Bill May (USA) – “Never say never”
FINA Communications Department

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,” he said. “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.”

May and his fellow make 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,” he said. “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)!”