

*Out of the Blue : Sharing insights and positive perspectives about the sport of swimming from those that have lived the experience. By Cynthia Owens*



There is a huge banner spanning nearly the length of our 50 meter pool at the International Swim Center. It proudly lists all 46 US Olympians from Santa Clara Swim Club. What you may not know is that SCSC is also home to scores of Olympians who trained here and went on to represent their home country in the Olympic Games! This is the story of one of our most prolific and gifted, yet little-known Olympians. Tucked in the back room, quietly tackling complex computer issues for the club, or expertly running the high-tech timing system for our meets, you'll find a handsome and very humble superstar right in our midst.

Sergey Mariniuk grew up in Moldova, a small country that was part of the former Soviet Union. *Gold in the Water* author, P.H. Mullen, describes Sergey's Moldova as a "forsaken country," "...where the system is broken, and hope has long ago fled." Yet in the midst of what could be considered a rather bleak existence, a pathway emerged, in the form of an endless black line on the pool bottom, which would eventually lead Sergey out.

His first coach was Luba Pohilenco; yes, our very own Yellow Bell Coach, Luba! Under Luba's coaching for 15 years, Sergey became a national and international swimming sensation at every level of competition, including the Olympic Games. The second phase of his swimming career was with SCSC, where Sergey went on to become a United States National Champion and competed in two more Olympic games.

- Started swimming at the age of 8, in 1977 in Kishinev, Soviet Union
- USSR Junior National team, 1985-87, and USSR Senior National team from 1987 to 2000.
- 8 time USSR National Champion in 200 IM and 400 IM.
- Competed in 5 World Championships – one silver medal in 1993 Short Course World Champs in Palma, Spain (400 IM)
- Competed in 3 Olympic Games – Barcelona 1992(7<sup>th</sup> in 400 IM), Atlanta 1996(8<sup>th</sup> in 400 IM) and Sydney 2000.
- Trained and competed at Santa Clara Swim Club from 1993 to 2000 under Jay Fitzgerald and Dick Jochums.
- 3 time USA Swimming National Champion (1993: 200 IM, 1995: 200 IM and 400 IM)

His journey to the United States actually began in the early 1990's, when Sergey had the opportunity to travel to California to compete in our Annual Santa Clara International Invitational Meet. The contrast between Moldova and sunny, prosperous Santa Clara was extreme, and left an indelible impression on Sergey. With that experience, he knew he was destined for SCSC one day. After an incredible 7<sup>th</sup> place finish at the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games with Luba, Sergey began his trek to Santa Clara Swim Club. Leaving everything and everyone he knew behind, he packed his meager belongings headed west in search of a better life, and one that would include his love of swimming. His is a story of determination, hardship, overcoming obstacles and emerging victorious. While at SCSC, Sergey went on to win the US Nationals three times, and compete in World Championships. At the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, he once again qualified for the 'big' Finals, and placed 8<sup>th</sup> in the 400 IM. In 2000, after competing in the Sydney Olympic Games, Sergey hung up his competition suit. SCSC was extremely fortunate to have Sergey coach our age group, senior group and masters program, from 1993 to 1998.

Swimming and SCSC have been good for Sergey outside the pool, too. He met and fell in love with another SCSC swimmer, Eve Walton. They married and now have two young children. Today, Sergey is the Vice President of Fastlane Tek, a technology services company, where among other technical projects, they manage timing systems and results management systems at a number of age group, national and international swimming competitions.

I recently had the opportunity to catch up with Sergey and talk about his thoughts on swimming.

## *Out of the Blue (continued)*

**Q: What has swimming meant to you?**

**Sergey:** I liked swimming from day one. A big part of it was having a great coach by my side. Luba Pohilenco was my only coach from age 8 until my first Olympics in Barcelona. Swimming was fun and easy and it was very exciting when I started. Games after workout, relays, and team trips were very big part Luba's program. When my 'real' training began at age 12, it was often very intense and I was truly 'tested'. However, although it was difficult it was still a lot of fun! Swimming was one thing I always wanted to do and Luba's drive and dedication to sport reinforced that every day. Although it was many years before I saw any real success - I *loved* swimming. I loved it when I learning how to swim, and I loved it when I was up on the blocks to race in the Finals of the Olympics.

**Q: Did you always dream of making the Olympic Team? Why or why not is that important?**

**Sergey:** I was 8, had just learned how to swim, and got my "*I can swim*" pin handed to me by my coach, Luba. I wore that pin to school on my school uniform every day for a year! I recall when our small group went for the first time to a "big" swimming pool; it was a 25 meter indoor pool with a deep diving well. It was intimidating, but also very exciting. I'd never seen a full competition pool before that day. There, at the big pool, we continued our training that afternoon, and as it turns out for many days, months and years ahead. One of the first things I remember seeing at that pool was kickboards. Big kickboards; the kind that are difficult to push underwater. Rough. Colorless. And mean looking. Each kickboard was painted with the words: "Our goal - Olympics 88". A few weeks prior to that first day in the big pool, Luba told us that our goal was to swim across the pool and that we would be able to do it if we followed instructions well. Eventually, we all did swim across that pool. Next, the goal moved up a bit, according to the kickboards! I kicked with one of those boards for years, seeing the letters fade away slowly in the chlorine. I never made it to the 1988 Olympics. But the dream of going to the Olympics was born in that "big" pool with those scruffy kickboards and a coach who said that it can be done-if we followed instructions well.

**Q: What advice do you have for swimmers just beginning their journey?**

**Sergey:** When I was around 12-13 years old, an older coach working with our Junior National Team would say this to us quite often: *"See that pool over there? Look at the water and look hard. There you will see great races, records, medals, awards and recognition. There you will see National and Olympic races and podiums with flags. In that water you will find the victory that only you know about... Now go get it from there!"* I always remembered those words, and would like to pass this advice along to young swimmers out there: YOU decide what your victory is, and then go get YOUR victory.

*Out of the Blue* is a regular monthly feature in our club newsletter to showcase stories of inspiration, motivation and humor from those who have strong ties to our great sport. Contact Cynthia Owens at: [cowens@santaclaraswimclub.org](mailto:cowens@santaclaraswimclub.org)