

Aquatics review of 2017: Artistic Swimming - Russia continues doing it better

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If, from a formal point of view, 2017 was a pivotal year for the discipline, in terms of the performances in the pool, the status quo prevailed and the world hierarchy didn't suffer major changes. At the July FINA Congress in Budapest, "Synchronised Swimming" became "Artistic Swimming", a change that aims at better identifying the essence of the discipline. The FINA delegates agreed by a vast majority to this switch and Artistic Swimming made a kind of comeback to its origins, when, in the 1940s, it was popularised as "ballet in the water" by US movie star Esther Williams. While this decision was taken in a hotel in the centre of Budapest, in the Varosliget venue, not far away, the synchro, or artistic swimmers, were still competing in the pool.

And there, the global picture remained the same, with Russia taking control of operations, a reality that has held sway for the last 20 years. In the nine finals on the programme - it was the second time in the history of the Worlds that mixed duet events were included in the schedule - the European powerhouse bagged seven gold medals, leaving only the mixed duet technical crown to Italy and the free combination consecration to China.

Kolesnichenko steps up

With the most famous duet (and solo) swimmers out of action this time - they don't need to be presented any longer: Svetlana Romashina and Natalia Ishchenko - the spotlight in the Magyar capital shone on Svetlana Kolesnichenko. Born in September 1993, she wasn't an unknown swimmer when she arrived in Hungary: she was part of the Olympic squad that won team gold at the Rio 2016 Games, and she was also successful in Kazan 2015, getting gold in both the team technical and team free finals, and also the free combination event.



Kolesnichenko in Budapest with one of her gold medals

Despite this roll of honour, few had had the opportunity to see her competing in solo or duet, Romashina and Ishchenko taking the central roles in these two events in recent years. But in Budapest, Kolesnichenko had a privileged stage to show her class and elegance; and she did not disappoint the onlookers, winning the solo technical and free finals but also reaping gold in the duet events, together with Alexandra Patskevich. With this harvest, Kolesnichenko was the most successful artistic swimmer in Budapest and naturally won the Best Female Athlete of the Year award in this discipline.

Besides those four titles, the Russian delegation also collected gold in the two team events (technical and free), as well as the top award in the mixed duet free routine, with Aleksandr Maltsev pairing successfully with Mikhaela Kalancha. Maltsev is by far the most prominent male swimmer of the team and retained the 2015 crown, while also getting silver in the mixed duet technical event. Two years ago, in Kazan (RUS), Maltsev's main opponent was US star Bill May, while last summer in Hungary the major challenge came from Italy, with Giorgio Minisini winning the top honours in the technical final with Manila Flamini and taking silver in the free final with Mariangela Perrupato). Bill May (swimming with Kanako Spendlove), the symbol of male artistic swimming in the United States, fared slightly worse than two years ago, this time earning two bronze medals (in 2015, he won gold in the technical and silver in the free).

Voloshyna: six medals in Budapest

The last gold medal of the World Championships went to China, in the free combination, an event which Russia did not contest. China can be rightly considered the second-best synchro nation in Budapest after collecting four additional silver medals - in the two duet and two team events. Ukraine is also progressing fast and had a very successful outing at the Worlds - Anna Voloshyna, the country's main star, was very consistent in the Magyar capital, earning bronze in both the solo and duet (with Anastasiya Savchuk). She was also part of the bronze medal team free squad and gained an additional silver in the free combination event. If we take into account the total number of medals, Voloshyna was the "most valuable" artistic swimmer in Budapest, with six medals round her neck!



Voloshyna performing her routine in Budapest

The last two countries on the podium in Budapest were Spain and Japan. The Iberians are far from their glory days but still have one star in their ranks, Ona Carbonell. The Catalan great (27 years old) returned home with two silver linings in her pocket, having finished second to Kolesnichenko in both the solo technical and free events.

Japan also had a fruitful trip to Budapest, collecting two bronze medals: team technical and free combination. This was, however, worse than their 2015 performance in Kazan, where, besides those two events, Japanese swimmers were also third in the team free and duet technical routines.

If we look at the list of the nine countries which have collected medals in the history of the World Championships, only two are missing: Canada and France. Just as two years ago, both Canada (a powerhouse in the discipline in the initial 20 years of the discipline at Olympic and world level) and France (who had in Virginie Dedieu an unforgettable soloist in the first years of the 21st century) left the World Championship stage without a single medal.

Something new: the World Series

Created in 2017, the FINA Artistic Swimming World Series gathered a series of existing meets into an annual circuit, capable of attracting the best swimmers and distributing prize money to the most successful in the final ranking.

After the seven events of the competition, held successively in Paris (FRA), Taiyuan (CHN), Tokyo (JPN), Toronto (CAN), Las Palmas (ESP), Long Island (USA) and Tashkent (UZB), the first surprise comes from the fact that Russia does not appear in the classification. For the moment, the Russians are not very engaged in the World Series, which gives opportunity for other nations to shine.



Spanish squad in Las Palmas (ESP)

That was the case for Ukraine, the best country in the duet and team rankings - the latter is obtained by adding the free, technical, highlights and free combination points to each national federation swimming those events in the series. In solo, the Ukrainians were second, behind Spain, who, once more, had in Ona Carbonell its main asset. Japan was the strongest nation in the mixed duet and second in team.

Canada is also well placed on this circuit, with three placings in the top 3: second in duet and third in solo and mixed duet. Germany (second in mixed duet), China (third in duet) and Uzbekistan (third in team) complete the list of nations in the first three positions in the different events.

The full length article is available in the latest issue of the FINA Magazine
