

## Interview with Ralf Schumann

# LEADING YOUNG ATHLETES ON THE HARD WAY TO SUCCESS



Ralf Schumann at the World Cup Final in Munich

*THERE'S A MAN WHOSE NAME HAS BEEN WRITTEN IN THE PAGES OF THE SHOOTING SPORT HISTORY THROUGHOUT THE LAST 35 YEARS. A MAN WHOSE NAME IS AT THE TOP OF ALL THE ISSF STATISTICS ON MULTI-MEDALISTS. A MAN WHO HAS ENTWINED HIS NAME TO THE SHOOTING DISCIPLINE HE MASTERED AS A KING.*

**W**e are talking about Ralf Schumann, the three-time Olympic Champion from Germany who reigned over the 25m Rapid Fire Men event for three decades, becoming one of the most titled shooters in the history of our sport. Ralf quit shooting after London 2012, and at the age of 53 is now working as a coach to pass on his knowledge to the next generation of athletes. But even if he's not an active athlete in competition anymore, he is still on top. Schumann is indeed still the most titled Olympic shooter (current individual events), along with Korea's Jin Jongoh, with 3 Gold and 2 Silver medals out of seven Olympic participations. Furthermore, he is still the most successful Rapid Fire pistol shooter in the history of the ISSF World Championships, with 2 titles, 1 silver medal and 2 bronzes. And finally, the German champion is still the most titled athlete in the ISSF World Cup his-

tory, having achieved an impressive number of 56 World Cup Stage podiums between 1986 and 2012 (39 Gold, 7 Silver, 10 Bronze medals) which led him to win 13 World Cup Finals in his 35-year long career.

With such a medals showcase, what's left to achieve?

Well, Schumann has new goals, now that he turned into a coach. And as you can imagine by scrolling through his great achievements, motivation is one of the strongest features of his character, and that's something he carried onto his new job. We met Ralf at this year's ISSF Rifle and Pistol World Cup Final in Munich, Germany. There, he told us about his new life, and how he's trying to hand down his knowledge to young athletes, following the same rules that lifted him to the top of hundreds of podiums: motivation, skills and hard work.

Photo: Niccolò Zanigroliani

**Ralf, we were used to interviewing you at medal ceremonies, now we meet you among the spectators. What are you doing here in Munich?**

I am not competing anymore, indeed. My last competition was in 2012 in London. It was the final match of my long career and it came at the end of 31 years as a member of the German national team. I really decided to take a break at that point. After ending my career as an active athlete I worked as a coach in Thuringia where I trained young athletes, and now I am here just to watch the competition, observe the athletes I trained a while ago and those I am coaching now. I really enjoy being here in this new capacity!

**“Each athlete is different. Each person is different. What in particular can I do to teach him shooting? Or to facilitate shooting for him?”**

**Is it difficult to stand here, in the middle of the action, in a different role? I guess it must feel a bit strange, not being down on the firing line after so many years of competitions.** I don't think so. It was not a difficult decision to retire as an athlete and to stop being a professional shooter. It did not hurt me to end my career after such a long time. In the past few years, while I was still active, I obtained my coaching diploma – I'm an educated sports trainer now. So I prepared myself for the change, and I really enjoy working with young people now. As I said, after closing my active career as a shooter, I worked for the Federation of Thuringia, with the aim to pass on all my knowledge to young athletes.

**The shooter and the coach. These are two totally different roles, with different obligations and different pressures involved. How do you feel in your new role?**

It is very interesting to pass on the things I have learned and everything I have tried myself. I've changed many things and tried various different training methods which proved to be very successful and now it is very interesting for me to impart that knowledge. It's all about asking the right questions, and offering the correct best answers. What kind of athlete do we have here? What is he/she like? Each athlete is different. Each person is different. What in particular can I do to teach him shooting? Or to facilitate shooting for him? To improve his rankings in competitions? What basics do I need to teach him so that it is easier for him to perform well in the competitions? The interesting point is that if a shooter has a basic technique – like for example in Rapid Fire pistol – you need to check what to do with him to help him achieve his personal success.

This is challenging, and at the same time very interesting, and keeps me motivated.

**The 25m Rapid Fire Pistol event changed a lot after London 2012. How do you cope with these changes? Does it make a difference in the way you train your athletes?**

You're right, the Rapid Fire Pistol final format has changed a lot. In general, I would say that is actually not a problem. We have to accept that the emphasis is now on the four-second series. With the old rules we shot 8-6-4 second series, and then a regular Final which was not that long. Now, the Final starts from scratch, and we have to focus on the 4-second series. The challenge is now to find a way to teach the best technique possible so that an athlete can apply it on the 8 and 6-second series toward the fast series.

**This sounds like a new game, isn't it?**

Right, everything is decided in four seconds. It is essential to have a good basic technique, to be physically fit and to have the ability to understand how to combine speed and precision. Nowadays, you need to shoot numerous series, back then it was only four. And that is the big difference. We have to work much more consistently to achieve a great technique, to build up a strong basis which can support both the speed as well as the consistency required by the new format.

**There's a lot of passion in your words when you speak about this sport. How did you keep yourself so motivated throughout your 35-year long career? What's the secret of your success?**

For me personally, passion was really the key of success: I really wanted this for myself. I just wanted to shoot. I enjoyed it: I wanted to shoot pistol. Many things have changed and the challenges have become greater. For me it feels like this: I stand on the shooting range, I have to start each series anew, I have to start from the beginning again and again. The technique is the same but I have to start

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from scratch again and again. There's nothing I can take to the next competition level or into the Final, especially now. I have to start from the beginning all over again. And again and again I have to try to do my best to shoot a perfect series. I have to try to shoot five tens. That's the challenge: to repeat it again and again with the same precision. And for me, that was exactly the sparkle that kept my motivation high. And that's the feeling, the passion that I try to pass on to the athletes now that I am a coach. I am working hard to make training interesting so that the athletes

do not get bored by repeating the same process and aspire to become even better and to improve their technique. It is my goal to show them that they can also enjoy this.

**“The road to success is much harder than that, that's what I have learned.”**

**I guess that there must be a lot of trust involved, in the athlete-coach relationship. What are you looking for, when you meet a young athlete who wants to work with you?**

I am happy when I see young people who want to change, who want to learn something, who love shooting, who love this sport not only because it's fancy. Sure, it's fun because it makes a loud bang and shooting is fascinating, but that's not all. I am looking for athletes who love the sports challenge, people who are motivated and willing to invest time to be taught something. Improving in these games means investing time. And sometimes it's not easy: you have to find the right balance between sports and other obligations, and that is something very important in my opinion.

**You're talking once again about passion. But is that all you need to improve in this sport?**

That's important, but it's not all you need, indeed. When I decide to train an athlete, I start with an all-around preparation. You can't just start with Rapid Fire Pistol, that's impossible. You need basics and knowledge about Air Pistol, Sports Pistol, Standard Pistol, plus some physical education. But don't misunderstand me, it's not just that. I would say that in general your mind needs to be prepared for it. You develop the experience and the skills over the years. But it is essential to have those basics.

**After winning all you could possibly win on the shooting ranges, now you're in a position where you can decide who you want to work with. How would you describe your ideal student?**

I am a self-employed coach, I'm a personal trainer and anyone can contact me if they want to be trained by me. But what I am looking for is to work with people who want to achieve something, who have set a goal and who say “I want to learn that, I want to do that”. Anyone can contact me through my website [www.ralfschumann.com](http://www.ralfschumann.com) and then we can discuss his/her interests and goals. It doesn't make sense if someone says “I want to train with Ralf Schumann for three weeks and then I will know how everything works”. That will not work out. The road to success is much harder than that, that's what I have learned.

Marco Dalla Dea, Wolfgang Schreiber

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