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Kristof Rasovszky (HUN) “It’s all about your head, your mental toughness, your willpower”

Gergely Csurka, FINA Media Committee Member (HUN)

Last year he made his breakthrough at European level, now he has made it on the global stage, though that is barely

a surprise to anyone involved in open water swimming. Kristof Rasovszky won the first world title of his career,

booked his spot in the Olympic marathon and, after two seasons of ups and downs in the World Series, he finally

came up with a consistent run of performances - only ups (three wins, two more top 5 finishes) - and clinched the

In the previous three seasons he sent signs enough that something huge was in the making. First, no one else had ever won the junior European and world titles over 10km within two months (and swum in the 1500m at the Olympics between the two). But this was only his warm-up in 2016.

I'm still very much in the learning process

A year later he finished first in the LEN Open Water Cup overall by winning five races in five starts and, even though this continental series is not comparable to the level of the FINA Marathon Swimming World Series, first places are not free give-aways in any 10km international event. In any case, in the World Series itself he was the only male to win three legs in 2017, while the best of the rest had one victory apiece. A disastrous start of the season cost Rasovszky the chance of a higher finish overall. Many had expected him to blow the field apart at the 2017 World Championships, staged virtually on his doorstep at Lake Balaton.... But a couple of underwater kicks caught him painfully in a sensitive area and he had to settle for 5th and 7th place finishes.

Then came 2018 and the big picture was coming together for the first time, even though he alternated gold medals and 12th places. What made Kristof Rasovszky one of the top open water swimmers in the world last season was his ability to learn something even from a bad race. And this is not just words, because he does put it right next time. He knows exactly where he committed a mistake. Moreover, he is also pretty much aware of what he did right (see also: intelligence).

At the 2018 Europeans in Glasgow he wrote history by becoming the first male ever to win medals in all three individual events. And what medals those were: gold in 5km and 25km and a silver in 10km, losing by just 0.04sec to his great friend, the Dutch Olympic champion Ferry Weertman. Every word he spoke, his body language and face transmitted the self-confidence typical of all perfectly prepared athletes. He knows exactly what he wants, he knows exactly how he will achieve it and what he has to shut out in order to prevent anyone and anything from derailing him from the track to his goals. Though he feels he belongs in the higher circles in his sport now, there is no trace of pomposity. He has a brilliant sense of humour, which helps him face the world with an overwhelming serenity and ensure that under no circumstances will he ever crack under pressure, even with the biggest things at stake.

"It was not an easy process, even if it looks differently to many" he says. "I struggled a lot in my first races but as I started

getting used to the racing environment and entering more and more events, my connection to open water was improving

step by step. In the past two years I took part in the majority of the FINA World Series legs and LEN Open Water Cup

discover my strengths and weaknesses. Even if I produced some great results which made me really happy, I'm still very

much in the learning process and don't consider myself an outstanding or absolutely top swimmer – just one of the guys

who has a chance to make the podium if everything comes together in a given race.”

I think I've closed a fine season, but...

On the other hand, he proved a few times that his upbeat mood never switches into light-headedness. At this year's World Series he often started his races with a somersault from the pontoon, or with a smile and a wave to his photographer buddies when he dives into the water – but this didn't happen at the World Championships. When it's 'game time' he just does his job with an expression of stone. He doesn't look for brawls but hits back when necessary. His hard training has given his body the power to meet whatever situation arises and he has got to know all his big rivals well enough to adjust his tactics accordingly.

Of course, we saw him going through bitter moments, at the 2017 World Champs for example – but even then he does not sulk and leave the press with just a few banalities before walking off. He tells you straightforwardly what he thinks about the race and in about an hour he gets over it, no moping. And no boastful showing-off in victory either, as he showed in remaining modest on and off the podium after his triumphs in Glasgow and Gwangju.

He clinched his (and Hungary's) first-ever world open water title on the opening day of the FINA World Championships. Two days later he booked his spot for the Tokyo Olympics, though he was disappointed at finishing fourth in the 10km. Before and after the top meet of the year he offered a balanced performance in the World Series, five podium finishes in as many legs, including three wins (back-to-back: Balatonfured, Lac St-Jean, Lac Megantic), and securing his overall win with respective 5th and a 4th place finishes in Ohrid and Chun'an.



(L-R) Silver medallist Logan Fontaine (FRA), Gold medallist Kristof Rasovszky (HUN) and Bronze medallist Eric Hedlin (CAN)

“I think I’ve closed a fine season including a good performance in Gwangju, but I’m not fully satisfied,” he says. “I wanted

to get a medal in the 10km race at the Worlds – to earn the Olympic berth was a kind of minimum. I managed to achieve

that, I got a gold on the opening day, so I won’t say I’m upset but I still have a kind of feeling that I had not wanted

to swim the 10km the way I eventually did. I wanted to have a different ending but I messed up my positioning in the last lap

and especially in the finish. I came fourth, the medal was close and I couldn’t grab it, that’s a bit disturbing.”

From now on the Olympics are in the focus

Many said that the 10km race in Gwangju was one of a kind, perhaps the most gruelling we've ever seen: the world's top competitors, 10 Olympic spots at stake, swimmers of the strongest nations also having to look for each other as a top 10 finish for one would mean the end of the Olympic hopes for a team-mate if he finished outside the top ten.

“Yeah, it was a unique race, happens once in four years if it happens at all,” Kristof said. “I was participating in an

Olympic qualifying 10km at the Worlds for the first time but the older guys told me that not even the one in Kazan (2015)

was like this. Still, we kind of expected what unfolded on that day. I can tell you honestly that we sat down with the German

guys on the eve of the race and agreed to cooperate a bit, to set a really high pace right from the beginning to narrow the

number of swimmers who could stay with us till the end. While this worked all in all, we found a few more guys keeping up

with us than expected... With more swimmers in front I think I made a couple of wrong decisions; I should have rushed to

the front earlier instead of waiting in the third row.”

Credit to Rasovszky that he was the only one among the top 10 who had swum in the 5km two days earlier and one of the few who was also part of the team event and entered the 25km too. He tried to repeat his (25km) win from the Europeans but this time his body turned against him: he threw up twice before deciding to quit the race after 9.5km. With the World Series races commencing in days, he didn't want to take any risk to suffer for three more hours and finish around 10th place.

Still, with all the results he has achieved in the past two seasons, he should face more and more questions on his chances in Tokyo.

“No doubt, from now on the Olympics are in the focus. My coach, Laszlo Szokolai, has already found out where we are

going for training camps and I'm looking forward to having tough, sometimes painful, demanding but pretty good Olympic

preparations. And I'm aware that I will hear loads of questions about my medal hopes. But as of now I'm still pushing it in

front of me, kind of postponing thinking of my replies mentally as I want to enjoy my autumn rest, recharging the batteries,

attending my brother's and my fellow national team-mate Daniel Szekelyi's weddings and stuff like that. Then, from

January, I know I won't have any other choice than to face the questions – and all the challenges coming with the

That is physical pain at its best

Talking about pain, back in 2018 it was interesting to hear how Rasovszky explained the core elements of going all the way

in a 25km race (it was his second-ever event in which he completed the distance). *“The 25km race – especially in 17C and*

in full-body suits, a pain to wear over five hours – is mostly about saying ‘no’ whenever the evil ‘let’s quit now’ thought

surfaces from the bottom of your mind, from time to time. I could say now at least four times then.”

Going in-depth a bit, he offered some more thoughts on that some months later. *“In open water the feeling that you call pain*

comes at around 15km. I would say, this is something a woman might feel after a tiring Saturday visit to the market.

Walking for two or three hours and carrying at least four bags home in her hands – after that you feel your arms are about

nap – instead, you have to go on as you still have some kilometres to cover. It's all about your head, your mental toughness,

your willpower. These decide our races.”

We know that swimming is a sport where bearing the pain is the factor which usually makes the difference. However, the pains in the pool and in open water are a bit different.

“In open water our goal is to swim as fast as possible and as long as possible in a steady state. It's a very delicate

balancing on the borderline of falling into the condition of lacking oxygen. You need to stay on the other side of that border,

but very close to it. You have to keep your pulse between 154-164 constantly, which prevents the acids taking over in your

muscles, and that should last for a long time, almost two hours in a 10km race. In contrast, in the pool the pace is much

higher and consequently your pulse too. There, over the last lap, you should push in top gear, mostly without taking a

heart is no longer able to pump fresh, oxygen-rich blood to your arms and legs. Especially in the cruellest events, in the

400m IM and in the 200m fly, over the last metres you feel as if air had been removed completely from the venue, your lungs

are in flames, your eyes see only virtual circles, arms and legs are metal-like objects... That is physical pain at its best. But

we are trained for that. Swimming several thousands of kilometres prepares you to swim the last metres without taking a

breath. Or to really gear up for a finish in a 10km race. Even though sometimes you might feel you are like an axe without a

grip. Just beating the water but the wall or the panel is nearing awfully slowly.”

A nice way to live your life and achieve success on highlighted occasions... But this is something Rasovszky and all top-

level swimmers are ready for. “When I’m talking about this, ordinary people usually look at me with eyes wide open.

like sometimes I find ordinary people's things quite weird," he says with his unique laugh.

He is a happy man indeed. Well, at the age of 21, that's what you are supposed to be, for sure.

