

Mellouli fifth qualifies for fifth Olympics

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Oussama Mellouli, the Tunisian star, is perhaps the main reference in today's men's open water swimming. The reigning Olympic champion qualified today for the 2016 Games in Rio, following his fifth place at the FINA Marathon Swimming Olympic Games Qualification Tournament held in Setúbal (POR) and is ready to compete in his fifth Olympics. After a disappointing race (23rd position) at the 2015 FINA World Championships in Kazan (RUS), the 32-year-old once more targeted the Setúbal rendezvous to get his ticket for Rio this summer. In 2012, he had won in Portuguese waters and went on earning gold in London.

A true hero in Tunisia, Mellouli's roll of honour includes three Olympic medals, comprising the above mentioned title in 2012, plus the gold medal in the 1500m in Beijing 2008 and the bronze medal in the same event in London. Four years ago, he then became the only swimmer in history to have won a medal in the pool and in marathon swimming in the same edition of the Games. His 2008 victory also meant an important milestone: he was the first African ever to win an individual swimming event in the history of the Games.

At World level, his tally is still more impressive: in the long course version, he accumulates eight podium presences, including two gold, while in 25m-pool he collected seven medals since 2004. For Rio 2016, he will then be one of the athletes to watch in the waters of Copacabana beach. Moreover, in 2012, he had the opposition of German Thomas Lurz, arguably the best open water swimmer in history, who retired since then.

Visibly satisfied after his effort in Setúbal, Mellouli spoke about the race: "My goal was to secure a place for Rio. This is now done. However, it was a very physical race, with a lot of contact between the swimmers. It was tough!" On his strategy in Portugal, the Tunisian champion explained: "To be in the leading group as much as possible, be careful when turning at the buoys, save some energy for the final metres, and accelerate in the end. It paid off, and I am quite happy to be swimming in the magical scenario of the Copacabana beach".

Based in the USA, Mellouli will now be one week in his native country, then, until the Games, he will be training in the United States. "In Brazil, it will be a very different race, with a solid group of 25 swimmers. It will definitively be faster!" Also qualified for the 1500m free, the Tunisian swimmer hasn't made his mind on whether he will also be in the pool. "I still need some time to decide. Today, a huge step was made, let's be serene for the weeks to come".
