

Check out the August issue of Swimming World Magazine and read, "Still Kicking: Jesse Vassallo," by Tito Morales. See if you can answer the trivia question about Jesse and his fellow 1980 Olympic teammates. Following is the original unabridged version of the story on Jesse Vassallo:

Still Kicking: Jesse Vassallo

By Tito Morales

Jesse Vassallo was all set to take center stage.

The 19-year-old, a defending world champion and world record holder, was at the apex of an already prodigious swimming career. He could pretty much do it all in the water, the Puerto Rican-born IM specialist. Every time Vassallo mounted the blocks, the swimming world anticipated great things--and invariably, he would deliver.

The rest of the sporting world had begun to take notice, too. Maybe, in part, it was because of his charismatic smile and Latin good looks. Or perhaps it was because he made it all seem so effortless. Whatever the case, Vassallo was ranked on high profile lists right alongside the likes of Bjorn Borg and Muhammad Ali. Yes, Borg and Ali....

Heading into a new decade, the 1980s, Vassallo was ready to do his part to continue America's dominance in Olympic swimming competition. He was to be an integral part of what promised to be one of the most formidable U.S. teams in history, just as his celebrated teammate, Brian Goodell, had done four years before.

But then the whispers started--the rumors about the United States possibly not fielding a team to compete in the Moscow Games. It had something to do with an invasion--a Soviet invasion. In some place called Afghanistan.

In the beginning, though, the rumors were all just that: hearsay.

And competitive swimmers, who are forever focused on squeezing the most out of their abilities, don't have either the time or energy to engage in gossip. There's always the next workout to prepare for. Always the next set to tackle.

Life in the pool is all about fact, not fiction. The dimensions of a swimming pool--that's fact. The numbers on the pace clock, qualifying standards, PRs, the amount of meters logged last week, the dates of upcoming competitions--all more fact. These are a swimmer's only reality.

Surely some dispute unfolding on the opposite side of the world couldn't possibly have any bearing on what's transpiring between the lane lines here and now, could it?

LIVING IN THE VORTEX

A natural backstroker, Jesse Vassallo realized early on that he was nearly as equally gifted in the fly, free and breaststroke. More importantly, however, he discovered that he could slip from one stroke to another with the ease of one changing swimsuits, and he could do it quickly.

His father, Victor, realized it, too.

The Vassallo family had moved from Puerto Rico to Miami. Now they made the commitment to move yet again, this time to Mission Viejo--then the nation's hotbed for producing world-class talent.

Vassallo thrived in Southern California. Within years of training with one of the most famous coaches, Mark Schubert, at one of the most famous programs, the Nadadores, he'd developed into one of the most famous competitive swimmers in the world.

On Aug. 4, 1978, Vassallo broke his first world record, covering the 400 meter IM in 4:23.39. Eighteen days later, at the World Championships in West Berlin, he lowered his mark by another astonishing three seconds, to 4:20.05.

It was a time that would stick. It would take another four years, in fact, for the world record to fall, and a total of eight years for Vassallo to lose his American record.

Well over a quarter of a century later, Vassallo is still the 16th-ranked 400 IMer in U.S. history--despite the faster pools, stroke/rule advancements and new bodysuits.

Vassallo earned two individual gold medals at the 1978 World Championships in both IMs. A year later, at the Pan American Games in his native Puerto Rico, he duplicated the feat--this time adding the 200 IM world record to his resum,.

Vassallo was living in the vortex of every swimmer's fantasy.

COMING UNDONE

On March 21, 1980, though, it all collapsed with the official announcement confirming that the United States would, indeed, be boycotting the summer Olympics.

The news was numbing. Then ludicrous. Then devastating.

The U.S. Olympic Trials went off as scheduled, from July 29-Aug. 2 in Irvine, Calif. Vassallo was one of the meet's top performers. He won the 400 IM handily, and also earned top three finishes in the 200 IM (an event not then contested at the Olympics) and the 200 backstroke.

By meet's end, Vassallo was the second highest point scorer on the men's side.

But, understandably, the meet was hollow for Vassallo and the rest of the athletes who had qualified for the Olympic team.

There would be no trip to Eastern Europe. No opportunity to compete against the very best swimmers from every continent. No chance to fulfill the dream.

The talented athletes like Vassallo, who had sacrificed the better part of their lives for this moment, were Olympians in name only.

For Vassallo and his teammates, it would be four long years for the next opportunity to shine in the bright sunlight of the XXIII Olympiad in Los Angeles.

For many, that was simply too much to ask. When one is used to measuring days in increments of some 400 grueling long course pool lengths, a quadrennial can appear as imposing as Mt. Everest.

A career-threatening knee injury nearly made Vassallo's decision about whether to continue for him. It took two years for Vassallo to bounce back. And while he somehow managed to qualify for the 1984 team, Vassallo, in the cruelest of ironies, touched the wall fourth in the 400 IM. He announced his retirement shortly thereafter.

Jesse Vassallo, who was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in 1997, had become an unwitting poster child for a generation of stolen dreams.

STILL SHINING BRIGHT

Today, Jesse Vassallo lives with his wife, Bethsabee, in Puerto Rico with their three children, Jesse, 18; Victor, 11; and Alejandro, 9. He is a principal, along with his brothers, in a manufacturing company known as "Vassallo Unlimited."

Jesse revealed that he was unable to watch the Olympics until last year, so devastating was the effect of President Carter's pointless boycott. "But I really enjoyed watching the 2004 Games on TV," he shared. "Especially Michael Phelps--that kid is incredible."

He coached for six years, then in 2001, opened a swim school called "Aquagym" in Ponce, the island's second largest city. Next year, he plans to open a second location in Guaynabo in the metropolitan San Juan area.

Vassallo, now 43, swam Masters for several years, but has not done so since he opened his swim school. During his Masters days, he entered the Puerto Rican Senior Championships--and won the 200 meter backstroke in 2:17.

Recently, in what he describes as "a fluke," Jesse became president of the Puerto Rican swimming association. "I ran for the vice-presidency and won," he said. "Then, two months later, the newly-elected president resigned, and I became president."

It is a testament to his undying love for competitive swimming, though, that despite all the misfortune that struck Vassallo during his career, he is still active in the sport.

He also conducts swim clinics throughout Latin America, and has introduced his children to the sport. On occasion, he will slide into the pool and join them.

His children, like many tens of millions of others around the globe who never had the opportunity to watch Vassallo compete in Moscow, will never know of his true greatness between the lane lines.

But those fortunate to have seen him in his prime know that even despite being deprived of his greatest hour, Jesse Vassallo's talents shone bright.

Tito Morales, a novelist and free-lance writer, is a Masters swimmer who competed collegiately for the University of California at Berkeley.