic for you to stay with the**

**Russian team?**

It wasn't problematic when Vera retired, because it happened in 2004. It became problematic really after 2008 when Yulia retired and they changed the technical directors. Oleg Zaitsev at that time was the assistant to Alexei. He was very supportive when he was the assistant. But after Beijing all the best girls had retired and the boys (Evgeny Kuznetsov and Ilya Zakharov) started to emerge. So the girls had really no support. I remember one practice, we were preparing for their Nationals, so Nastya wasn't supposed to leave for two more or three more weeks. She arrived at the pool on one day, her phone rang, it was Zaitsev and he said, "You better come by tomorrow otherwise you are no longer on the Olympic team." And she said, "What? What do you mean?" And he said, "I don't care, you'd better be here tomorrow in Moscow." She had to run home, pack her bags and leave that night to be in Russia the next day. And crazy things like that. I didn't want to be a part of that any longer.

**Alexei invited you to work with Tom Daley?**

Exactly. Though at first I said: “No, no way.” I didn’t want to move to London. I didn’t know the city at all. My mother is British but for me London has always been cold, miserable and unhappy. It’s actually not like that but that had been my impression back then. And again, I didn’t want to leave Texas, because Vera was there, Yulia was there and Nastya was there, my family was there. And I had travelled so much with the Russian team that I wasn’t ready to start travelling again.

**When did you move to London?**

Alexei called me probably in October of 2013 and he said, “Hi Jaaaaane!” And I said “Hi Alexei, what are you doing?” He said, “Do you speak Portuguese?” Because my father is Portuguese. And I said, “No, I’ve never spoken Portuguese.” And he said, “Ohhh, that’s a bummer. I thought maybe you might be interested in being our team manager or a translator in Rio.” I thought the conversation was finishing there. And then he said, “Okay... Why don’t you come to London and give my coaches a presentation, because we have a conference every year?”

**So he went from far away?**

Yes. And I said, “Oh, that sounds interesting.” So I went to London and the other day (‘the next day’?) Alexei suggested to go to the Olympic pool. And of course, Thomas Daley was there. I said, “Oh, hi Tom.” He said, “Hi Jane, now we’re going to show you the facility. You know, I’m moving to London and looking for a coach. Maybe you want to move to London?”



**And?**

And I said “No, I don’t think so, like I’m happy where I am. I am very happy in Texas.” Next week, Alexei gave me a call and said, “Hi Jane, by the way, Tom is in Orlando. Can he come to train with you for two or three weeks in Texas?” I said, “Okay, when are you coming?” He said, “Tomorrow.” So I picked Tom up at the airport, he came to stay with me. He was fantastic! Oh my goodness, for two weeks I was just in heaven. And you know, honestly, since Vera and Yulia I had not coached somebody who just inspired me that much and before this I was thinking I would never coach somebody as good as them again. I thought I was the luckiest person in the world. Really.

**I am not able to imagine how big was the blow when Tom finished last in the semi-final in Rio after he almost won**

**the Games in preliminaries...**

Huge. That was extremely painful. Painful for him, painful to watch him. Painful for me because certainly I didn’t expect that and our preparation was amazing. But several things happened prior to that. I think he thought only he could be the guy ever to win a diving Olympic gold medal for Great Britain. But Jack Laugher and Chris Mears achieved that some days earlier. So that was the first scenario. And I think when that happened, he wanted so badly to just kill it and do it and be the same that he came out that first prelim and just like “Grrwww...” And he just killed himself. There was nothing left. Nothing. And it was a very difficult thing to watch because we always wanted to dive like he did in preliminaries. And during the couple of years that I coached him, we were always battling with “Why do you want to be in ninth place and

scratch and claw and then you end up third?" I said, "You're never going to win the gold medal that way. Ever."

**After performances like Tom had in Rio it happens often that an athlete and a coach split.**

I never thought about that. I can't speak for Tom because, you know, he would have to tell you his version but I think that initially he wanted to blame a lot of things for his mistakes or his failure there. But I think now, if you ask him two years later, three years later, he has a very different reflection. But because of Rio I never thought a second about not staying. I had to stay. Because running away from that failure would, I think, be my biggest regret and I couldn't allow us, Tom and me, to finish like that. That's never going to happen.



**Knowing the story, it's easy to understand what you felt in Budapest, when Daley became world champion.**

Well, he had so much to prove, right?

**You started working together when Tom started this relationship with Dustin (Lance Black), who lived in USA. Was**

**it a problem for you?**

I would say... no. Tom discussed the situation with me in America before I even moved to London. Because he came to America to stay with me when all the papers were going to reveal that he was gay. So he was in my house and he came and he said, "I want to come stay there with you, I want to get out of Great Britain." I think moving to London was the beginning of trying to be able to manage that relationship. Because he lived in Plymouth before and it took four or five hours by train to get to London. Whereas if he lives in London, it's easy to fly to Los Angeles and back.

**One probably stupid question. I know it's a huge problem for the American coaches to tell the student that he or she**

**has too much body weight. Can you tell Tom, "Now you close your mouth and stop eating"?**

No. Because I coached mostly women all of my life, there's a certain strategy for women, right? If you go to a woman and you use the word "fat", first of all, I find that very rude. So it's not the right word. Tom had heard those words years before I came along but I never used that word with Tom. Ever. I think one article in a newspaper in Great Britain... we made a joke about some candy or some sweets and they wrote an article about that: "Tom Daley's coach tells him to lay off the candy". And that's not what we were talking about. But for me the strategy for Tom was to give him the tools so he could work on his nutrition. To educate him. And we started that process in Houston. I had him to meet with my nutritionist at the University of Houston and she sat with him the first time he ever came to visit. Not me. I was never there. And then we started just working on strength and conditioning, different kinds. And my strength coach worked with him. And before you knew it, he was like dropping pounds. We never said anything about what to eat.

**Did he talk to you about having a baby when they decided?**

That's a great question because after Rio he did talk to me that he might like to start a family and how was I about that. I said, "Well, I have two things. Number one: I'm concerned only because how are you going to manage your time, because having a baby and training full time and travelling and being a celebrity look a lot? And then number two: I never told him "You shouldn't do it." Again, I think, it's like nutrition – I don't want to tell him what he shouldn't do. I want him to make the decisions and then he's going to come and say, "How are we going to manage this, Jane?" So, since he's had the baby he's been like another person. So my fears disappeared, turned into happiness and joy to see how he's changed as a person and how much love he shows for this baby, Robbie (Robert Ray Black-Daley). He brings him to the pool, though he always asks, "Jane, can I bring Robbie to the pool because Lance is away and I don't have a place to put him?"

**Do they have a nurse or...?**

Yes, but you know everything cannot click all the time, right? We just work around it. He brings the baby and I love the baby.

**Did you ever have a kind of misunderstanding with Tom's husband Lance?**

We have had only one conflict and that came after Lance broke the rules. I mean, the rules set by British Swimming.

**What kind of rules?**

You are not allowed to stay in the same hotel as the team. You are not allowed to fly on the same airplane as the team. You are not allowed, you are not allowed, you are not allowed. I don't necessarily like all of those rules but if there are rules and I work for British Swimming I need to keep them. It means I can't make my own rules because he's married or because he has a baby.

**Many years ago I talked to (diving coach) Tatiana Starodubtseva, while she was alive, and she told me that it was**

### **And I think you have the same problem with Tom.**

Yes, absolutely. You can't change that. When Tom was training with Dan (Goodfellow) and they won a bronze medal in Rio, Dan lived in another city, so it was not ideal. I think if you are going to be the best in synchro, you have to train together. Vera and Yulia, Nastya and Yulia, Jack (Laugher) and Chris (Mears), Jack (Laugher) and Dan (Goodfellow). So the next alternative, we had to think of another plan, because when Chris retired, Daniel was the only person who was very talented both on springboard and platform. But who could maybe do the same dives as Jack? So we had to let the option with Dan go and I said the only other possibility was Matthew (Lee), because he has the ability and the talent to do the dives. Maybe not as great as Tom but he is very talented and very, very good. In Korea (2019 World Championships) he made a mistake, but that was just because of his inexperience. The gold medal is going to be very difficult next year. It's not impossible but we have to give our best at least minimum for the silver.

### **How long have Tom and Matthew been training together?**

Oh, they didn't start synchro until the end of October, beginning of November (2018). So there's been a very short period of time. Then Matthew had to move, so Alexei (Evangulov) said to him, "You want a chance to go to the Olympics and win a medal? Number one, you have to come to London, and number two, you have to come to train with Jane and Tom." And he said, "Yes."

### **How do you imagine your future?**

My contract in Great Britain ends after Tokyo 2020. Many people ask me like, "What are you going to do, Jane?" My answer will always be, "I will wait until the Olympics are finished. And then I will take some time, maybe travel with my mom." I'd like to spend some time with my mom, she is getting older now. We want to travel, we want to do some fun things. So I will not make a decision until I had some time to rest. So in case Alexei also stays in London, he has to be patient and wait for me because I don't want to rush. I want to think all of my options because I think that's the smart thing to do.



**And if Alexei will return to Russia, you will return with him?**

Hahaha, wow... That's a million-dollar question. You know, I don't see that coming for me. I'll tell you why: mostly because my time with Vera, Yulia and Nastya was the most amazing time in my career. I don't think that going back is a good idea, the language is very difficult and it was always difficult. There are many opportunities for me and I am so appreciative of anybody that wants me to go anywhere. I feel lucky and I don't take advantage of that. I want to wait and then I want to really look at where I see myself. I love coaching. I want to give back to other coaches. I think I've learnt so much from the Russian system, the British system and the American system and I have the best of all of those three worlds. And I know for sure: I don't want to keep that experience for myself.

