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VOYAGE TO PARIS 2024: PART XV



Leading off: final warm-up brings all of the heat and plenty of promising signs

Every voyage must reach an end. Whether long and arduous or short and sweet, even the journeys of a lifetime can't last forever. For 72 women and men, their personal voyage to Paris is now tantalisingly close to the finish.

On July 8, UIPM will confirm the identities of the 36 competitors in the Women's and Men's Individual competitions at this summer's Olympic Games, two and a half weeks before a spectacular Opening Ceremony along the river Seine and exactly one month before Modern Pentathlon kicks off on August 8.

This is the point where you hear one thing most frequently from those in the middle of it all: "It's beginning to feel real now." Yet last month in the Chinese city of Zhengzhou, things felt real in another way — real hot, real humid and as close to the real thing as it gets.

The UIPM 2024 Pentathlon World Championships offered the last chance to grab precious qualification quota places for Paris but, for many, it was also a final tune-up for that shot at Olympic gold which only comes around once every four years. In the faces of the athletes, in the images of exhausted bodies crossing the finish line, it was clear just how much had been put into it

all.

So what can we take out of it? Well, among many intriguing developments, it is perhaps most strikingly clear that both Korea and Hungary have their athletes primed for a summer peak. Seungmin Seong's dramatic victory in the Women's Final was in keeping with a dominant week for Korea's elite with medals flowing early and often.

But behind her the resiliency and determination of Blanka Guzi (HUN) ensured it was a gripping battle to the end. Guzi's compatriot Rita Erdos (HUN) stormed from 13th to 3rd to also snare a direct qualification quota place, creating one hell of a dilemma for Hungary's selectors given that the prolific Michelle Gulyas had already secured another place and only two of the three could go to Paris.

While Hungary remains the most prolific country in Modern Pentathlon's Olympic history, winning nine golds and 23 medals overall, the past 20 years has only produced two bronze. Perhaps the history-maker Csaba Bohm can be the one who changes the colours. His own dominant victory in Zhengzhou mere hours after the heroics of Guzi and Erdos was a serious statement of intent. For good measure Balazs Szep grabbed a qualification place too.

The race for places is now over. The final sprint finish towards them reminded us how much this all matters. Once the 72 names are confirmed, Paris is in for one hell of a show.



Paris Pointer: last-minute gift ideas and last-minute preparations as Olympic organisers prepare for launch

Once the gift shop opens its doors you know it's go time!

Last week, the flagship Paris 2024 megastore opened its doors to the public on the city's iconic Champs-Élysées.

Right next to both the Grand Palais and Parc Urbain La Concorde, two competition venues, the

sprawling space will be an Olympic venue of its own. The Paris 2024 megastore contains around 1,000m² of sales space and around 1,000 official products. The numbers are Olympian across the board, with the shop's 250 employees ready to welcome over 10,000 visitors 7 days a week and the mementoes for visitors and athletes alike ranging from €5 to €800 (for a giant Paris 2024 plushie!).

The city is in the absolute final stages of its preparations with 2024 decorations and flags being hung across the city and underground on its Metro system. Simply put: Paris is ready to party.

Managing so many pressing concerns on the security, transport and environmental fronts, organisers are confident that the final pieces are all falling into place. With the Olympic flame currently touring the north of France, international footballer Raphaël Varane having helped light a cauldron in Lille, there are now only last-minute issues to resolve.

The spectacular Opening Ceremony planned to run along the River Seine will have an updated capacity of 320,000 spectators, with fully 220,000 seats free of charge.

So, as the calendar flips ever closer to July 26, get ready to party too. And don't forget to exit through the gift shop.

Numbers game

10,000: The number of tickets sold for the Paris 2024 Paralympics, which will follow the Olympic Games and begin on August 28. Nearly 550,000 tickets, priced at €25 or less, are still available for all of the competitions, which will run at venues across the city until September 8.