

Janet Evans' Windmill Revolution



Photo courtesy of PNG Sports

>When 17-year-old Californian Janet Evans won the gold medal in the 400-meter freestyle at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea, spectators had not seen anything like it before. Not only was Evans fast, she won by spinning her arms around like a windmill.

"Everyone says she really was a spectacle," remarks *SWIMMER* Editor Bill Volckening, who profiled Evans for *Swimming Technique* magazine.

When the Olympic race began, Evans seized an early lead with an efficient start, rapid stroke ... and straight-arm recovery. The recovery technique distinguished Evans from other freestyle swimmers. Her arms darted out of the water, without the bend.

"My straight-arm recovery was natural," Evans told Volckening, in the interview. "I really couldn't swim it any other way. I think I developed [the technique] when I was a kid, and I wanted to get down the pool the fastest. I figured the fastest way to get to the other end was to turn my arms over as fast as I could."

Evans' main competitors in the 400-meter free were German standouts Heike Friedrich and Anke Mohring. At 300 meters, Friedrich boosted her kick, pulling ahead of Evans. For seconds, Evans and Friedrich competed head-to-head, until Evans heaved herself forward, to finish in 4:03.85 and win the gold medal and set a new world record. It was her first Olympic medal; four more gold

and one silver medal would follow.

Evans trained with Bud McAllister, a renowned distance coach. "She has a good feel for the water," McAllister told *Time* magazine in September 1988, three days before Evans triumphed in the 400-meter free.

McAllister, who began coaching Evans in 1985, later added, "She's intense. Every week there will be some set that she'll do faster than she's ever done before."

Intense, innovative—and nearly infinitesimal. At the 1988 Olympics, Evans weighed only 105 pounds and stood at 5 feet 5½ inches, significantly smaller than the standard swimmer. Yet she proved to be an amazing aquatic force.

Although Evans drew attention to the windmill-like swimming technique, she apparently didn't invent it. According to some reports, during the nineteenth century, two American Indians used a similar thrashing style at a London exposition.

"What's most important with the straight-arm recovery," says Mike Collins of Nova Masters in Irvine, Calif., "is what's going on under the water. And, it's specific to your body type. For example, someone who sinks a lot needs to get their arm in a lot earlier than someone who doesn't."

Of Evans, Collins notes, "It was critical for her that she got the high elbow vertical forearm catch – her elbow higher than the fingertips" – as her arm emerged from underwater.

Evans held the 400-meter free record for 18 years. French Olympian Laure Manaudou broke it in 2006.

Other competitive swimmers who have succeeded using the straight-arm recovery include Australian Michael Klim (1998

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>>> A swimmer since childhood, Janet Evans started swimming laps at 2. By 11, she was setting national age group records.

>>> When Evans broke the world record in the 400 meter freestyle at the 1988 Olympics with her 4:03.85, she eclipsed some men's swimming records of the past. Her winning time beat that of fellow Californian Mark Spitz, who set the world record (4:07.7) just prior to Olympic trials in 1968.

>>> There are three types of freestyle, explains Mike Collins of Nova Masters, which work with straight-arm recovery: 1) hip rotation, 2) shoulder rotation and 3) body rotation. "Body rotation is a good stroke for Masters swimmers," Collins says. "The whole body rotates as a unit, and the elbow doesn't get pulled behind."

>>> Bud McAllister coached another straight-arm-recovery freestyle swimmer, Suzu Chiba of Japan. McAllister said of Chiba and Evans, "Both swimmers had very relaxed recovery motions [and] great hand speed/acceleration at the finish of their underwater stroke ... Both had excellent hip rotation, [which] gave them more force/power at the finish of their stroke."

>>> Because the shoulder rotation freestyle is flatter, Collins says, it works best for sprinters.

>>> Evans carried the Olympic torch at the 1996 opening ceremony in Atlanta, passing it to Muhammad Ali (he lit the cauldron). The 1996 Games were Evans' third and final (second were the 1992 Barcelona games).

World Championships in Perth, Australia); Inge De Bruijn of the Netherlands; and two-time Olympian Scott Tucker of Largo, Fla. Chinese sprinters Yang Wenyi and Zhuang Yong also make the list. Both won Gold medals in Barcelona at the 1992 Olympics. <<<