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Lara Teixeira Cianciarulo is a three-time Olympian synchronised swimmer who took up the sport at eight and by 13 was in a national team. She's been coaching Tauranga Synchro Club and our national team for the past three years but come October will take up a new challenge in the United States.

In a bright swimsuit, Lara Teixeira Cianciarulo counts, breathes and waits.

Then...

"Brazil team," the commentator announces over the loudspeaker.

As Cianciarulo and her teammates graciously glide onto the pool deck, the crowd stands, and the applause and chanting swell at the Maria Lenk Arena in Rio, her hometown.

Brazilian fans are known to be wild, but today they really roar.

She momentarily freezes in surprise and awe.

"The noise from the stands was so loud, I thought: 'Oh my God, I'm going to cry'," Cianciarulo recalls.

She fixes her smile as everything plays out in slow-motion.

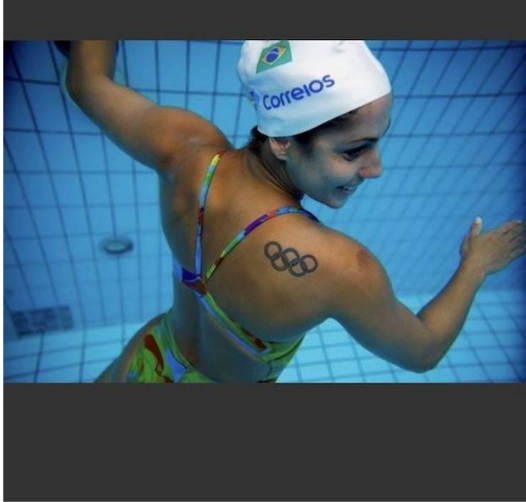
"Lana, you're about to compete," she silently tells herself before ordering: "Pull your s*** together!". That's the moment that you have goosebumps...

"I'm here. I made it."

AS a three-time Olympian, that memory of her Pan-American Games debut - her first big competition in synchronised swimming - is one of her favourites.

Cianciarulo moved from her native Brazil to work with the Tauranga Synchro Club three years ago and took on the job of the national head coach, having just competed in her final Olympics, at home in Rio, and then retiring at 29.

She'd always wanted to live overseas and was enticed by Tauranga coach and former Brazilian representative synchronised swimmer, Suzanne Ribeiro.



Lara Teixeira Cianciarulo marked her first Olympic experience by getting a tattoo. Photo / Supplied

Her husband, Fernando Cianciarulo, was a Brazilian water polo international (they first met in a swimming pool in Sao Paulo) and has been coaching the Tauranga Boys' College team.

However, come October, the couple is leaving New Zealand for Cianciarulo to take up a new challenge in California.

She has just been appointed assistant coach of the United States High-Performance National Synchro Junior Swimming Squad, and also their high-performance manager.

Among her new colleagues will be four-time Spanish Olympic synchro medalist Andrea Fuentes.

The opportunity presented itself unexpectedly at the FINA World Championships in South Korea in July and will see Cianciarulo put the business degree that she obtained while still swimming into practice.

She says it was a hard decision to leave her Kiwi synchro family, having just gained New Zealand residency, but it was an opportunity she couldn't pass up.

"Here in New Zealand, the sport is too tiny," the 31-year-old says. "I couldn't see myself going from coaching to managing and earning a salary with that. I knew I would probably have to leave one day, but I was really happy with the idea to settle down here and have babies."

The next best thing to compete at the Olympics would be to stand beside a podium with synchro swimmers that she's helped guide to get there, she says.



Lara Teixeira Cianciarulo at the London Olympics in 2012. Photo / Supplied

It's been 10 years since New Zealand had synchronised swimmers at the Olympics and Cianciarulo, who was roped in to get us back there, believes we do still have a chance but need to grow in numbers as well as train as a group more frequently. At the moment, national squad members come together every school holidays for 10-day training camps.

"There's definitely some potential and we were dreaming together to have a team... They have grown so much and I think they're ready to keep pushing and fight for the spot in 2024."

Down to earth

WEARING an Olympic podium suit over her togs, she's as head-turning out of the water as she is in.

As more ordinary swimmers go about exercising at Mount Maunganui's Baywave TECT Aquatic and Leisure Centre, Cianciarulo (also sporting a necklace with the Rio Olympics emblem) stands out.

She took up synchronised swimming at 8 and five years later was competing for Brazil.

As a child, she was smitten by the beauty of synchronised swimming. She used to do swimming, gymnastics and ballet, all at the same club, and between classes would watch the synchronised swimmers twirling underwater rockets and pikes and fishtails.

When she was 8, she decided to give it a try and by 13, was in a national team. She describes herself as a hard worker as opposed to someone with a natural talent and spent more time at her club than at home.



Lara Teixeira Cianciarulo (left) with her sister in Rio in 1994. It was her first swimming competition and one year before starting synchro. Photo / Supplied

Her first taste of success came when she was 20 back in 2007, making her Pan-American Games debut and she came away with a bronze medal.

She made her Olympic debut in Beijing in 2008 but admits that she was not fully ready. About a year before the games, she and her then-partner in the water Carmen Moraes were offered scholarships to study and compete in the United States. Moraes was older and took the opportunity, but Cianciarulo was still in college and warned by her coach that if she went, she couldn't compete in the Olympics.

She only teamed up with her new partner Nayara Figueira (now a performer in Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas) about eight months before competing.

"It was really hard for me to swim my entire life with one partner and then switch," she admits, while marking the experience by getting a tattoo of the five Olympic rings on her shoulder.

Four years later, she was back in the Olympic pool, and this time was ready to take the competition in her stride at London 2012.

But despite being at her peak, she and Figueira were 0.3 points from making the Olympic duet final.

"It was such hard work; you have no idea. I gave up everything in life to be in London, but there's nothing we could have done differently. At the end of the day, it's all about the one that's best."

She and Figueira were far from subpar though.

Known for their choreography and eye-catching costumes inspired by Brazilian artists, they set tongues wagging in 2012 with togs depicting the human body, including swimming caps made to look like the brain. Seven years later people still talk about it, she says.



Lara Teixeira Cianciarulo (left) with Olympic partner Nayara Figueira. Photo / Supplied

Cianciarulo took a break after the 2012 games to get a normal life and quit training eight hours a day to take on a job in sports marketing.

"It was good to breathe and then look from the outside: 'Look, I accomplished a lot, it's just 0.3, you know?'"

"It left me with the feeling that we could do better."

Her passion for the Olympic Games saw her appointed as a Youth Olympic Ambassador for the 2014 Youth Olympic Games in Nanjing, China.

She felt a responsibility to be a role model, and the YOG made her think a fighting comeback at Rio 2016 was possible before ending her glory days.

"It was in my home country and I thought 'I'm still young, I think I can still make it.'"

Her final hurrah in the pool, and at the Olympics, saw her captain the Brazil team to a respectable sixth place.

Retirement

NOTHING about teaching synchro is easy.

Executing a 3.5-minute synchro routine is the equivalent of a 3.5-minute sprint.

After bobbing to the surface of the water, all the mechanisms of synchronised swimming, from an eggbeater to good old-fashioned sculling, keep swimmers afloat from below.

When they dive under, sometimes vertical for up to 20 seconds, an underwater music system helps them to keep time.

They wear nose plugs, and when in competition their hair is slicked back with gooey gelatine and on their face is "big make-up".

"It is full-on," Cianciarulo says of the costuming. "We usually say: 'If you have a partner and [he] sees you all dressed up, if he doesn't turn around and just run, he's in love with you. Ha, ha.'"

Concussion and bruised legs are a risk because they swim so close together, and you don't just need to be precise, but your facial expressions must fit the music and elicit emotion from an audience.

"You need to be connected," she says.



Lara Teixeira Cianciarulo leading her team in the 2016 Rio Olympics. Photo / Supplied

Cianciarulo teaches up-and-coming synchro swimmers basic positioning (they also train on land), how to move diagonally in the water, how to hold the body above the surface in suspended animation, without pushing off the bottom of the pool, and then how to go upside down. It can take months to learn a routine.

"The hardest part is to teach alignment," she muses. "So, upside down, legs to the sky, and, they're to the side," she laughs, reaching her arms up and out to the left.

Occasionally, she'll hop in the water and show off with a little solo performance. "They love it," she says and her smile shows that she does too.

Cianciarulo's likeability began in the water, but she's now just as charming on the pool deck.

Kate Boyt, the chairwoman of Tauranga Synchro Club, says Cianciarulo can win over anyone with her smile and has a positivity and warmth that brings out the best in swimmers.

"Lara has a magic ability to make teenage girls do things they wouldn't normally do, like go to a gym or get up in front of a crowd. Our parents love her!"



Lara Teixeira Cianciarulo with the Aquafems in Brazil in 2018. Photo / Supplied

Cianciarulo's determination to grow the club also means she has been instrumental in leading their high-performers in overseas opportunities and competitors have become a "force to be reckoned with" nationally.

"She has worked hard to successfully raise the profile of the sport in New Zealand.

"While Lara is leaving us, she will take a little bit of New Zealand with her – and we know we can count on her help to connect us with the right people to support both the club and the Aquafems athletes on their journeys."

The job has been Cianciarulo's "baby" and for that reason, she wants to help find her replacement. She sees herself as a big sister to her student swimmers.

"I'm a hugger," she says. "When I came here, they were all closed hands, but you need to connect, you need to feel and touch and trust. I've got involved with so many stories about their personal life. They open up for me and its been really special to see some behavioural changes around that and parents saying 'she's got much better at home and school!'"

Cianciarulo's hard work and expertise and all that is good in sportsmanship shines through.

"I'm going to miss them."