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Talent to win in the long run: Victor Johansson (SWE)

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Victor Johansson is unusual for a top-class Swedish swimmer these days – a specialist in the pool’s longest events. In the past couple of years, as a teenager, he has broken national records which had stood for nearly 30 years. It is still early days for Johansson, who moved in June to the University of Southern California to further his swimming career, but his commitment to the 1500 – the event Arne Borg, multiple world record holder over 400 and 1500, won for Sweden at the 1928 Olympics – is evident.

“I see no point in training for hours and hours and then swim for 25 seconds when it’s a competition,” Johansson said.

“It hurts to swim 1500 metres, but the feeling before and after makes it worth that pain. At every training session I am the first to jump in the pool and the last to get out but I like to train hard and a lot,” he adds with a smile.

So he has gone for even longer distances and tested himself on the open water circuit in March this year.

For Victor Johansson, who turned 20 in September, there has never been any doubt that it is the longer distances he likes the best.

“Of course I have asked myself what’s so fun to lie and look at that black line at the bottom of the pool length by length. And some days it is hard, I have to admit that. But somewhere within me, I’ve always known that this is what I love to do. The good moments I get with swimming are unbeatable, and they weigh up everything along the way.”



At his debut FINA World Championships last year in Budapest, Johansson lowered his own 800m freestyle Swedish record by nearly four seconds, clocking 7.52.66 which made him 11th overall, 1.7 seconds away from a final.

“The goal was to try to swim around 7.52 and the fact that I managed to do so was really great,” he says. “This time I didn’t make the final, but in 2019 I’m going to take make the final at the World Championships. I actually want to be there fighting for medals.”

He set personal bests in all his four starts, including a Swedish junior record in the 200m freestyle (1:48.74) – not enough for a place in the semi-finals but that did not concern him.

“Neither 200 nor 400 is really something I’ve been practising for. The focus has been on 800 and 1500,” he said. To that end he had trained with Norway’s Henrik Christiansen, who finished fourth in the Budapest 800.

“Henrik is a good friend of mine and being able to train with him has been both inspiring and motivating,” he said.

In the 1500m heats, Johansson broke his own national record with a time of 15:05.91, slicing nearly 10 seconds from the 15:15.24 mark he had set the previous year at the European junior championships which had eclipsed the 1987 record of Stefan Persson which stood for 29 years.



The first milestone passed

At the short-course European Championship in Copenhagen in December 2017, he started by setting a Swedish short-course record in the 400m freestyle when he made it to the finals with the third best time of 3:40.21.

“Before my first race I felt that my body had never felt as good as now, but then you never know if you get it out in the race,” says Victor, who comes from Nässjö and competes for Jönköping SC. This time he did.

“My goal was to get to a final at the Europeans, but I thought it would probably be in the 1500 metres freestyle, not the 400m.”

On top of that, he had broken the oldest Swedish swimming record, shaving 0.60sec from the 3:40.81 short-course mark Olympic medallist Anders Holmertz had set over 27 years earlier, in February 1990.

“Anders is an icon and a role model for all young swimmers, including me. He and his swims boost me with motivation,” he said. Johansson lowered that record to 3:39.35 in the final, when he finished fourth.

In the 1500, Victor twice broke the Swedish record. He clocked 14:35.75 in the heats but was not completely satisfied:

“Sure, it’s a personal best by six seconds but I want to lower my time even more. I felt pretty heavy throughout the race,” he said.

In the final he lowered the record to 14:34.46, finishing fifth.

In those, his fourth senior championships, he qualified for the first time in not just one, but two finals. For Victor, this was a major milestone. Now he’s a swimmer capable of making finals. This knowledge and experience is something he takes with him to the next championships.

Targeting the record from 1992

At the Swim Open Stockholm in April 2018, Johansson lowered his own Swedish junior 400m freestyle record in the heats by just over 1-1/2 seconds with the time of 3:47.33, qualifying for August’s European Championships in Glasgow. In the final he swam his second-fastest time ever at the distance but came up somewhat disappointed:

“It’s not a bad time, but I would have been very happy to swim under Anders Holmertz’s Swedish record (3:46.77) in the final. I guess I felt a little nervous going into the final. I was more tense in the final than I was in the morning. Anders Holmertz set the Swedish record in the 400m freestyle in 1992 and it would have been cool to break it here in

Stockholm. But I've just got to learn to relax a little bit more.”.

In the 1500, he lowered his own Swedish record by just over two seconds, finishing fourth in the final in 15:03.74.

“It is always fun to beat a record, but I'd love to go under 15 minutes,” says Victor. “I think I still have a little too much respect for 1500 metres and therefore I am probably a bit too scared to push too hard at the beginning as I'm afraid of dying at the end. That's something I have to practise.”

On the last day of the meet he broke his national 800m freestyle record by almost three seconds (7:49.77).

“I was a little depressed after the 400m free. After that race I thought I wanted to do something really good in my final race, so I set a goal to go under 7.50 at 800 metres.” he said.

That he did, making him the first Swedish swimmer ever to swim 800m freestyle under 7:50.

“It was a really good race, but I can get better at turns, and when I do, I know I can go even faster in the future,” he said.

In preparation for the European Championships, Johansson trained together with two of his toughest rivals, Olympic champion Gregorio Paltrinieri from Italy and Christiansen. Then in Glasgow his best effort came right on the first day when he finished 5th in the 400m free (3:47.74, still outside the good old 1992 national record of Anders Holmertz - had he bettered it, he would have been silver medallist at least). He failed to make the cut in the 800m (by 0.37sec, came 9th, though couldn't repeat his sub 7:50 swim) and the 1500m.

And now: Los Angeles!

Victor's first major goal as a senior swimmer is to qualify for the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, and he has decided how and where he will train to try to get there. In June, after finishing high school, he moved to Los Angeles to the University of Southern California.

“I feel good about this decision. I want a change in my training and I think this is good for my future development. After thinking back and forth, this feels like a very good option for me,” says Victor.

“In the US, I get both the opportunity for good training – they will build a distance group around me – and also to study. School is important to me. There's a life after swimming career too.”

In a swimming world where the trend over the last 10 years has been that the swimmers at the top are getting taller and taller, Victor goes against the tide. With his 176 centimetres (5ft 9ins), he is 10-15 centimetres (4-6ins) shorter than the majority of his competitors.

“There are advantages and disadvantages in everything and it is important to make the most of what you have. Ultimately, however, the height does not matter. You can be the fastest in the world without being the longest or having the biggest hands and feet. What determines is how well you have trained and how strong your will is,” says Victor, smiling as often does.

He has also made a try in open water swimming, competing in the opening leg of the FINA Marathon Swim World Series in Doha in March. He finished 13th.

“I like the open water swimming as well. It fits me since I am a long-distance swimmer, and open water is sort of a different element where you have to take the waves, currents into account. It is different and exciting. I will try open water whenever it fits into my swimming agenda. It is not my main focus, but today some of the best pool long-

distance swimmers in the world are doing the open water as well in periods, and I think it is a good way to become more all-round as a swimmer, getting out of the pool and competing in nature every now and then.”
