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Bill May (USA): “Never say never”

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Whether somersaulting on the start platform at his third World Championships or quietly working at the grassroots level to guide younger generations of little boys, Bill May leads the fight for gender equality and the inclusion of men in artistic swimming at every level.

Over his 30-year career, without ever competing at the Olympics nor winning a world medal until five years ago, the tenacious, charismatic and friendly American has commanded attention. From his beginnings in upstate New York in 1989, to not being eligible for the 2004 Olympics despite being one of the very best, to retiring to join Cirque du Soleil, to returning and becoming world champion in 2015, May has almost seen it all.

Almost. Much like three decades ago, the Olympic Games, are still eluding him because he is a man. Artistic swimming is one of only two Olympic sports that solely feature women, and he wants to change that. Being, allowed to compete at the Worlds in 2015 was a step in the right direction, and an essential one.

"I always had a dream that it would be introduced into major competitions because I couldn't imagine a sport ever growing when it limited itself."

I think it had to include men or it would die.

"It needed something different. With mixed duets, people can watch and relate. You have a man and a woman with different dynamics together. Mixed duets are just the evolution of our sport."



Since 2015, mixed duets have continued to grow as more men are taking up the sport and more countries are represented in various competitions. This steady presence at the Worlds and other international events is key to proving to the International Olympic Committee that men deserve to be at the Games.

"We just need to keep pushing for it and keep showing the powers that be that there is a large of male athletes", May said. "We already have female athletes, so now we just need to show everyone that mixed duet is a great event, and that it's something that should be in the Olympics. It's such an obvious gender-quality thing too."

However, May's plans came to a halt with the COVID-19 pandemic. Artistic swimmers were forced out of their element and into self-isolation. In such a quintessentially team sport, many turned to online group workouts for a few hours every day.

May started to host daily, 30-minute core and strength sessions on Zoom, opened to anybody around the world. He welcomes everybody with a huge smile, chit-chats with some of his former club team-mates from Santa Clara Aquamaids, waves to the Spanish or U.S. national teams who occasionally join, jokes with his friends from the Uzbekistan mixed duet, or greets some new younger boys connecting for the first time.



He also continued coaching online his group of seven boys from the Aquamaids and has further turned to social media to join numerous projects, always aiming to promote the inclusion of men. This became even more important as the next World Championships, the biggest platform exposure for mixed duets and originally set for the summer of 2021, were pushed back to 2022 after the delay of the Tokyo Olympics to 2021.

"It's a little discouraging", he said. "We don't have many opportunities to all come together, and there isn't a large competition for men other than this. For three years to go by without the public, the judges, the coaches, the officials seeing

us all... It's almost like taking a step back."

I wish I still had 32 years left in me...

May and his fellow male athletes have had to find different options to continue pushing the IOC for inclusion at the 2024

Games. They first launched a new campaign on social media with the hashtag “**#InclusionofMixedDuets**” to highlight the events and athletes involved.

"With the Olympics being pushed back, we thought it would be an opportunity for people to relate to us", he said. "We hope they can say, 'I now understand. We wanted to go to the Olympics, we lost our opportunity. You want to go to the Olympics, you don't have the opportunity.' Hopefully that will ignite something that will further people's support for us."

Since the next Worlds are now two years away, May also would like to see one of the World Series legs used as a major competition for mixed duet and promoted as such, where all men could get together again and make their presence felt.

Finally, he took part in a wide variety of other initiatives stemming from the artistic swimming community, like a worldwide online workout led by U.S. head coach Andrea Fuentes or a specific workshop geared towards boys and men, where they could ask questions to May, amongst others. He has wanted to start conversations with the coaches as well, and to advise them on how to properly nurture their male athletes.



"We talked a lot about not trying to hide a man or trying to hide the problems that can come of it," May said. "The second coaches start to treat the male athletes or expect the same thing as a female athlete, that's where it takes a downward spiral. We have to keep talking about how to get them to the sport, but also how to keep them because a lot of them get discouraged. There aren't many men, and at a young age you don't really see a future and start to feel out of place."

Even through a screen, seeing these younger faces from all over the world, eager to learn and make an impact, has been inspiring for May as he knows artistic swimming is on the brink of change. It's been a bittersweet feeling as well, making him acutely aware that his own career is mostly behind him.

"I'm very jealous of all these people. They have so many years of growth left in them, way more than would be possible for me. Of course, I still want to get better, but when you're a kid that's eight years old, there is so much potential. If you compare to me, he still has 32 years left! To have 32 years left to improve and grow, that's what makes me jealous. I wish I still had 32 years left in me... Well, maybe I do (laughs)!"

Now we need to push for younger men to get involved

May started artistic swimming at the age of 10 in Syracuse, N.Y., after watching his sister's practice. At 16, he moved to California to join the Santa Clara Aquamaids, where he stayed for nine years. At the time, it wasn't easy to compete internationally, and men were more than a rarity.

His Aquamaids coach, Chris Carver, quickly realised they didn't have much to lose and decided to start promoting mixed duets globally. She paired May with Kristina Lum-Underwood and they eventually became the first-ever mixed duet to compete at a major international competition, winning silver at the 1998 Goodwill Games.

Because May is a man, he was barred from competing in the 1999 Pan American Games, where men are still not allowed. He continued swimming at smaller international events while taking on a prominent role in the fight for gender equality. In 2004, his skill level could rival some of the best in the world, but he was again banned from participating in the Athens Olympics because of his gender.

He had also then started to think of life outside the sport, of a steady pay cheque, a home and, in his case, dogs. He retired from elite that same year to join the Cirque du Soleil show 'O' in Las Vegas. About 10 years into his retirement, he received an email that drastically changed the course of his life: mixed duets would finally be included for the first time at the 2015 World Championships. He knew he had to be there, and he would figure out along the way how to handle a full-time job with elite training.

As history would have it, he became the very first male world champion in the technical event. To complete the circle, Lum-Underwood also returned to join him in the free event, where they claimed silver. In Budapest in 2017, May captured two bronze medals. At the 2019 World Championships, he earned two fourth-place finishes. While disappointed at missing a medal for the first time, he still had an uncanny ability to focus on the big picture, as always.

"It's life, it's a competition," he said. "But it's pretty awesome to see people getting better and to see the quality of the mixed duet increase. At the end of the day, if you walk home with a medal, you feel great. If you walk home without one, you don't feel so great, but in five years you are going to see that you helped this sport grow. This and my friendships with these guys are going to last longer than that feeling of winning a medal."

Behind the scenes, the camaraderie between all the men is indeed touching. May spent most of the final day of competition in Gwangju searching for each athlete to give them small, personalised gifts. He felt great optimism for this particular field of competitors because a handful of new countries were present, even though the total numbers plateaued.

"It was pretty incredible," he said. "This is picking up. We are getting support and we are getting men. There is always a time where people need to retire, so to have a re-filling from different countries means it's growing. Now we need to push for younger men to get involved so there is that influx of younger guys to fill in the gaps. Once that ball gets rolling, it's just going to keep getting bigger and more popular."

Once quarantine ends, May will return to Cirque and to his boys' team in person. For now, he doesn't picture himself competing at future events, even at the 2022 Worlds, especially as he doesn't currently have a duet partner, which he said

was his “unfortunate reality”. Of course, the door is not fully closed yet and the lure of the Olympics is as strong as ever. He has already made a comeback, so what’s another one, even knowing he would be 45 in 2024.

“Never say never,” he said, laughing. “I try to stay fit, I am still in a water show, I am still doing artistic swimming on a daily basis. You never know what will happen. Obviously I still love this sport, I love being there, I love coaching. Right now, my world is in a little bit of turmoil because of quarantine, but beyond that who knows what’s going to happen?”

