

el Periòdic News

INTERVIEW

Natalia García Timofeeva FORMER RHYTHMIC GYMNAST

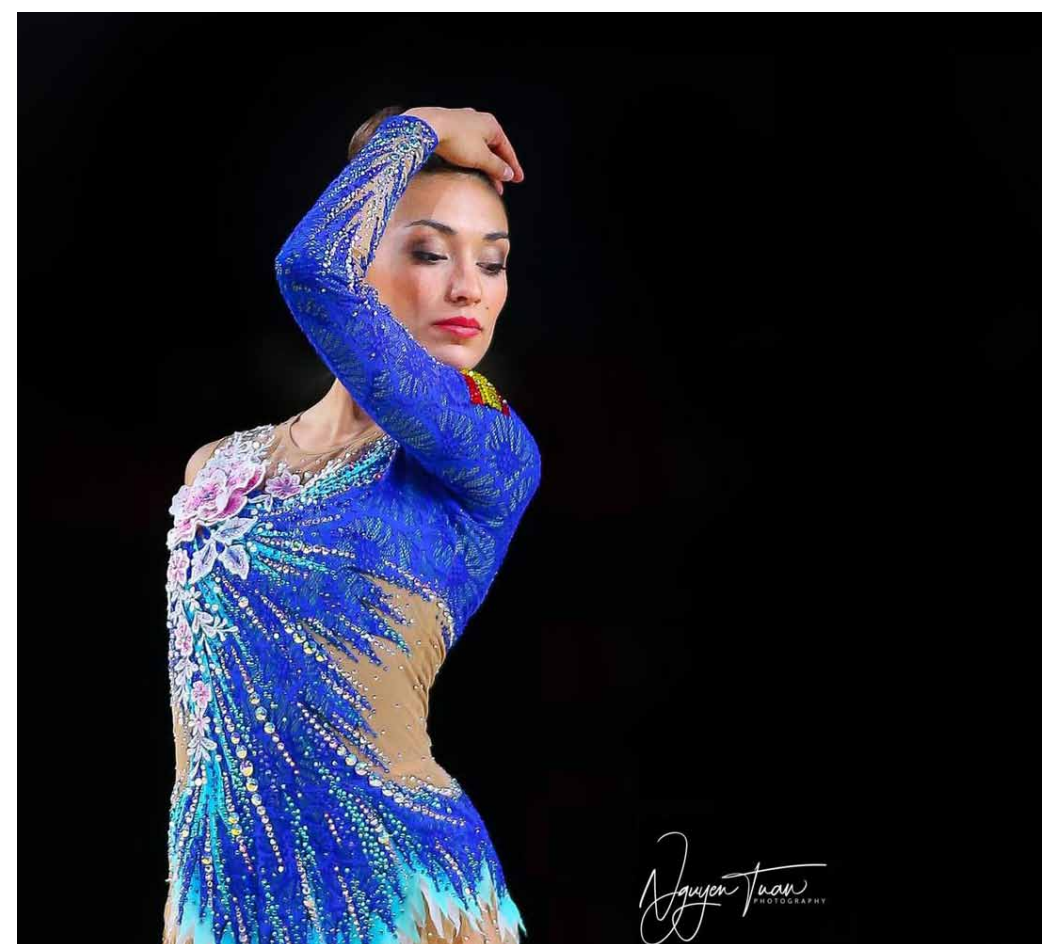
"I wanted to help more people when I retired and I discovered a new way to do it in stretching"

CATARINA KOHLER
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With a career of more than 20 years dedicated to rhythmic gymnastics, Natalia García Timofeeva has been one of the most prominent figures in national sports. She has participated in multiple European and world championships and was a reserve at the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Olympic Games. Trained at the Sant Cugat High Performance Center, she became captain of the Spanish national team and has established herself as a reference on and off the mat. Now, retired from competition, she is promoting a wellness project through stretching, with which she seeks to make the benefits of stretching and flexibility accessible to everyone. We talk to her about the memories she has of her sporting career, her new path and the masterclass she will give at Caldea.

—How did you get started in the world of rhythmic gymnastics? Do you remember your first contact with this sport?

—I started because both my grandmother and my mother did rhythmic gymnastics in Russia. My grandmother was a champion of the Soviet Union, and my mother could not reach the elite due to an illness, but she also practiced rhythmic gymnastics from a very young age. The summers that my grandmother came from Moscow, here in Barcelona she always



taught me things related to rhythmic gymnastics and I always wanted to learn more, I spent hours playing with the apparatus that they gave me as a gift from childhood: hoop, weights, ball, ribbon and rope.

—What have been the most special or unforgettable moments of your career?

—The truth is that the most special and unforgettable moments have been the World Cups that were held in Guadalajara, in Spain, because the home fans were incredible. As well as, the internationals in Barcelona, which were where all my people could come to support me, and where my fri-

ends and family were in the audience... At international competitions, my parents and very close people always came, but in these competitions close to home, people who normally couldn't afford to travel during the week or make long journeys could also come. The affection of the home fans, in the end, I think are the most beautiful memories I have.

—You have participated in several European and international championships and even in the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Olympic Games. How do you experience the Games from inside?

—I have participated in international Europeans and I have been

a reserve at the London and Rio Olympic Games. These are moments of great tension, when you are playing for the classification, going to the final and leaving your team and your country in a good place. At first, when you are younger, you are not very aware of this pressure, but over time you have to learn to manage it with the help of psychologists and coaches. And when things go well, you realize that all the effort and suffering have been worth it, and you feel very happy and satisfied.

—Do you have any sports role models?

—Since I was little I have trained with gymnasts from the national team who have inspired me, but my great role model has always been Evgenia Kanayeva, the only gymnast with two Olympic gold medals in the individual event, like mine. She has always been very humble despite being at the highest level, she would come close to me, give me advice, and we still have a very good relationship today. Last year she even came to my campus to do a 'masterclass'. For me, her way of doing gymnastics was a dream, and I wanted to be like her. She has been the figure who has inspired me the most.

—What values has rhythmic gymnastics left you with in your personal and professional life?

—Rhythmic gymnastics has taught me values such as effort, perseverance, discipline, resilience-

ce and the importance of fighting for what you want, because no one will do it for you. Nothing is given: you have to earn it. I apply these values every day in my projects and hopes. I have also learned that with empathy and teamwork it is easier to go far, you have to fight and surround yourself with good people.

—How did you experience the transition from elite athlete to former gymnast? Was it easy to find new paths and projects?

—I wanted to retire in 2020, at the Tokyo Games, but with the pandemic I had more than a year to think about what I wanted to do after rhythmic gymnastics. During that time, my grandmother suffered a stroke, and I started helping her with stretching. It was then that I discovered that, thanks to the values and skills that gymnastics had given me, I could help other people feel better, both physically and mentally. I decided to create a stretching project, which combines coordination, strength and stretching to improve well-being. I also really wanted to make my own choreographies and give masterclasses, and although I didn't know exactly what awaited me, I knew that I wanted to continue to be linked to movement and share it everywhere.

—To what extent is flexibility important in everyday life, beyond

the sporting field? It is true that flexibility can only be worked on if you start when you're young? Or is it never too late to start?

—Flexibility is very important for a better quality of life and to prevent injuries, not only in the sporting field. It makes everyday movements easier for us, such as sitting down, getting up, taking clothes from a closet or tying our shoes. It also protects us from muscle ruptures and tendon or ligament problems, and improves the general functioning of the body. And all this is not exclusive to those who have worked on it since childhood: it is never too late to start. Even if it is something that is hard to gain, with perseverance you can always progress, regardless of age. Each body is different, but everyone can improve.

—For someone who has never done stretching or who is not particularly flexible, what would you say to encourage them to try it?

—I would say that you don't need to have any level or any specific physical condition. My sessions are designed to adapt to anyone, and I always offer options to make each exercise easier. The feeling after a class is very good: you notice a tension-free state, both physically and mentally, as if you were floating. This helps a lot to face the day better and also to relieve stress. Stretching helps to prevent muscle, joint and tendon injuries,



NATALIA GARCÍA

es, and I have seen it myself at the CAR in Sant Cugat. In addition, it is a time to dedicate to yourself, and with just 10 minutes a day you will notice results very quickly.

—When is the best time to do stretching? Do you need to warm up first? And can it be combined with yoga or Pilates?

—The ideal time is in the morning, because you start the day with less tension and more mobility, but if that is not possible, doing it in the evening is also very good for better rest. In fact, some people do it twice a day. Before starting, I recommend doing some joint mobility to prepare the body and avoid injuries. And yes, stretching can be perfectly integrated with other practices such as yoga or Pilates, as they have many points in common: isometric work, stretching to take care of the body in a global way.

—How did the proposal to do this master class in stretching come about? Is this your first time participating? Do you often do sessions open to the public?

—I have been coming to Andorra for several years to spend weekends, ski and enjoy everything the country has to offer. On a few occasions, Caldea has invited me to live the spa experience. Once I retired from elite sport, knowing that I was doing a 'stretching masterclass', they suggested I do one. This is the first time I have officially collaborated with them. I have been giving this type of session open to the public for three years, in different places throughout Catalonia, Spain, Europe and beyond.

—What can people who attend expect? Is it a session suitable for everyone?

—Yes, it is a session that is completely suitable for everyone. We start with very basic exercises that everyone can do, and then I add elements that are a little more demanding, but always adapted. I have different options for each exercise so that everyone can practice it according to their level. People who participate will notice that the whole body is also worked and that, despite not being a high-impact activity, it has important benefits for health and well-being on a daily basis. ●

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