

## Philippe Lucas : “Training is training, but outside of the pool, I’m cool”

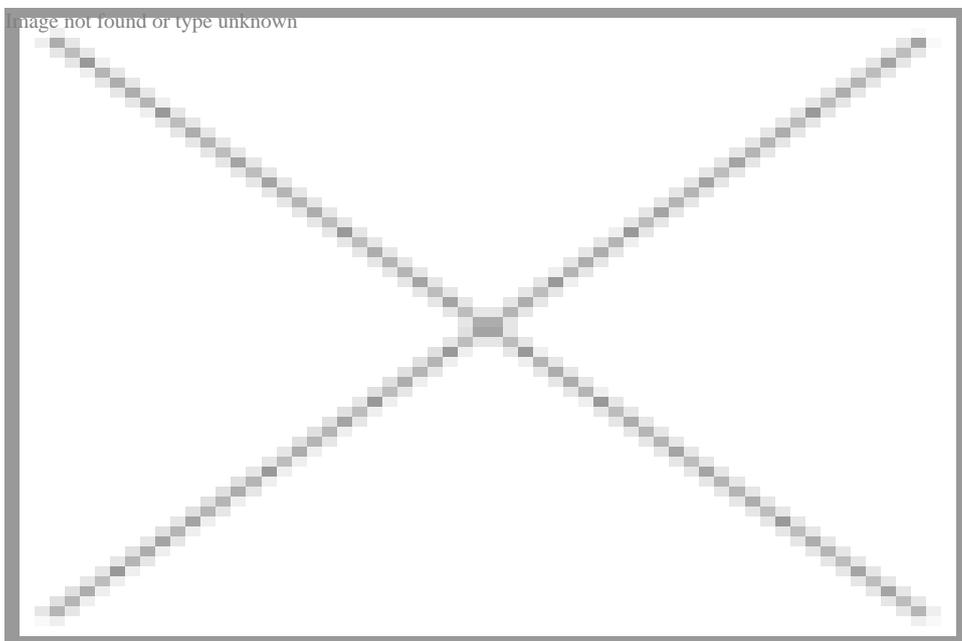
By Christina Marmet, FINA Aquatics World Magazine Correspondent (FRA)

Legends coaching legends: Philippe Lucas (FRA, swimming, open water)

For an athlete to be outstanding in Philippe Lucas’ book, all it takes is hard work and competitiveness. Lucas is France’s most successful swimming coach and was propelled to international fame in 2004 when his young protégée Laure Manaudou became the first Frenchwoman to win an Olympic title in swimming. Since then, Lucas has coached a legion of notable swimmers ranging from Esther Baron, Camelia Potec and Federica Pellegrini to, now, some of the cream of the crop in open water swimming, like Sharon van Rouwendaal, Marc-Antoine Olivier and Aurélie Muller.

He does not attribute his success to anything in particular, and he admits he does not have any secrets up his sleeve when it comes to bringing his athletes to the top, over and over again. *“First of all, they need to like training,”* he said. *“That’s the first step, but that’s the problem with a lot of swimmers (laughs). They need to love training, it needs to be a passion for them, and they need to want to succeed. Then, they must have a strong competitive spirit, and to be able to bring it at the competition. And that’s also not a given for everybody to be capable and strong to win on D-Day.”*

“When I tell them we are going to work hard, it’s to succeed”



His athletes swim twice a day and on average 16 to 17 kilometres, which nearly rounds up to 4,000 km a year. He fully recognises he is demanding, but that is to bring out the best in his swimmers and to win medals. But most importantly, he despises wasting his time.

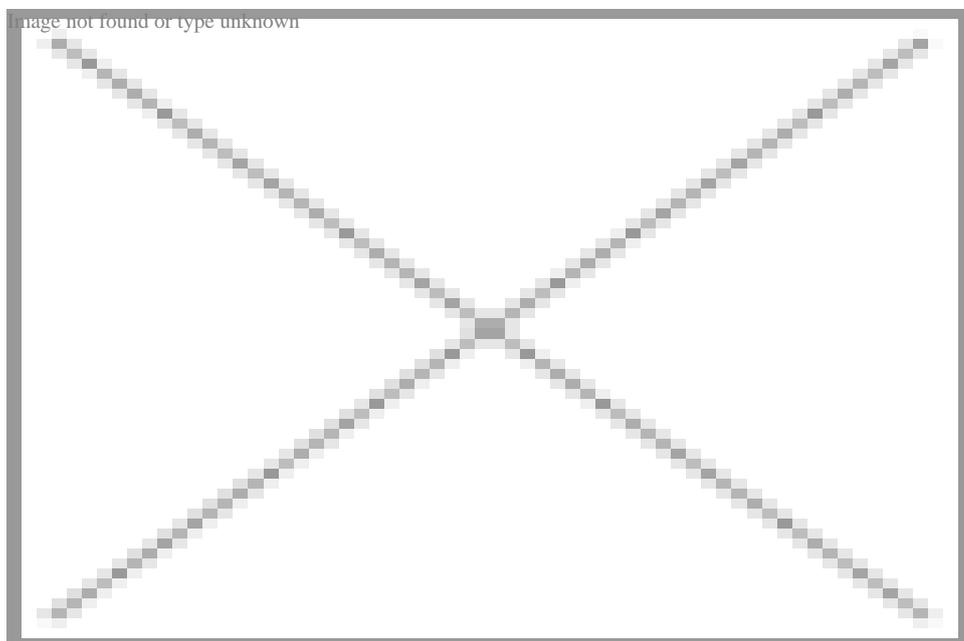
“I don’t know, maybe 80 per cent of swimmers out here won’t ever get any results,” he said.

“It’s nice and all to train but if every time you finish eighth, sixth or fifth, at some point you have to stop, it’s pointless. It serves no purpose at all. [The swimmer] is wasting his time, and I’m wasting my time. So when I tell them we are going to work hard, it’s to succeed, it’s to be on the podium, it’s to win... or at least try to.”

He has had numerous swimmers join his ‘Team Lucas’ over the years, and now counts a solid core of 15 under his wing in Montpellier in southern France. Most of his elite swimmers are foreign, hailing from Russia, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands among others. He admits with a small laugh that in reality not many French swimmers come to him, and does not offer any explanation as to why: “*They don’t want to train with me, that’s it. That’s just how it is.*”

Philippe Lucas has the reputation across the country and internationally of being the big bad wolf of the swimming world, a tough, blunt and outspoken coach. He does not really care nor is he interested in what the media have to say about him or his way of working:

“What’s most important is to know what you’re worth and what you want to do. Everything else that’s said behind me or about me is not a problem, I don’t care.”



In spite of this off-putting persona the world has attributed to him, which does not necessarily match with reality, a lot of his athletes do stick with him.

“You know, it’s just an image that’s been given to me,” Lucas said. “I have good relations with my swimmers, I’m close to them, I chat at length with them to really make them understand that it’s useless to swim for hours, days, years, to do shit. It’s better to invest time, to work hard, and then to get the results. But the great swimmers, the ones capable of working hard and vigorously, of course they are going to stay, and they stay for years. Because yes, they get the results but mostly because they get along with me. Okay I have this image of a strict coach, but I’m not.... Well training is training, but outside of the pool, I’m cool.”

“I’m still getting medals there”

Lucas started his coaching career at the age of 20 after a brief stint as a swimmer, “*a very, very, very mediocre one*”. He knew very early on he wanted to become a coach, and it quickly became his passion. His

first results on the international stage started in the early 90s, when a few of his swimmers, such as Julia Reggiany and David Abrard, earned spots on the Olympic teams of 1992 and 1996.

But it really was the success of Laure Manaudou that put Lucas front and centre. At only 17, Manaudou won gold at the 2004 Olympic Games in the 400 freestyle and thus became the first Frenchwoman to win an Olympic swimming title. She also claimed silver in the 800 freestyle and bronze in the 100 backstroke.

He had first spotted her in 2000 at a national championships. He rapidly contacted her, and became her coach a year later: *“The first dinner I had with her family, I told her dad, ‘if she works well, your daughter will be an Olympic champion’.”* This was in July 2001. It wasn’t an easy road for either of them as the young swimmer needed to be constantly pushed.

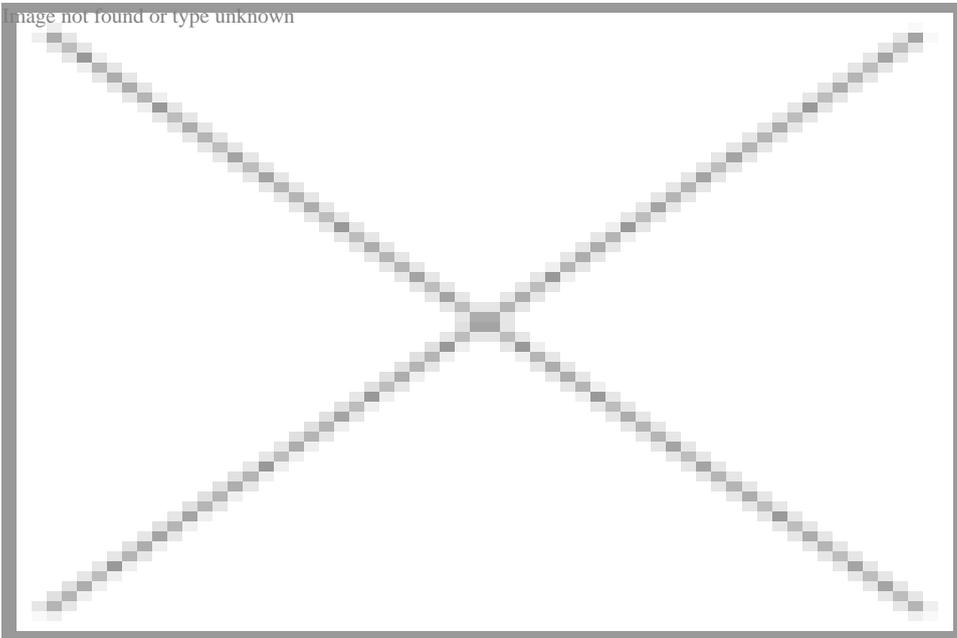
“Ah, you had to be on her back all the time,” he said, laughing. “Practices with her were a constant struggle, but she was capable of doing good things. But also, she was an athlete, a true athlete, and she was exceptionally competitive. She was an exceptional swimmer.”

Lucas’ fame and success with Manaudou attracted prominent figures to his training group, including Luca Marin, Pellegrini, Filippo Magnini, Van Rouwendaal, Amaury Leveaux and Benjamin Stasiulis. He slowly moved away from the pool to more distance freestyle events and the open water world but continued to have the same success. This transition did not occur by choice, but mostly as a matter of circumstances.

“At the end of the day, [this change] depended on the swimmers I had with me,” he said. “I work with the swimmers I get. I’m still in the pool, and touch wood, I’m still getting medals there. Just (at the European Championships) in Glasgow, I had [Anna Egorova] medal in her races. She’s not French so it’s less visible, but she’s training with me. Then I have girls like Van Rouwendaal who can medal everywhere, in the pool and open water. And then I have the open water specialists like Aurélie Muller and Marc-Antoine Olivier. So yes, for now, I have more open water swimmers and distance swimmers than sprinters.”

At the last Olympic Games in 2016, Lucas had a few swimmers competing, including 2015 world champion Muller. She finished second in the 10km but was disqualified for obstructing Italy’s Rachele Bruni on the finish line: *“I feel there’s been a great injustice done. It’s even shameful, so shameful what happened,”* Lucas said of the decision.

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“I spoke with her a bit after [Rio] because it was really, really hard. Thankfully she was really well surrounded by her family, friends and [technical director] Stéphane Lecat. Because it could get bad very quickly. You work your whole life, and you get disqualified on something that’s just so unfair. It’s so hard mentally, extremely hard. But she’s also a smart woman who knows what she wants and who is determined. I spoke to her but not much more. We had to let her digest the news, and the decision to continue had to come from her. I wasn’t really involved in her final decision.”

#### **“You have to adapt to the natural environment”**

Muller took it easy following Rio and focused on other personal goals. She eventually decided to give it another go and six months later successfully defended her 10km title at the 2017 FINA World Championships. She also won a gold in the relay and a silver in the 5km. She took 2018 off to focus on her studies and did not compete internationally. Since September, Muller is back in the pool full-time, with the ultimate goal of swimming at the 2020 Olympic Games.

“Well, first we have to qualify,” said Lucas with a laugh. “First things first, she has to get back to her level, because nothing is easy when you take it slow for one year. You aren’t in it anymore, so it’s hard to come back. So first we need to qualify to the World Championships, and we take it step by step. But [Muller] is a good athlete who is smart and knows what she wants, you don’t have to be on her back the whole time and she’s very autonomous.”

Some of his swimmers were part of the historic results of France at the 2017 FINA World Championships in open water. They obtained solid results as well at the 2018 European Championships in Glasgow. Lucas’ biggest star, Dutch swimmer Van Rouwendaal, won the 5km, 10km and the relay, plus silver in the 25km despite a mistake in her trajectory. France’s Lara Grangeon earned bronze in the 25km and three of his athletes (Olivier, Grangeon and David Aubry) placed third in the mixed relay event for the country.

In the pool, Egorova represented Russia, took bronze in the 800m freestyle and placed fifth in the 400m freestyle. “A satisfying competition,” said Lucas, considering the circumstances with not only Muller out, but also with a limited Olivier, the reigning world champion in the 5km, injured and out of the pool for two months.

He was, however, not thrilled about the new wetsuit rule imposed on open water swimmers, where the use of wetsuits is compulsory in waters where the temperature ranges between 16 and 18C.

“That’s just bullshit,” he said. “It’s useless. Open water swimming is all about the difficulty. When it’s cold, you have people who handle it and people who don’t. Now if we start wearing wetsuits, well... Are we going to end up like in 2009 in swimming? When we had 160 world records or whatever instead of the usual eight to ten? That’s crap. Wetsuits put the lighter guys, the more technical guys, at such a disadvantage. And they aren’t even adapted for our swimmers. If we didn’t have the sleeves, maybe... But this is ridiculous, they can’t even properly move their shoulders. This is not swimming.”

He pauses, sighs.

“You know, open water swimming is... you dive in, you’re in a natural environment, it’s hard, there is wind, there are waves, it’s cold, it’s hot, whatever. That’s what it’s about! You have to adapt to the natural environment. So now what, in two years we will give them gloves and shoes? No no, we have to stop with this bullshit. It sucks, it’s craziness.”

“Open water can bring a lot of things to distance swimmers”

Lucas has found joy in open water swimming as it has brought new challenges for himself, his athletes and his methods of coaching. He also believes the future of swimming for France lies in open water and argues that the level of swimming in the country nowadays is extremely weak, except for a handful of athletes. However, he is convinced one way to bring the nation back to the top of the podiums lies within open water.

“We really only have two elite swimmers, and it’s [Charlotte] Bonnet and [Mehdy] Metella,” he said. “Then we have nobody. We are very weak in the long distances like 800m, 1500m and even the 4x100m medley... All these races, that’s a load of crap for [France]. We are so weak. But one thing for certain is that open water can bring a lot of things to distance swimmers. When we get swimmers going from open water back to the pool, they are much stronger. I really think to improve the level of French swimming, open water is primordial.”

Open water is on a completely different level from sprint swimming and requires constant focus and adaptability, skills that can then translate very well back in the pool:

“Everything can get complicated really quickly. If you mess up at your feeding station, if you make a mistake in your trajectory, and it’s just very hard races overall. Even the best can finish 30th. You have to watch for everything, be vigilant at all times. So of course when you’re back in a lane line, alone, without waves, it’s not the same (laughs). If you do a few races in open water and then come back to the pool, it’s absolutely certain you’ll be better.”

Now in his 36th season, he hopes to bring a handful of them to the next World Championships and eventually to the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo. However, he doesn’t want to get ahead of himself too much.

The first step for his French swimmers will be a pre-selection at November’s FINA/HOSA Marathon Swim World Series 2018 eighth leg in Abu Dhabi, where they will need to finish in the top 10 there or have a time under 15:18 in the 1500m in the pool to compete in the next meet in Doha in early 2019. There, they will have to be amongst the best two French swimmers to participate in the 2019 FINA World Championships in

South Korea. And finally, they will need to place in the top 10 there to qualify to the 2020 Olympics.

“You know, I hear people and even coaches say ‘I’m going to go to Tokyo, and then I’ll go to Paris’, and I’m like ‘but no, no!’” Lucas said. “We will go wherever as long as we have swimmers to go with. You have to take it step by step, eh!”

Philippe Lucas has shared some tremendous success stories. His top swimmers have included:

- Laure Manaudou (FRA) – Olympic champion, world champion
  - Sharon van Rouwendaal (NED) – Olympic champion, European champion
  - Aurélie Muller (FRA) – world champion
  - Marc-Antoine Olivier (FRA) – world champion
  - Esther Baron (FRA) – European champion
  - Alena Popchanka (FRA) – s/c European champion
  - Federica Pellegrini (ITA) – world silver medallist (under Lucas)
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