

# THE VOICE OF FEMALE LEADERS

**A CONVERSATION WITH NOVELLA CALLIGARIS**



## Introduction

Born in Padova but of Trieste origin, Novella Calligaris quickly made waves in the world of swimming, becoming Italy's first Olympic medalist in the sport by the age of 17. Her journey began when she followed her brother into the pool, and by 13, she was already on the national team, winning her first Italian title. Known for her strength in distance freestyle, Calligaris set European records and earned multiple medals at the European Championships, Olympic Games, and FINA World Championships.

Her crowning moment came in 1973 when she won the 800-meter freestyle at the World Championships, breaking a world record, despite battling a toothache. Over the course of her career, she amassed 76 Italian titles and 21 European records, before retiring at just 20 years old.

But Calligaris' impact didn't stop at the pool. After her athletic career, she transitioned into journalism, working with leading Italian newspapers and television, covering major sporting events and becoming a prominent voice in sports policy. In 2021, she made history again as the first female president of the Associazione Azzurri Olimpici d'Italia, further solidifying her legacy as a leader both in and out of the water.

In this interview, Calligaris reflects on her remarkable career, sharing the challenges, triumphs, and lessons that have shaped her life—from her record-breaking swims to her continued advocacy for women and inclusion in sports leadership. Her story is one of resilience, passion, and a relentless drive to break barriers.

### **Can you share some insights into your journey and the key factors that have contributed to your success?**

My parents were born in Trieste, and each of them had at least one Teutonic lineage: from one side the Black Forest and Alsace, and from the other side Montenegro and Greece, from which my surname comes, because a colony from Thessaloniki moved to Friuli, and from there the Calligaris branch originated.

Sports have always been a natural part of my upbringing: my father was a great horseman and was on the National field hockey team. I say this to explain that, even as a child, for us in the family sports were a form of education, and so it was non-negotiable for both me and my brother to practice sports. And since I was born in Padua, where there wasn't much choice, I had two alternatives: rugby or swimming. Of course, I didn't have the physique of a rugby player, and besides, my brother had started swimming, and everything my brother did, I did too. In fact, he joined the National Team before me, and I quickly followed.

Then I had the chance to meet Bubi Dennerlein, an extraordinary sports philosopher—not just a coach. Bubi had been a promising athlete but had the wisdom to recognize his brother Fritz's extraordinary potential as a swimmer and water polo player. He stopped swimming to coach Fritz, eventually becoming one of the greatest coaches in the world, and that's how I had the opportunity to meet him. At that point, my transition from amateur to competitive sports felt natural.

### **How do you define leadership, and what qualities do you believe are essential for effective leadership in any industry?**

The most significant lesson from sports is that it serves as a path for growth and empowerment. Sports are a way of life, and the experiences you gain stay with you forever. It teaches you how to set goals, no matter the level of competition. The key is to focus on improving yourself, setting achievable targets, then pushing those boundaries further, and eventually applying that mentality to everyday life.

**“It’s a team effort; no one gets anywhere alone.”**

In sports, you confront others early on, and often face defeat before tasting victory. You learn to set goals, not make excuses, and recognize your limits as well as your strengths. Where you end up in sports isn’t the most important part, because so many

factors play a role. Had I not been born in Padua, had I not had those parents, had Bubi not come to Padua—the list goes on. My world record and victories are the result of fortunate combinations and extraordinary people. It’s a team effort; no one gets anywhere alone.

I always say that each of us is a piece of a puzzle, and when everyone finds their place, we complete the picture and succeed. This applies to work, sports, life, parenting, and relationships. I’m a woman who believes deeply in the strength of women—in all aspects of femininity, including work, love, family, and the grand adventure of motherhood, and now, being a grandmother. Thanks to this, I’ve shared life with people whose culture, sensitivity, and passions inspire me daily, fuelling my curiosity and constant desire to learn, challenge myself, and create.

**Can you share a specific challenge or setback you encountered in your career? How did you navigate through it, and what lessons did you learn that can be applicable to other leaders?**

I started swimming when I was 12, and I was quite the feisty kid. The first time I saw that Bubi had assigned me to the 800-meter freestyle, I went straight to him to complain. “Why should I have to swim such a long race?” I asked, and he calmly replied, “Because that way, you’ll stay quiet for 12 minutes.”

So, my debut was “uphill,” and I ended up with the sixth-best time in Italy overall, meaning I was supposed to move on to the national championships, but Bubi didn’t let me participate, telling me very simply that I was too young. He had this way of approaching things, understanding my qualities perfectly and wanting to absolutely protect me, something that, unfortunately, is often not done today.

The following year, I joined the National Team, first overall at 13. In 1968, with the goal of the Mexico Olympics, I was training like crazy. When I first met the time limit, Bubi

made me repeat it 30 times: he absolutely didn't want to take me to the Olympics because he thought I was still too young.

And the then-president of CONI, another extraordinary figure in the world of sports, Giulio Onesti, eventually confronted him, saying he understood his reasons, but if the only woman who had met the time limit was a little girl, that little girl would go to the Olympics.

I was completely unaware of what awaited me; I thought it was an amusement park, and when it came time for the race, it was traumatic because I saw this huge space that seemed like the gladiators' arena, and I didn't want to go in anymore. Bubi threatened to throw me into the pool by my ears! So, in the end, I competed... and when I returned years later, everything was much smaller than I had imagined.

### **How do you maintain resilience and drive during challenging times, and what strategies have helped you overcome obstacles?**

Well, first of all, I had a unique family behind me: my mother was an art lover. I called her from the World Championships where I had just won and set a world record, and that evening she was in Syracuse watching B ejart's ballets. She answered, "Well done, well done, my love, but now that you're traveling the world, you have to find the opportunity to go see this show; it's extraordinary."

My father, on the other hand, was completely different. The only thing he worried about was that I wouldn't get tired: when I got out of the water, no matter the race or the result, he was there, immediately asking me if I was tired—as if there was an alternative at the end of such a physical effort. But I had the great advantage of a family that let me follow my passions while trying to protect me from the obsession with doing too much.

Bubi, my coach, had a unique problem with me: I was very young, I won too much, too quickly, without truly understanding competition. So the year after the Olympics, he made me do seven races with the expectation that I would lose, and I won them all, and not only that, I set my first European record. Bubi was a farsighted person; he recognized talent but was more concerned that I might burn out. He wanted to teach me how to lose, so he took me to East Germany, where the athletes had a completely different style. I finally got soundly beaten, learning the hard way to take it in stride. It wasn't easy, dealing with the idea of losing, but in hindsight, I realized how great my coach's lesson was and how important that lesson was, among everything I learned from him.

From that moment, I started winning for real, at an international level: I was tiny, 167 cm for 48 kg. I became a case study for American sports, and even Spitz's coach wanted to see me to understand how my body could achieve those results. But that didn't stop me from winning 22 championships and setting a world record.

Then, at 19, I decided to quit. I felt I had completed a journey, and I wanted to decide what to do with my life. Even at such an important decision, my parents were on my side, understanding that I was very young, determined, and that I needed challenges in a completely new field. So I started doing journalism, and later gained experience in international marketing in the U.S., but my heart always kept the door open to sports journalism because it allowed me to stay close to sports.

### **What initiatives or strategies do you implement to promote diversity and inclusion within the world of sports?**

For me, sports, and the way sports impact athletes' lives, are a metaphor for life. That's why I accepted various volunteer roles in the sports world, and I was a commissioner for sports dance, where I worked on completely rebuilding the discipline. Now, I'm in the National Observatory of CONI for Safeguarding. This is a role I consider very important: with sector experts and legal academics and professionals, we have established rules for federations to protect athletes from any kind of abuse, especially minors. We ensure that the federations have adopted both the regulations and the guidelines, and we take action to prevent any non-compliant behaviour. Since 2021, I have been the president of the National Association of Olympic and Azzurri Athletes, which is recognized by the

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Italian National Olympic Committee and the Italian Paralympic Committee, and I emphasize this because, for me, there is only one sport, and the Paralympics and Olympics athletes have all kinds of different abilities, and often the so-called Paralympic specialties are much more difficult than those of Olympic athletes.

With Safeguarding, we fight to ensure that the language and approach towards athletes are appropriate to their sensitivity and character, especially knowing that today young people are much more fragile than we were, so a despotic or even offensive attitude from a coach is unacceptable. The same instruction can be given constructively, respecting each individual. Certainly, in my time, there were different evaluations and ways of expressing oneself. Today, much more attention is needed in the approach to athletes and in communication: I refer, for example, to Velasco's success with women's volleyball. He kept the same team but had the ability to motivate them all, saying to each one a word that was crucial for them, and it's difficult in a women's team, where many are primadonnas, to motivate them all. But his experience, his ability, the extraordinary talent of this man meant that everyone felt like a protagonist and indispensable. This is also a great lesson, knowing how to manage a group. Sports are always a team effort, even if you do an individual sport: the team is made up of the coach, the doctor, the psychologist, the family, the friends, and the society that surrounds you. They are all essential. When you are alone, you don't go anywhere.

**As a role model, what advice would you give to aspiring young leaders aiming to make a positive impact in their respective fields?**

My advice is to do what you love. Above all, you have to enjoy it. I competed at a high level as long as I had a purpose and found joy in it. When that purpose disappeared, I stopped.

Competing at the Olympic level is a choice, and you do it only if you love it. If you truly love it, then the sacrifices people talk about don't feel like sacrifices at all. But if you start seeing those efforts as sacrifices, then it's probably time to change direction.

**“In everything I do, I seek out the challenge—the struggle—because that's where the spark of enjoyment lies.”**

I believe that those who pursue sports at professional level do so because it's their choice. No parent or coach can force it on you. You need an inner drive, and those around you must respect that. If you're not having fun, if there's no joy, you won't last. But throughout life, what I've missed most is the effort. In everything I do, I seek out the challenge—the struggle—because that's where the spark of enjoyment lies.

## Reflections

Novella Calligaris has contributed with her unique style and personal trait to the Olympic Hall of Fame during the decades spanning the '60s and '70s. While Armstrong was taking his first steps on the moon, a 14-year-old girl had just set her first European record. Five years later, with a stellar track record, first Italian to win an Olympic medal in swimming and having set a new world record, she decided to retire. Between the ages of 12 and 20, with the help of her petite frame and surprising tenacity, Novella changed the history of swimming and, quite simply, moved on to decide what to do with her adult life.

This very personal trajectory - of a woman choosing a job and committing to the cause of diversity after standing on the Olympic podium as a child - leads to deep reflection on the maturity of such a journey, on her personal strength, and on the foresight of those who guided her. Even more so for those of us working on talent and potential development, imagining that the young people who are now beginning their university journey face their first adult challenges at the same age Novella chose to be nothing but herself, is a testament to strength and self-awareness worth reflecting on.

The importance of education, meaning intellectual and personal stimulation as well as study, must help us to fully express the potential of every individual, regardless of age or inclination. To quote Novella, the approach towards individuals depends on the most appropriate language for each one, and with no fear of hard work or failure, but with the courage to recognize and nurture one's aspirations, everyone has the potential to succeed in the field where their sensitivity, interests, and passion serve as pillars for growth.

Novella Calligaris was interviewed by [Ilaria Bertizzolo](#), Consultant at Eric Salmon & Partners.





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