



Back in the USSR

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Although I have never taken the time to extensively research the matter, I am confident that somewhere, perhaps buried beneath layers of dust and confusing legalese, there exists a law against making eight year old children swim six thousand yards at five o'clock in the morning. Such strenuous practice schedules defy common sense. They make parents in charge of the carpool cringe at the very thought of waking up to find the alarm clock displaying four thirty and the thermometer displaying temperatures more aptly suited to a tundra ecosystem. They make most eight year olds want to roll over and go back to sleep, willing to sacrifice all vague notions of Olympic eligibility for those few precious hours of early morning slumber. I, however, found myself sluggishly walking onto that pool deck morning after morning, swimming endless laps, perfecting the elusive flip turn that would shave precious seconds off my time, and becoming increasingly dependent on sugar-laden, caffeine saturated beverages at a startling young age. I knew early on that I was not destined for Olympic greatness, but I enjoyed swimming. The pleasure I received from the sport did not warrant my dedication, at times bordering on dogma, but my fear of the coach did.

Alex Boutov was once the darling of the Soviet Olympic Swim Team. His talent was such that, in the midst of impossibly long bread lines and a housing crisis never equaled in a free market economy, the Russian government had generously bestowed upon him a single family dwelling that was palatial by current USSR standards and steady access to food and other necessities without the hassle of standing in sub-arctic conditions for hours. Despite such relative opulence, Coach Boutov possessed the hard-edged drive that catapults people to athletic greatness. His principals of hard work, strict discipline, and never giving into the muscular whining of one's exhausted and energy depleted body, made his fleet of pygmy swimmers into real athletes. Also, he hated children. Even through the lens of my youthful naiveté that much was obvious.

His regime centered on fear and intimidation. He did not merely

stand at the edge of the pool, he loomed. To this day, I still consider him to be the tallest man in the world. Staring up at him from the swimming pool, my exhausted fingers gripping the ledge, he seemed to be at least eight feet tall. His thickly muscled body filled the entire room. He would glare down at us, his enormous swimmer's shoulders eclipsing the overhead lights, and point at the stopwatch with disgust. In his thickly accented English, he would tell us our times were too slow, our turns too sloppy, our hands slapped the water too frequently, or any one of a million grievances he could find with our performance. I remember him as a hulking, shadowy figure poolside, lips curled around a whistle, glancing from his stopwatch to the water screaming, "Faster, faster, you must swim faster." Even during meets, when all the ambient noise melts into one dull roar as you tipped your head up for breath, I could always hear his voice distinctly. The water aborted his words, distorted his message, but it was already so ingrained in every swimmer he need not say it at all. We had to swim faster.

Despite his ironfisted approach to coaching, he had moments of incredible docility, teetering dangerously on the edge of being downright sweet. After a good race, he would place an enormous hand on your shoulder and tell you, "We are very proud. You have made us all very proud." Even after a bad race, if he could see that the swimmer had tried his or her best, he offered a reassuring sentiment, "Next time you win."^o The intimidating Eastern European cadences that were the scourge of predawn practice became soothing rhythms capable of transforming a scared child on the verge of vomiting into a mentally prepared athlete, focused and ready, filling that precious void before the race with visualizations of aquatic triumph. His standards seemed impossibly high, but, in his strangely persuasive manner, they seemed within reach as each one of us mounted the starting block. No one wanted to disappoint this man.

Perhaps it was his own work ethic that motivated us, not just his complex and wildly unpredictable oscillation between harsh taskmaster and caring patriarch. His work ethic was unparalleled. He still swam on his own, between our practices mainly. In the afternoons, I would sometimes come early, and see him in the water. He parted the water easily with his hands, his legs moving with a controlled violence that left foamy white wake and made the lane-lines tremble. He seemed as fluid as the pool water, rarely coming up for air, just gliding through lap after lap with a power that seemed feral, dangerous, as though he was capable of smashing through the tiles on the wall. The lanes could barely contain this man. This was the essence of swimming:

one solitary man waging a private war with an element he did not belong in, and, ultimately, winning.

With his cropped haircut and standard uniform of white t-shirt and weatherproof warm-up pants, he was the very picture of a no-nonsense exhorter. He made us practice until our legs shook. He yelled until he was hoarse and we were nearly deaf with his screams. He did not see us as children. He saw us as potential athletes, in need of a strictly regimented training plan that would push our minds and bodies to new plateaus of performance. Maybe he did not actually hate children; he just never intended to coddle children. His disdain came from the fact that we were not children to him, but athletes, swimmers, bodies in need of discipline. He ignored our juvenile desires, our whims, and our youthful tendency to take everything too lightly. There was nothing light about communist Russia. He had swum to live. He expected that we should do the same. We never could get to that place in our minds, with our supermarkets and front lawns and backyards and other baubles of a free market. We just wanted to swim fast. Alex Boutov made us swim fast.

I still imagine that if I were to return to that YMCA at five a.m., I would find him exactly where I left him, pacing up and down a twenty-five meter pool, his knuckles growing white around a stopwatch. He would not have aged at all, for people like him are frozen in time. They die at obscenely old ages with four percent body fat, their shoulders and backs just enormous packs of ropey muscle. I can hear him even now, his accent as thick as always, as though he arrived from Russia only weeks previous. He would tower over me just as I remember, and, just as I remember, I would secretly thank him for his harsh words and constant vigilance. As always, I would leave wondering, hoping, if maybe, just maybe (even though he would never admit it to me) just one time, I swam fast enough for him.