Coaching legend: Gianni Lonzi (ITA)
Camillo Camett, FINA Media Committee chairman 1994-2017 (ITA)
Born in Florence, the capital of Tuscany, on a hot summer day on 4 August, 1938, under the sign of the Lion, whose influence was clearly reflected in some traits of his character, Gianni Lonzi has always shown himself to be a quality fighter, a tireless worker in all the roles he played in water polo - practically all available roles: athlete, club and national team player, national team coach, club administrator and federation manager, in Europe and the world.

Candid to the point of being sometimes uncomfortable, constructive and proactive, builder of ideas. In short, a unique character. If water polo were a novel Lonzi would be its main character, if it were a film he would be the main protagonist.

Just think that he is perhaps the only person in the world to have participated in 15 Olympics, the first in Rome 1960 as a player in the triumphant Italian team, the last in Rio de Janeiro 2016 as technical manager of FINA.

He was a workaholic
Gianni Lonzi highlights some typical features of the people of his land, such as salacious humour, wit, irony, sometimes sharp, sometimes mocking. Sometimes, in the presence of inflexible interlocutors sceptical about what he was saying, he would go so far as to tell a joke like this: “Remember that the most stupid of us was called Leonardo da Vinci!”

His love affair with water polo began as a boy. One day, while playing with friends on the banks of the Arno, the famous Florence river, close to home, Gianni was noticed by a sort of talent scout named Giordano Goggioli, a character himself in love with water polo. Goggioli, a player, club manager, journalist and writer of books on the sport he loved, noticed him and invited him to come and train at Rari Nantes Florentia, the water polo club of the city, one of the best in Italy, winners of national championship titles.

Lonzi excelled in swimming and at the age of 15 won a national title in backstroke, but he could not resist the fascination of the ball and the game of water polo. In 1953, he made his debut in the first division of the Italian Water Polo League (Serie A), where he proved to be an all-round and tenacious player. He played for Florentia from 1953 to 1963, combining the roles of player, captain and coach. In 1964, he moved to Camogli, contributing to the promotion of his team to the first division. In 1967 and 1968 he played for Pro Recco, winning two championships. He played in the national team from 1958 up to the 1968 Mexico Olympic Games, winning a gold medal at the Rome Olympics in 1960 and participating in Tokyo 1964 and Mexico 1968.

After Lonzi concluded his playing career in 1968, Mario Majoni, the national team coach, a Hall of Famer himself, called on him to coach the national junior team. After the 1972 Munich Olympics he replaced Majoni at the helm of the national team and led Italy to a bronze medal at the 1975 World Championships in Cali, a silver at the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal and gold at the 1978 World Championships in West Berlin. During this time he also coached the 1977 and 1982 junior teams to gold medals. In 1988 he became the vice- chairman of the LEN Technical Water Polo Committee. In 1992 he was appointed to the FINA Technical Water Polo Committee (TWPC), of which he became chairman in 1996 – a position he held until the 2017 World Championships in Budapest.

As a player, Lonzi made up for his modest stature – small when compared with those of the giants of Hungary or the former Yugoslavia, though in reality completely normal - 182 centimetres in height (5ft 11-1/2ins) and 74 kilos in weight (163
pounds) – with technical skill, great vision of the game and incredible preparation. His desire to be perfectly prepared led him to train even on his own.

Eraldo Pizzo, one of the greatest of the sport, was a player then coach of Pro Recco during the two years Lonzi spent at the strong Ligurian club. Pizzo says of him: "He was a workaholic. Always training, he would have liked all of us to join him for the morning training. But in those days we had to work, water polo didn’t give you the money to live. I had a bar and ran to the swimming pool for the game about 10 minutes before the start, while Gianni was always in the pool, swimming laps."
Then here is a curious anecdote about his beginnings as a coach of the national youth team. In 1970, in Belgrade, he had among his players Nanni Moretti, who later would become a famous movie director, author of an iconic movie on water polo (“Palombella Rossa”): he deployed him in midfield, as a playmaker. Years later Moretti said: “That I had a call to directing, Lonzi was the first to recognise”.

In 1978 the star of the team he led to the World Championships victory was Gianni De Magistris, a Florentine like him, acclaimed for his dribbling and his spectacular goals, a player of great temperament and, like Lonzi, of strong personality. Their relationship was not easy but Lonzi knew how to make virtue of necessity, and also how to be diplomatic and get along well with him.

After ending his career as a coach, Lonzi became a highly appreciated administrator and in this capacity he had to travel around the world to hold talks on water polo with the aim of making the sport more understandable and making it grow. His job was heavy, but his passion and love for water polo made it light. A job that kept him away from home, away from his family, almost always abroad, up to 280 days a year: to manage international tournaments and championships but also to manage schools and clinics for referees and coaches. Gianni fought hard to defend water polo; water polo as he always intended it, a sport made of exciting games and rules, of show and tradition.

He has always played in defence of this Olympic, noble, sport; he has fought against attempts to diminish its value in the name of an unlikely greater diffusion. He is proud to have advocated women’s refereeing in international water polo matches.

As chairman of the committee that sets the agenda for world water polo, Lonzi deserves to be acknowledged for these achievements: the addition of women’s water polo to the Olympic programme, the establishment of the FINA World Water Polo Leagues for both men and women, and the European club competitions, including the men’s Champions League and the women’s Euro League.

During his career Gianni Lonzi, a man with a golden arm as a player and a golden man overall if you consider his entire career in water polo, has been awarded many honours.

After winning the Olympic gold medal at Rome 1960 he was appointed Knight of the Italian Republic for sporting merits, gaining him the nickname of “The Knight”, which became popular among his friends and acquaintances. Since then everyone affectionately calls him “The Knight”, and he does not mind that at all. A knight with an impeccable look, always in a suit and tie, with his suit and shirt perfectly ironed; always in shape, never a gram overweight thanks to his healthy and temperate habits.

CONI awarded him all possible honours at different times: 1998, Gold Star as a sports administrator; 2015, Gold Collar as Olympic champion in 1960; 2018, Gold Palm for outstanding technical merits.

In 2009 he was inducted in the International Swimming Hall of Fame (ISHOF) as Honor Water Polo Player/Coach/Administrator.
A marriage of 50 years, to another champion

Besides water polo Gianni Lonzi had another great love, the one with Antonella Ragno, like him an Olympic gold medallist, she in fencing (foil) in 1972, in Munich, two years younger, originally from Venice. Their story deserves to be told, since the couple on 23 October 2019 collected another gold, celebrating their golden wedding.

“How did we hold out for half a century? He has always been out on business, I have seen him no more than 15 years,” she jokes. Irony is one of the elements that cemented the couple, in addition to sport, with the Olympics to mark meetings and courtship.

“We met for the first time at the closing ceremony in Rome. He was already a champion, I didn’t even know what water polo was,” she recalls. A glance, a greeting and another four years went by. “I saw her again in Tokyo in 1964, I took her by
for Mexico ‘68. “To be exact, for the ‘Pre-Olympic Week’ organised one year before to get used to the altitude. There were no races, we were happy and carefree.” She adds: “That’s where the spark broke out.” He corrects: “If anything, the bomb.”

Thus was born what we would call a glamorous couple. They married in 1969, with the blessing of CONI and the whole sporting environment. She, daughter of the fencing art (her father Saverio was Olympic team gold medallist in Berlin in 1936), won nine Italian titles and was the queen of the foil. The first child arrived in 1970, the second three years later. In between, the Olympic victory of Antonella, to balance the accounts in the family: “He has always supported and valued me. When I won the last bout, he was standing there cheering.” After her competitive career was over she left the world of fencing, while Gianni became the coach of the national water polo team and then an appreciated technical manager at international level.
“I have always enjoyed his successes, never felt envy,” she says. “We have always been in tune, although it has not been easy to raise children with him often far away. But I knew from the beginning that he would never give up his passion.”

In half a century of life together, the Lonzi-Ragno couple have found new common ground. After fencing she went on to appreciate water polo, while he has discovered opera (“but he prefers the ballets because he sees the athletic gesture,” she teases him). She still looks at him in love. “I always felt safe with him. Fifty years, in fact, have flown.”

Gianni Lonzi’s portrait cannot be complete before we recount an important episode in his life that explains what it means to be an athlete outside the competition fields.

We are in Florence, it is November 4th 1966, there is a terrible flood. People run away, the streets are crazy rivers. Gianni Lonzi does not hesitate and dives. He manages to save 49 people. A feat that earned him the gold medal for “Civil Valour.”
“If they ask me which is my most precious medal, even if someone from my environment may turn up their nose, I will answer the one for Civil Valour for the flood in Florence.”

The district of Florence where he was born, raised and where he still lives, on the left bank of the Arno, was submerged that day. “The water in the streets was five metres high, but for me it was only the river where I had always swum. I didn’t think about it for a moment and I dived.” From dawn to dusk he saved lives incessantly. “A grandfather asked me to go and get his grandson; I recovered an elderly man immobilised in bed; two young firemen drifting on a boat.... Only after seeing the pictures did I realise the danger. But helping others has been the greatest satisfaction of my life.”
The interview

You have lived as a protagonist almost 70 years of the history of water polo, more than half of the entire history of this sport which has changed a lot since the 1950s. What hasn’t changed?

One thing I want to change before I stop is the location of the centre-forward, which is the origin of all our problems. Football, the sport from which water polo was born, has totally changed, now it is played at speed, we still have to get there.

What legacy do you think you leave, speaking in terms of sport, when you end your tenure?

In the past 30 years water polo has made great strides. If we think of the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, water polo has changed a lot, thanks to the contribution of many.

Over the decades the rules have changed many times. Do you think they have to change again?
A lot has been done, now it is necessary to change the role of the centre. We have done positive tests, now everyone has to be convinced. The centre must play aligned with the others, he cannot stand still on the throne at 2 metres: as in football he must enter the 2 metres together with the action and not before; he cannot stand with his back to the goal as he does currently. The playing schemes of the world and continental championships have also changed but too many games are still taking place where top-ranking teams meet others from a much lower level with these consequences: zero spectacle, empty stands, disconcerting final results, like 30-0 or so there.

Do these matches make sense?

It’s true it’s a problem. We wanted to widen the basis of our sport in the world, unfortunately the gap remains too big between Europe and the other continents. We had already prepared plans to change this situation and develop it from next season but the corona virus tragedy is stealing precious time.

So many good memories, some perhaps less pleasant. Can you tell us a couple?

Moscow was not pleasant in 1980 because an Olympiad was wasted, for water polo and for sport in general: without the Americans and other countries that did not want to participate it was an Olympics without many champions. I believe that the fear of having an Olympics without many champions is the reason that has convinced us to postpone Tokyo 2020 until next year. Even Los Angeles 1984 was not a good time but at least there was no lack of sense of the Olympics.

The best players you have seen at work over the decades, and currently?

All seasons have presented many champions, leaders of great value. It is impossible to make a scale of values because in different eras we played with different themes. Anyone who has experienced a season as a leader has been a great champion. I don’t name any names.

The best national teams?
All the European teams that have won a title have been great teams. In Europe we live 85 per cent of the world water polo.

The best matches?

Those which have tremendous excitements until the last second of the game. An example: at the European Championships in Budapest last year both finals ended with penalty shootouts, a great show that totally involved the thousands of spectators who crowded the beautiful Duna Arena in Budapest.

Any nice or curious anecdote?

I don’t want to reveal anything because I’m writing a book on the history of water polo, and there are many anecdotes to tell.

You have always worked to raise the quality of the referees, but many still complain today. What is wrong and what could be done to improve?

In a game there are no two winners and the losers are never happy. The fact is that in the last 20 years, which I have lived as chairman of the FINA Technical Committee, I can say exactly that we have had only two complaints in all the Olympics played in this period. I believe there is no better evaluation to enhance how the referees have improved and continue to improve. I also want to say that we, although children of football, were the first to ensure that at our major international events, including Olympics and World Championships, we nominate female referees, starting from Rome 1994.
Athlete, coach, official ... many successes, many satisfactions. Any regret?

Perhaps, in all these years, there were some small things I did not manage to complete. Big regrets, no. I have had a happy life, a life in sport, and I continue to be in the sport.
World championships, World Cups, World Leagues, continental championships, even for clubs ... don’t they play too much?

It is the dog that bites its tail because of the need to introduce events that create interest in water polo, and this forces us to play more or less continuously.

New poolside technologies, new ways of communication ... how does water polo change? VAR has been tested since last year; I consider it very useful. If we are to find new strategies, we should also change other rules.

Physicality, technical fundamentals, dynamism, game vision and harmony with team-mates are the most important qualities of a good player, of a leader in the pool. Is this so?

These are now required from all players. However, the leader, the ideal man, must use above all a fundamental weapon: intelligence. The focus should be on intelligence rather than strength.