

The strongest field ever seen in Balatonfured

Gergely Csurka, FINA Media Committee

Balatonfured will witness the strongest field ever gathered for a FINA/HOSA Marathon Swim World Series leg here in Hungary. Olympic champions, world champions, last summer's medallists, former overall winners – it's almost like the World Championships held here a year ago.

Balatonfured and open water swimming is a love affair we might even label 'ever-lasting'. It's started eight years ago, first with continental events, then came the big switch in 2014, the first FINA meet, a junior world champs – taking over the hosting in 40 days, something usual for Hungarian organisers... –, followed by two editions of World Cup legs in 2015 and 2016. This event was skipped in 2017 for all the good reasons: because of the preparations for something bigger, the FINA World Championships. It was a milestone of its kind as Balatonfured became the first-ever co-host city in history – but even if it's located 120km from Budapest, the open water competition was a big hit and adored by everyone.



Scene from the opening press conference (from left: Ana Marcela Cunha, Kristof Rasovszky, City Mayor Istvan Boka, Anna Olasz, LOC Chair David Szanto) - Credit: LOC / Istvan Derencsenyi

Now, the 10km races are back, under the new name of FINA/HOSA Marathon Swim World Series, and the open water fever is already high in Balatonfured. Hopefully, the temperatures will reach some highs at least on Saturday as a cold spell has just hit the country recently. This is good news for the professionals – a bit less good for the potential participants of the mass event – as the hot and humid days were over early this week and the lake cooled down to the low 20s. According to the forecast, sunshine returns for Saturday, winds will ease so it's going to be another perfect day for racing in the sweet and mild Balaton.

And Hungarian fans are really in an upbeat mood thanks to Kristof Rasovszky's brilliant win in Setubal last Saturday. The 21 year-old might be the next big hit in Hungarian swimming, he achieved an amazing double two years ago by clinching the junior world and European 10km titles in a span of six weeks in 2016 (while racing in 1500m at the Olympics between the two), then in 2017 he won the European Cup overall title and finished 4th in the World Cup overall (claimed three titles en route, the only one in the field who won more than one, but his disastrous opening race and a weaker swim in the last one prevented him from making the overall podium). And what makes him even more popular here, that he is truly a local guy, from the neighbouring Veszprem, he trains in a pool next to the lake and swim for a club named Balaton.



Setubal winner Kristof Rasovszky is ready to rock in home waters

At the opening press conference held next to the venue on Friday, Rasovszky was optimistic, though he insisted that win would not come easily this time. *“In Setubal I could break from the pack relatively unnoticed at least I learnt this from the discussions with the other guys after the race. The waves blocked the view of the others, then I caught up with the girls so no one could recognise that there is a man up front among the many caps”* he said. *“I don’t think this could be repeated here though for sure I won’t miss the course as I did in Seychelles where I led almost the entire race but took the wrong direction after the penultimate turn and that cost me a medal. I know the course like my palm, if I could put together a fine plan and I’ll stay focused for the entire race then I can finally make the podium which I’ve never achieved so far at home.”*

One thing is for sure: Rasovszky will enjoy a wide circle of rivals, since the field is a kind of open water's 'Who's who' with a lot of outstanding swimmers showing up. In the men's field we'll have the Olympic champion Ferry Weertman, the Dutchman who added the world title to his treasury right here last year. Another world champion, 25km gold medallist Axel Reymond (FRA) will also line up for the start, just like the 2016 and 2017 overall title-holder (and world champion) Simone Ruffini, who won the last World Cup race here two years ago. 2015 winner Jack Burnell (GBR), 2014 overall champion Alan do Carmo (BRA), Italian silver medallists from last July Mario Sanzullo (5km) and Matteo Furlan (25km) and the German strongmen, former world silver medallist Rob Muffels and 2016 overall runner-up Andreas Waschburger will also chase the top positions.

The women's race promises the same thrills, headed by Olympic title-holder Sharon van Rouwendaal. One

of the most decorated swimmers of the discipline Brazil's Ana Marcela Cunha has fond memories from this lake as she won here in 2015 and made history last July by claiming medals in all three individual events at the Worlds (gold in 25km, bronzes in 5km and 10km).



Ana Marcela Cunha: for her racing in this lake means winning medals

“I love to come back here from time to time as I have great memories from Lake Balaton, especially from last year” Ana Marcela said at the opening press conference. “I’m healthy and I’m ready for the start though I know it’s going to be another pretty tough race, but among perfect environments.”

Italy's specialists, winners of the last overall titles are coming to maintain their respective runs: the best in 2017, Arianna Bridi (also clinching bronzes in 10km and 25km at the Worlds), the winner in 2015 and 2016, Rachele Bruni, who came first here in the 2016 race. Samantha Arevalo got Ecuador's first ever open water medal last July in the 10km – she is back for more this time, too. Ah, and we also have USA's 2012 Olympic silver medallist and double world champion Haley Anderson who is fresh from her win in Setubal plus her former team-mate, Eva Fabian, now racing for Israel, who also medalled (including a gold) at previous World Championships.

“I’m not an expert but those who know this sport convinced me that this event is going to be like another World Championships” Balatonfured Mayor Istvan Boka said at the press conference. “I hope our city has become a trademark name in open water swimming based on our efforts in the last five years as we hosted at least one major event in each season since 2013. Last year’s Word Championships were the peak for us and our city benefited a lot from that event, the list of all developments would be too long to recall now.”

The competitions kick off at 9.30 (men's race, women start 10min later) and can be followed live on FINA TV.
