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Aurélie Muller (FRA): “I don’t give up”

Christina Marmet, FINA Aquatics World Magazine Correspondent (FRA)

“Fall down, get back up.” Those are the first words Aurélie Muller wrote on her Facebook page at the end of August

2019, a month and a half after finishing 11th in the 10km open water race at the FINA World Championships in

Yeosu, South Korea. A month and a half after missing her qualification to the Olympic Games in Tokyo by one tenth

of a second. A month and a half after losing her chance of redemption after being disqualified in 2016.

“As if I couldn’t help but fall down and face more difficulties,” she continued. “Forced to lift my head up, to question my

desire to continue and to start all over again. What an infernal cycle. I tire myself out!”

So I gave myself this new challenge

The 30-year-old's future was up in the air after Yeosu. All summer, she struggled to let go of these championships. She kept turning that race over in her mind. How could she have led nearly the entire time, only to be overtaken by exactly 10 girls 200 metres before the finish line? She fought to move on, and pondered over her future and what she wanted in and from life.

But when the time came for training to start again at the end of the summer, she realised she too wanted to be at practice like everybody else. She knew she still loved to swim. Compatriot Lara Grangeon had finished fourth in Yeosu to claim a place in the Tokyo 10km for France, which meant no other Frenchwoman could contest the second Olympic qualifier. So getting to Tokyo in open water was clearly out of the question for her, but maybe there were other ways to reach her Olympic dream.

"It's in my temperament," she said. "I couldn't quit, and I also didn't want to endure this year. Everybody was going to

talk about the Olympics, every sport will try to qualify, and here I was, not qualified. What was I going to do if I didn't want

to agonise this whole season? So I gave myself this new challenge."

Muller, who originally was a speed swimmer specialising in the 800m and 1500m before choosing open water in 2007, decided to go back to her roots to try to qualify in the 1500m, which is included at the Olympics for women for the first time. The time limit to reach among French swimmers is 16:21 and her career-best is 16:24, which she recorded in 2010 at her last major competition in the pool.



She believed she had not reached her full potential there yet, and was eager to give this new challenge her all. If it worked out, great, and if it didn't, she would have tried. The next step was, however, to find a new coach and training group.

Indeed, it was completely out of the question to return to Montpellier to Philippe Lucas, her coach since 2015. Lucas, who is at the head of an impressive group of long-distance swimmers, will have his hands full as three of his athletes are already qualified to the Tokyo Olympics in the 10km race: Sharon van Rouwendaal, Marc-Antoine Olivier and David Aubry.

“I couldn’t continue with Philippe, not because things weren’t going well,” Muller said. “But because it was just too hard

for me mentally to be there knowing he has three athletes qualified. He’s going to be very focused on open water and

prepare for the Games with them, which is normal. I was already very frustrated and angry to not be [qualified], so it would

have felt like a double punishment. I just couldn’t do this to myself.”

Honestly, I wanted to go home

Muller landed in the town of Nice in southeast France with the renowned Fabrice Pellerin, who brought Yannick Agnel, Clément Lefert and Camille Muffat to the top of the 2012 Olympic Games podiums. She now found herself amongst a dynamic and welcoming group of swimmers, including Charlotte Bonnet, Jérémy Stravius and Jordan Pothain, all also working towards the same goal of an Olympic qualification. Now that she had her new home, she had to readjust to a completely different training after 12 years in open water.

“It might be silly to say but from September to November I was basically learning how to swim again,” she said. “Fabrice

to adapt to swim fewer kilometres a day, and also to a completely different kind of focus.”

However, just as for every elite athlete across the planet, all of these Olympic aspirations came to a sudden stop when the International Olympic Committee announced at the end of March that the Games, set to open on July 24, would be postponed to exactly one year later in 2021 due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Muller had already been out of the pool since mid-March after the French government placed the entire country on lockdown.

She opted to stay in Nice but could hardly focus on anything happening in the realm of sports at first, with her family living in northeast France, which has been the nation’s worst-hit region.

“Of course this [postponement] is the best decision and we all had been waiting for it,” she said. “But honestly my mind

wasn’t really in it at all. Two of my best friends are nurses dealing with the COVID crisis, my grandmother is fragile and in

a retirement home, and my mother works in the food industry and has been overworked, so I had been extremely

preoccupied.”

With the Olympics now officially more than a year away, she is certainly relieved not to have to continue fretting over training in basic conditions and out of the water for an indefinite amount of time. She nonetheless continues to follow daily virtual training sessions concocted by her trainer, but she also isn’t sure if her strategy moving forward will remain the same as initially planned.

Indeed, she now awaits the new dates of the 2021 FINA World Championships that have to be moved to accommodate the

Olympics. Additionally, she hopes that the selection criteria for the open water qualifications are revised and eased up to take into account the current situation. And if they are, then a return to this discipline is certainly an option.

“I totally agree that the 10 who qualified in 2019 should keep their spot and it would have been unfair otherwise,” she said.

“But there are still 15 spots to allocate and a lot can change in two years. It should be the 25 best swimmers, but with two

years in between the first round of qualifications and the actual Games, will you really get the best swimmers in the world at

that time if you don't change the rules? I am thinking of every possibility. Will there be a qualification tournament or will it

be decided at Worlds if before the Games? Do I get another opportunity in open water or do I continue in the pool? I'm

waiting to see if a door opens up.”

In Yeosu, only the top 10 swimmers in the 10km could qualify for Tokyo. Muller, the reigning double world champion in the distance, had taken a short break in 2018 to focus on her studies, but had returned easily to competition shape for 2019. After successfully passing every step of the internal French qualification procedure, she was certainly a strong contender for

an Olympic spot.

She led throughout most of the race and looked poised potentially to win a third title. But in the blink of an eye, everything flipped. The final stretch of the women's race was messy, with a required photo finish and what seemed like an endless wait to know who the 10 were. Muller believed she was in it.

The longer she waited, the more she started doubting herself. She knew something was wrong. In the end, she was 11th, one tenth behind her training team-mate, reigning Olympic champion Van Rouwendaal, who was 10th. There was a difference of only four seconds between China's Xin Xin, the winner, and Muller; such an insignificant amount of time in a race of a little under two hours, yet significant enough to make the difference between going to Tokyo and not.

"Of course at first I don't realise it," she said. "I tell myself that it's not possible. I had a great race, and there is no way

10 girls passed me. I tried to understand, but of course at that time I just don't. Honestly, I wanted to go home. I missed my

qualification, and I had failed at my goal of returning to the Games after what happened in Rio. I just wanted to leave."

Nevertheless, Muller wasn't quite done yet. Somehow, she had to regroup for the 5km. Somehow, she did. Three days later, she won her third silver medal in the distance, and her sixth world medal overall, with a time of 57:57. She couldn't stop crying on the podium.

Maybe it was thanks to the words of her agent and adviser: *"You can't give up because Aurélie Muller does not give up."*

Maybe it was because she couldn't end her championships on a bad note, or maybe she just wanted to show how much of a fighter she was.

"This medal is even more frustrating," she said. "Well, better win it than not and I'm very happy but I can't help but

because all that stays with me from these Worlds is that I am not qualified to Tokyo.”

I have the skill set and talent to be right up there

This kind of long wait leading to incomprehension and heartbreak was unfortunately nothing new to her. Muller touched the board in second place at the 2016 Olympics in Rio, but was eventually disqualified for obstructing Italian Rachele Bruni on the finish line.

“That was the worst thing to ever happen to me,” she said. “I don’t think I can go through anything worse than that in life.”

Muller had arrived in Rio as the reigning 10km world and European champion. She had joined ‘Team Lucas’ a year and a half before, after nearly 10 years in her home club in Sarreguemines and then six months in Canada with Ron Jacks.

With Lucas, everything clicked right away, both in and out of the pool. She was now swimming twice a day, between 16 and 20km, and she was physically and mentally prepared for anything. A few months later at the 2015 FINA World Championships, she won her first world title in the 10km and qualified for her second Olympics, eight years after Beijing where she finished 21st.



Then, Rio happened. She didn't know if she would ever be able to fully close that wound, and it took her months to recover emotionally. She felt lost, victim of an injustice that broke her at a moment that should have been the pinnacle of her career. She was unable to turn the page and realised that the Olympics as a whole were not picture-perfect.

She still showed up back at the pool in October, ahead of what would eventually be her most successful season yet. She just knew deep down she had more to prove, and that maybe there was more to sports and life than the Olympics.

"Ah, good question," she said with a laugh when asked why she went back. She paused. "Because... I don't give up. Aside

from the disqualification, the performance is there. At the end of the day, I am still second. Evidently, I am not in the record

books and I don't have my medal, but I have the skill set and talent to be right up there."

So after a four-month break, she was back to Lucas, back in the pool, doing what made her happy. She started to slowly appreciate swimming again, but she knew she could not just be doing laps after laps for nothing.

And also to prove to others that Aurélie was still here

Stéphane Lecat, France's open water technical director, mentioned the Santa Fe-Coronda Marathon: a 57km race in a murky, brown river in Argentina. Lecat had swum it eight times and won it four, and it had been a life-changing experience for him. He was convinced this would help Muller get back on track.

She knew she needed a first goal to keep going, so she agreed. She flew there with Lecat in February 2017, just wanting to finish the race. After nine hours, five minutes and 13 seconds, she not only finished but placed third among women and eighth overall. It felt like a rebirth to her; a different, stronger Aurélie Muller had emerged. In those Argentinian waters, she actually never thought about Rio once.

"It was a challenge against myself," she said. "I never asked myself, 'Why am I here, why am I doing this?' I just knew. It

was to prove to myself that I could do this, and also to prove to others that Aurélie was still here. That in spite of what

happened in Rio, she was hit but not sunk."

In March, she won the World Series leg in Abu Dhabi, ahead of Van Rouwendaal and many of the same competitors as in Rio. This had been her first 10km since. Finally, in July, she retained her world title in Budapest, a feat she had never even contemplated at the beginning of the year. She felt she had truly turned the page on 2016.

"For me the most important thing that year was to pick myself up from Rio," she said. "It wasn't about becoming a world

before.”

Now back in Nice, Muller must stay patient as the entire world endures an unprecedented health crisis. In the meantime, she tries to take it step-by-step and to overcome the fact that 2020 may in the end be a blank year. She wants to stay positive and is thankful for her experiences in open water swimming, which have forced her to adapt quickly to ever-changing conditions.

“Of course it’s not easy but at least the Games aren’t cancelled,” she said. “That’s a great thing. I try to see this as an

opportunity that gives me more time to get ready. And my experience has shown me that everything can change up until the

last moment. You’re never sure of anything, so one thing at a time.”

