

Soviet Champion Rooting for Phelps

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Latynina, who first met Phelps this year, is certain he will overtake her. **Gennady Fyodorov**

Soviet gymnast Larisa Latynina, the most decorated Olympian of all time, will cheer on American swimmer Michael Phelps in his bid to break her record at the London Games.

“I wouldn’t be bitter if he did,” Latynina, now a sprightly 77, said in an interview. “As they say, records are made to be broken. He is a great champion and a very nice young man.”

“If anything, I can only wish him well because I’m a huge admirer of his talent,” she said. “I just enjoy watching him swim.”

Latynina’s eyes lit up as she proudly recalled her own triumphs.

“I remember just about everything. Each Olympics was a unique experience in itself, each one had its own things to remember,” said Latynina, who competed in Melbourne (1956), Rome (1960) and Tokyo (1964), winning a record 18 medals, nine of them gold.

Phelps, who has 16 medals, 14 of them gold, from his two previous games, is likely to better Latynina’s medal haul in London, where he is due to compete in seven events.

Latynina, who met the American for the first time at a sponsors' event in New York this year, was certain he would overtake her.

"I have no doubt about it. He already has 16 and should win at least three more in London," said the former gymnast, who plans to attend the 2012 Games as a guest of the International Gymnastics Federation.

"If you talk about great athletes, I can't wait to see this guy [Usain] Bolt run in London. He is just something else, out of this world," she said of the Jamaican sprinter.

"Or take Roger Federer, for example. Aside from great results, one can only marvel at his grace, dignity and style on the tennis court. He is just a great example of a great athlete," Latynina said.

Asked to name the greatest athlete, Latynina paused for a few seconds, taking a deep breath.

"If you want to know the greatest of all time, the first thing you look for is how many medals they have won," she said.

"Of course, some would not agree because many athletes have just one chance [in each Olympics] to win a medal — in boxing or wrestling, for example.

"So the medal count itself does not give a true meaning of who is the greatest, but at the same time, it gives you a good indication," she said.

"For example, [Soviet figure skater] Irina Rodnina has competed at three Olympics, and she has three golds. But I also took part in three Olympics and brought home gold medals from each one. It's hard to judge."

Latynina was quick to point out, however, that she also coached the Soviet women's gymnastics team from 1967 to 1977, helping her charges to win 10 Olympic gold medals along the way.

"I was a head coach of our team at three Olympics, and my girls won 10 gold medals," she said.

"I can proudly say that I've played a part in winning 19 Olympic gold medals if you add up my nine with their 10. Phelps has 14 so far, so he has a long way to go to catch me," she added with a smile.

The Ukraine-born gymnast also has 14 world championship medals, nine of them gold.

She won five golds, including the all-around, and one silver from six events at the 1958 world championships in Moscow while she was four months pregnant.

"I didn't tell anyone, not even my personal coach," Alexander Mishakov, she recalled.

"The coach's wife later teased him: 'What kind of a man are you if you can't tell she was four months pregnant?' In truth, I had to keep quiet about my pregnancy — if our sports bosses had known about it, they would have never allowed me to compete.

“And how did I do? Well, I won,” she said matter-of-factly.

Latynina, who nowadays spends most of her time taking care of her vegetable garden at her dacha outside Moscow and playing with her great-grandchildren, did not think she was much more talented than her rivals.

“If anything, it was probably my desire and a will to win. I had that competitive drive in me,” she said. “I never ever liked losing. Simply hated it.”

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