

28 MAR 2014

BOB NOBLE ROLLING BACK THE YEARS WITH QUALIFICATION FOR PAN AM FESTIVAL FIRMLY IN HIS SIGHTS



After competing at the Budapest Indoors earlier this year, 56-year-old Canadian pentathlete Bob Noble (pictured above, first from left) now has his eyes firmly set on making the team for the Pan Am Festival where Modern Pentathlon will be one of 23 sports on show. Set to be held at the Mexican Olympic Sports Centre in Mexico City, Mexico from 17-20 July this year, the Modern Pentathlon competition is sure to capture the imagination of the public and many from the sport, brought to life by the founder of the Olympic Movement, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, will be cheering on Bob as one of the most senior athletes to grace the whole event.

He originally retired from the sport way back in 1981 after the World Championships in Poland that year. Now over 30 years later, he is back. New targets, new goals, with qualification for the Pan Am Festival, to represent his beloved Canada, the dream that looks set to become reality.

Modern pentathlon was a very different sport in 1981. The competition ran over five days, at the leisurely pace of one event per day, with the exception of the gruelling, all-day-and-night fencing marathon of three-minute one-touch bouts among 96 total competitors. Pentathletes shot with .22 calibre pistols, jumped a cross-country style course with options, swam the unusual distance of 300m and ran 4000m alone starting in one-minute intervals. No women, except occasionally as spectators. How things have changed.

Noble explains his retirement “came about for all the usual reasons. There was the crushing disappointment of the 1980 Olympic boycott, the financial and time burdens of training for five sports, and maybe more than anything else, the pressure to get on with life and be an adult.”

One thing is for sure he never fell out of love with the sport of pentathlon. Not infrequently over the years, he wondered what he could have achieved had he stayed in the sport.

Fast forward to this century. After competing in Canada as a masters athlete for several years, in 2013, the ‘what ifs’ gave way to ‘why not’. So he decided to enter the open senior division at the national championships to see if he still had it. He must have been glad he did as he went on to win the competition.

He explains that “despite having to run on a fractured foot, I crossed the finish line in first place to win my first-ever senior national championship. I was 55 years old. Time for a new goal. Over the fall and winter, I set my sights on new target: laser and qualification to the 2014 Pan American Championships.”

Pentathlon Canada had designated the USA Pentathlon domestic competition in Colorado Springs and the Hungarian Indoor Pentathlon as selection competitions, so he travelled to Budapest to try and stake his claim for a spot on the team.

The competition in the Hungarian capital began early Saturday morning. Unlike in 1981, the schedule was anything but leisurely. The men had riding first, followed by swimming and fencing; the women started with fencing, then progressed to swimming and riding. Both gender groups comprised of 60 athletes.

At the riding venue, he was quickly reminded of one of the unique aspects of pentathlon, something that hasn't changed at all since 1981: the luck of the draw in the riding phase. While the horses in Budapest were, as he puts it, “quite capable, and the course was very well-designed, I drew a horse that wasn't the easiest ride. What little luck I had completely ran out at the penultimate jump”, before adding “I was, I admit, completely gutted, but only for about five minutes, until I reminded myself that I was in Budapest, back at top level competition, and I still had swimming, fencing, running, and shooting to look forward to.”

He continues, “About the swim, all I can say is that the 2014 200m swim hurt every bit as much as my 1981 300m effort. The fence was the highlight of my day. Actually, it was a lot like 1981. Sixty men, fencing fifty-nine one-touch bouts, only now the bouts were one minute rather than three. I didn't miss those extra two minutes per bout at all. When the final bout was over, I looked at the clock and realized we'd been on the pistes for more than five hours. At that point, all I could do to catch the bus back to the hotel, eat, and crawl into bed.”

Sunday's combined event took place at an indoor track in central Budapest. "It was the perfect venue, with banked corners that reminded me of my track days back in 1970s and a long infield to use for shooting. You could watch all the action from just about anywhere. The stands were full with spectators who, like on Saturday, were friendly and even inspiring in their enthusiasm", he tells us.

"Then something happened that you never would have seen in 1981: 60 women running and shooting, in an all-out competition that wasn't decided until the final meters. The skill level was so high, it seemed hard to believe that pentathlon was still a relatively new sport on the women's side."

"The combined event is a brilliant adaptation to the sport, it's just so thrilling."

"After running at the punishing altitude of Colorado Springs the previous weekend, I was a little worried about my combined event in Budapest. Once again, it was all about the atmosphere, but here, the effect was all positive. The exuberance of the crowd and cheering from my teammates pushed me to give it my all, and after crossing the finish line, I found myself surrounded by athletes and spectators, total strangers who came over to offer their heartfelt congratulations."

"I'm not sure I ever loved pentathlon as much as I did at that moment, lying on the ground on the track in Budapest now officially un-retired."

He now looks forward to making the cut for the Pan Am festival. At 56, a whole new chapter in his sporting career is just beginning!

(Pictured below left, Bob with '74 Olympic Champion Janusz Peciak in 1978 - pictured right, Bob mastering laser shooting in 2014)

