

Budapest stars also shone in Sanya! [VIDEO]

Pedro Adrega, FINA Head of Communications

Out of the 13 “FINA Best Athletes of the Year 2017” awardees, 10 were in Sanya (CHN) to receive the prize and be honoured by the Aquatics Family on December 2. All of them were visibly thrilled with this public recognition, now taking place with the occasion of an annual Gala since 2014. After FINA’s main event of the year, the FINA World Championships in Budapest and Balatonfüred (HUN), many of the stars shining in Hungary were also on their best shape in Sanya’s stage.

Tom Daley, from Great Britain, is perhaps one of the most recognisable faces in the world of **Diving**. However, despite his successful and long career – he was world champion at the 2009 FINA showcase event in Rome (ITA) -, it is the first time the British ace earns the FINA accolade. In 2017, Daley won the 10m platform title at the FINA World Championships in Budapest (HUN), and was silver medallist in the 3m springboard synchro event in the Magyar capital. Moreover, he was also the third best of the year in the 10m at the FINA Diving World Series. He succeeds a series of four Chinese winners – He Chong in 2013, Cao Yuan in 2014, He Chao in 2015 and Chen Aisen in 2016.

“It’s really nice to receive this prize, for the first time! Normally, this goes to Chinese athletes... After a tough experience at the 2016 Olympics, 2017 has been a good year. Now, I am working again hard towards Tokyo 2020 and, if possible, a gold in the Games, which I still miss. The victory in Budapest was one of the most intense competitions in my life, and it’s great to have a world title eight years after my first success, in 2009 in Rome. For 2018, I will focus on the World Series and on the World Cup, here in China”, declared Tom Daley, after receiving his prize in Sanya.



Tom Daley (right), with his coach (left) and husband (middle)

In the women's field, Chinese dominance has been complete so far, with Shi Tingmao getting the 2017 "FINA Best Female Diver" award, mainly thanks to her double gold at the FINA Worlds in Hungary, in the 3m individual and synchro springboard. She was also the overall winner of these events at the FINA Diving World Series. Shi is used to FINA's recognition, as she had been already the best of the year in 2015 and 2016.

"I feel very honoured to receive this prize for the third consecutive time. In 2015, I was unknown, last year I start to realise that I am in the group of the best, and this year, I feel that I can already be an inspiration for the younger divers of the team. After Rio, it was very difficult time for me, as I had to overcome some injuries, Despite that, I managed to be in good shape in Budapest. It was a happy end for a complicated time", explained Shi with the trophy in her hands.

Raising the height of the board, **High Diving** had also two of its biggest stars in Sanya. In the men's category, Steve LoBue (USA) was the best of the year, after winning the world title in Budapest, in a magnificent scenario on the shores of the Danube river. LoBue – also known as the "king of somersaults", being the only one executing five of them in a single dive – also shone in the FINA High Diving World Cup, held in Abu Dhabi (UAE), earning the silver medal in that competition. The US star is the third awardee in this discipline, after Orlando Duque (COL, in 2013 and 2014) and Gary Hunt (GBR, in 2015 and 2016).

"It's a very exciting evening for me, knowing that I succeed to two legends in the sport, Duque and Hunt. To be honest, I was more nervous on stage than on the top of the platform... The future of the sport continues to be very bright and I thank FINA for constantly pushing the limits. I have now been practising diving for 25 years and high for the last seven years, and I can see an enormous evolution of the discipline. The Olympic dream is definitively possible", considered the US awardee.

Among women, Rhiannan Iffland (AUS) is a newcomer to this list, after previous successes of Cesilie Carlton (USA, 2013), Rachele Simpson (USA, 2014 and 2015), and Lysanne Richard (CAN, 2016). Being the first Australian with a high diving medal in a FINA event, Iffland won two of them in 2017: gold in Budapest at the World Championships, and silver at the World Cup in UAE.

“I am a newcomer to the sport, it’s my second year in high diving. So being here, among so many aquatic stars, it’s really a big thing for me. Sometimes, it’s difficult, even for me, to believe in what I have achieved in such a short period. High Diving is evolving quickly among women, and my main goal for 2018 is to win the World Cup in April. On Budapest, I recall the innovation concerning the temporary pool that was used. I perform in acrobatic shows, so tanks are no novelty for me. I believe this is a way to facilitate the organisation of high diving events around the world”, stated Iffland after her consecration.



Steve LoBue (USA) and Rhiannan Iffland (AUS), with coach Adam Krikorian (US women)

In **Open Water Swimming**, Marc-Antoine Olivier, from France, was the man to beat at the World Championships. In Hungary, he was a double gold medallist in the 5km and team relay event, earning an additional bronze in the 10km. It is the first time a French open water swimmer is distinguished as best of the year by FINA, after Valerio Cleri (ITA) in 2010, Thomas Lurz (GER) in 2011 and 2013, Oussama Mellouli (TUN) in 2012, Allan do Carmo (BRA) in 2014, Jordan Wilimovsky (USA) in 2015 and Ferry Weertman (NED) in 2016. In a video acceptance message – Olivier couldn’t be present in Sanya -, the French awardee stated:

“It is for me a great honour to receive this prize, and to be considered the best open water swimmer of the year. I am just 21 years old, so this recognition means the world for me. 2017 was indeed a very successful year and the Budapest World Championships remains a very fond memory in my mind”.

Ana Marcela Cunha (BRA) is a regular presence in the FINA list of awarded open water swimmers. The Brazilian ace got the title of the best of the year in 2010, 2014 and 2015, and was once more the athlete to

watch in 2017. In the pleasant waters of Balaton Lake in Hungary, Cunha won three medals – gold in 25km, and bronze in 5km and 10km. These three achievements contributed to her amazing “collection” of podium presences at the FINA Worlds: 10. She was also the second best in the annual series of the FINA 10km Marathon Swimming World Cup.

“It definitely felt well to get my 10th world medal in Budapest. It’s always difficult when you have such a busy programme over so few days, but we need to remain concentrate and focus on one race at the time. Thanks to my performances, open water swimming is now a recognised discipline in Brazil, and I believe we have good conditions to continue progressing. There is a new generation that is coming after me. Tokyo 2020? I go step by step – firstly the World Cup in 2018, then the Worlds in 2019 – which will probably qualify for the Games -, and then the Olympics”, conceded Cunha in Sanya.

Coming back to the pool, the Budapest FINA World Championships last July were highlighted by the performances of a new star in the magnificent Duna Arena in the Magyar capital. His name – a name to retain in the future: Caeleb Dressel. The US athlete was by far the best male swimmer of the competition, winning an amazing harvest of seven gold medals: 50m and 100m free, 100m fly, 4x100m free and medley relay, 4x100 mixed free and medley relay. It is only the second time in the history of the competition that this amount of titles is won by a single athlete: the previous one happened precisely 10 years ago, with the successes of Michael Phelps in Melbourne 2007. The greatest Olympian in history was the 2016 recipient of the FINA award, after his last competition at the Rio Olympic Games. Other recipients of this recognition include Ryan Lochte (USA), Chad Le Clos (RSA) and Mitch Larkin (AUS).

“It was a wonderful time in Budapest with USA team! I am very sorry for not being with you tonight, but I had other priorities with exams and school obligations. Thank you very much FINA for honouring me this year”, considered Dressel in a video message addressed to the guests of the Gala in Sanya.

Among women, Sarah Sjöström (SWE) won the 2017 accolade. She was also very successful in Budapest, being named the Best Female Swimmer of the Championships. The Swedish star earned three gold medals in Hungary, in the 50m free, and 50m and 100m fly. Additionally, she was the runner-up in the 100m free event. Sjöström also set six World Records (two in 50m pool and four in 25m pool) throughout the year and was the indisputable winner of the FINA/airweave Swimming World Cup circuit. She succeeds, as Best Athlete of the Year, to triple winner in 2014, 2015 and 2016, Hungary’s Katinka Hosszu.

“I would like to thank FINA for giving me this very prestigious award. It has been a fantastic year for me, with three golds in Budapest, one silver, and two World Records there. Then, I also won for the first time the Swimming World Cup. This award certainly gives me a lot of motivation for 2018. See you next December at the FINA World Swimming Championships!” stated Sarah Sjöström, who could not make the travel to Sanya.

In **Artistic Swimming**, 2017 marks the second time the Best Athlete of the Year award is distributed, after the inclusion of mixed duet events in the programme of the FINA World Championships – more precisely in Kazan 2015. After the Budapest rendezvous, two swimmers shared the prize this year, Aleksandr Maltsev (RUS) and Giorgio Minisini (ITA). The first was the winner of the mixed duet free final, while the Italian great got the gold in the mixed duet technical programme.

“It is a great privilege to be here tonight, among so many champions. With the inclusion of men in artistic swimming, a new world is open, as we can perform more figures and do more lifts. It was definitely a good decision to allow men to compete in the FINA competitions, The next

step is to convince the IOC to get our events in the Olympic programme, I will continue competing until we get there..." said Minisini.



Giorgio Minisini (ITA)

Next to him, Maltsev also expressed his satisfaction:

"In Russia, for example, many more boys are now interested in doing artistic swimming. The evolution will be fast in our sport. I have been doing artistic swimming for seven years now, but I had to wait until 2015 to finally compete at the Worlds, in Kazan. I am glad other swimmers won't wait so long..."

Among women, Russia's supremacy in the discipline for the last two decades, continues to be the rule, with a new star on Sanya's stage: Svetlana Kolesnichenko. She collected four gold medals in the Magyar capital, in the solo technical and free, but also in the duet technical and free programmes. Over the history of the FINA awards, other two Russian legends were consecrated: Natalia Ishchenko and Svetlana Romashina shared the honours since 2010, with one notable exception, the distinction to China's Xuechen Hunag in 2014.

"I was very nervous when I had to go on the stage and receive the prize! I totally dedicate this award to my coaches. They make everything possible and they are the 'secret' behind Russia's domination in this discipline. They are our idols. They spend 10/12 hours a day with us in the pool, so they see us more than their own family!" Kolesnichenko confessed.



Svetlana Kolesnichenko (RUS)

Finally, in water polo, Croatia managed almost an impossible task, winning the men's World Championships' tournament in Budapest, defeating in the final the team of Hungary, in front of an ecstatic crowd in Margaret Island. The Magyar nation – the most successful one in the discipline at Olympic level – literally stopped in the day of the decisive game, and the disappointment was huge, but after the final whistle even the Magyar fans applauded the incredible feat of the Croatian team. Moreover, the Balkan squad won the bronze medal at the 2017 World League.

“Budapest was really a unique experience for us! We managed to keep our nerves together until the very last seconds of the game and the victory was possible! We are like brothers, so we can be a very strong and united team. That was the key for our win against Hungary. We are a water polo country and everyone was expecting gold from us; when we returned to Zagreb we had a big popular celebration and that was a great moment in our lives”, recalled Andelo Setka, one of the players of the Croatian team.

In the women's side, USA is clearly dominating operations in the last years. Already winner of this accolade in 2010, 2012, 2014, 2015 and 2016, the North Americans are again the best in 2017, after getting the gold in the Budapest rendezvous. Some weeks before the World Championships, the North Americans had also been the best in the annual World League.

“We have the culture of Water Polo in our genes. We always strive to do our best and to constantly challenge ourselves. This is one of the hardest sports in the world, so we must be prepared. This summer, playing in Margaret Island was really special for us. Being in a place where everyone loves the game we love it's really incredible. I felt very grateful I could play,

and win, there!" said Maggie Steffens, US player.



Andelo Setka (CRO) and Maggie Steffens (USA)

Besides the athletes, their respective coaches were also honoured in Sanya.

The complete list of awardees can be found [here](#) [1]

Two other distinctions were given during the Gala: the FINA Prize was handled to China Swimming Association, while superstar Sun Yang was given a prize for his “Outstanding Contribution for Swimming Popularity in China”.

Video of Athlete's statements & Trophy handovers | FINA World Aquatics Gala 2017 - "Soirée des Etoiles"
