

How Chad le Clos and Laszlo Cseh balance rivalry and friendship

By Jolene Latimer

László Cseh and Chad le Clos are fierce rivals, yes. But also cherished friends.

With each big race, like Wednesday's at Duna Arena, their respect for each other has grown all the more. On Wednesday, it was le Clos the winner in the men's 2017 FINA World Championships men's 200 butterfly, in 1:53.33, Cseh 39-hundredths of a second behind for silver.

The result proved a flip-flop of the result from the 2015 World Championships in Kazan, Russia.

There, Cseh touched first in 1:53.48, le Clos second in 1:53.68.

“Chad was a little bit faster because he's one of the greatest swimmers,” Cseh said after Wednesday's race.

“So who can beat me but him?”



200m butterfly podium, 1. RSA, 2. HUN, 3. JPN

Le Clos made it clear the feeling is mutual.

“I don't like losing,” said le Clos.

“But if I have to lose to someone it should be Laszlo.”

The two first met at a South African training camp in 2010. Seven years later, they have forged a relationship that manages to be both competitive and compatible.

“I was very young,” le Clos said about meeting Cseh, a veteran who had already medaled in two Olympic Games.

“The one thing that struck me about Laszlo,” le Clos said, “was that he was a champion outside of the water. I took inspiration from that.”

It was something le Clos wanted to become himself: a role model.

Before Wednesday’s racing, the 25-year-old South African said he was nervous. He heard the Duna Arena crowd cheering, and knew the cheers weren’t for him.

The race was in Budapest. Cseh was clearly the crowd favorite. *“I felt like I was at a football stadium,”* said le Clos.

“That’s a big credit to the Hungarian supporters.” But he prevailed — and when the gold medal was placed around his neck, he began to cry.

His father, Bert, a recent cancer survivor, was in the crowd crying, too. *“It was a very emotional event for me,”* said le Clos.

The le Clos family has always focused on keeping competition in context. The health struggles they have faced in the past year — le Clos’ mother, Geraldine, also battled cancer — have internalized for the whole family the importance of understanding life is about more than just winning or losing. “I’ve taught him from young that we all want to win,” said Bert le Clos, “but that there’s only one winner.”

The motto in their household was: *“If you lose, get over it.”* This attitude allows Chad le Clos to maintain friendships with people he desperately wants to beat in the pool.

“There’s worse things in life than losing,” Bert le Clos said.

He paused, then added, “Like getting cancer.”

After the medal ceremony, Cseh had nothing but praise for his rival and friend.

“We are rivals in the water,” said Cseh, *“but after we get out we don’t need to have this rivalry outside.”*

Cseh said a rivalry in the water is called something simple: a race. But when that’s over, it’s over.

“That’s the most important,” said Cseh, *“to not hate your rivals. Be friendly to everyone.”*

“It’s important to be rivals inside of the pool,” said Chad le Clos.

“But we have a friendship that extends outside of the pool.”

“How can I hate somebody,” he asked, “who has the same dream as me?”
