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Marathon Swimming, Men's 10km: Orange jubilation in Copacabana!

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A flood of orange jubilation for Ferry Weertman, of Netherlands, who claims his country's second Olympic gold medal at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games in the Marathon Swimming events. Weertman overtook Australia's Jack Poort at 1:38.50 into the race to put himself into position for one of the wildest sprints to the finish ever witnessed. Weertman joins Olympic gold medallist Sharon van Rouwendaal (NED) who won yesterday's women's competition.

This is the third Olympic gold medal for Netherlands following Maarten van der Weijden's victory eight years ago at the inaugural 10km in the Beijing Olympic Games. Hungary, Russia and Tunisia each hold one Olympic gold medal from either Beijing or London. Swimmers from the UK finished second and third in the women's 10km in Beijing and earned a second silver medal in the London Olympics four years ago.

Unlike Van Rouwendaal (NED) who won by a comfortable margin, Weertman (NED) managed to hit the touchpad first after an epic battle to the finish with six other rivals. His 1.88m height may have offered the final advantage he needed to win.

Weertman hit the touchpad at 1:52.59.8 just edging out Spyros Gianniotis (GRE) who challenged the Dutch swimmer with a fast sprint for the touchpads just 100m from the finish. Gianniotis swam outside of the six person pack that formed around Weertman after he disposed of Poort (AUS). The six included Marc-Antoine Olivier (FRA), Jordan Wilimovsky (USA), Jack Burnell (GBR), Evgenii Drattcev (RUS) and briefly London Olympic champion Oussama Mellouli (TUN). It was clear to most observers that Weertman touched first but the finish time for Gianniotis (GRE) was identical to the time for the Dutch swimmer.

Weertman recently won the 10km event at the 2016 European Open Water Swimming championships held in Hoorn, located in his country. The 2015 European Open Water Swimmer of the Year placed second to USA's Jordan Wilimovsky at the 2015 FINA World Championships in Kazan. Last summer in Russia, Weertman raced in the heats of the 400m and 1500m freestyle events. He is coached by Marcel Wouda who coached the 2008 Olympic champion Van der Weijden. In 1998, Wouda became his nation's first world champion by winning the 200m individual medley.

"This medal means a lot. I have been working very hard for six years to get to the Olympics", said Weertman moments after receiving his Olympic gold medal. "It was such a tough race from the start. I did my little share at the front which I don't normally do that early in the race. It made it a little bit tougher for me. Even after I touched the wall I wasn't sure that I had won. It took me a while. I called my friends back home and they told me I had won. I couldn't believe it, I still can't believe it."

As the initial results were declared a Photo Finish, it was confirmed that five-time Olympian Gianniotis (GRE) was the

silver medallist. The 36-year-old Greek swimmer, oldest in this competition made his inaugural debut in the 400m, 1500m and 4x200m freestyle relay at the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000. Four years later Gianniotis (GRE) would swim in the finals of the 2004 Athens Olympics in his own country where he placed 7th in the 400m freestyle and 5th in the 1500m freestyle events. He has raced in all three editions of the Olympic Marathon improving on his medal position as he ages. In 2008 at the Beijing Olympic Games he finished 16th and four years ago in London he finished in 4th place just off the podium.

The swimmer from Greece shared that his prolific swimming career may be ending with an Olympic silver medal. “Every single metre of training, every single day and hour, it’s just come down to the perfect moment. This was my last race and I think that it is a really good way to go out.”

The bronze medal was presented to Marc-Antoine Olivier (FRA) after some confusion that he might have to share the medal with China’s Zu Lijun. The results flashed a tie for third between these two swimmers but that was quickly changed to fourth place for the Chinese swimmers although their finish time was identical.

Olivier shared: “When I touched I didn’t know. It’s only when I got into the boat that I was told that I had finished third, and then I started crying. I am very proud of my medal today. I am also proud of my teammate Aurelie Muller for her swim yesterday.” Muller was disqualified at the finish line in the women’s race for interfering with another swimmer.

The morning unfolded as another spectacular day on Copacabana Beach where swimming fans and the public came out to see the fastest open water swimmers representing 23 nations across the five continents. Supporters waving Tunisian flags and a yellow boxing kangaroo were seen on the beach near the position where the 25 swimmers entered the water. Italy and the USA had two competitors each as two men from each nation placed in the top 10 at last summer’s World Championships in Kazan.

Jarrood Poort (AUS) set an early pace for the men’s 10km race leaving the chase pack to swim their own race. The 21 year old Poort widened his lead during the first lap to a staggering 57.6 seconds leaving 2012 Olympic champion Oussama Mellouli (TUN) and 23 others to battle for second in their own “time zone”. Mellouli was closely followed by Mark Papp (HUN), Erwin Maldonado (VEN) and Federico Vanelli (ITA).

One of the greatest swimmers to come from the African continent, Tunisia’s Mellouli is the only man to have struck Olympic gold in both the pool and in the Olympic Marathon. Mellouli won the 1500m event at the 2008 Beijing Olympics and four years later he was crowned the champion in London’s Olympic Marathon. Before today’s race he told his followers that he would “fight on” quoting the slogan of his University of Southern California’s alma mater.

By the midpoint of the race Poort (AUS) had widened the gap between himself and the others to a mind bending 1:16 seconds. Marc-Antoine Olivier (FRA), 20 years of age, finished 6th in the Kazan world championships was the “first of the rest” followed closely by 23 year old Jack Burnell (GBR) who was the 2016 silver medallist in the 10km at the European Championships. Just 1.5 seconds behind him was 33-year-old Evgeni Dratcev (RUS) who placed 5th in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Marathon.

Poort (AUS) continued to hold a commanding position in the third lap while Olympic champion Mellouli (TUN) and the chase group worked hard to catch the Australian leader. Poort covered the 7.5km distance in 1:25.15 while the gold medallist from Tunisia positioned himself only 40.4 seconds back. Burnell (GBR) and last summer’s world champion Jordan Wilimovsky (USA) were in hot pursuit for an Olympic medal as was 2012 Olympic bronze medallist Richard Weinberger (CAN) who had worked himself into 5th position.

Poort would relinquish his lead at 1:38.50 seconds into the nearly two hour race to Ferry Weertman (NED) the silver medallist from Kazan. Weertman had been conserving his energy having positioned himself in the rear of the chase groups for nearly 85% of the race. The Dutch swimmer was 19th through the first timing gate, in 10th position at the midpoint of race and still sitting back in 15th position at the 7.5km mark.

While Weertman would lead the final sprint and would successfully defend the charge from Gianniotis (GRE), the defending Olympic champion Mellouli (TUN) was left behind and could only finish in 12th place. Before today’s race Mellouli said: “It’s been quite an amazing journey for a kid from north Africa to come to this level and to fight all the way. I don’t know if there’s another medal in me. I will just go out and try to represent my country, my family and everyone that supported me, the best that I can.”

As if he had predicted the finish where six swimmers raced side by side towards the touchpad, Mellouli (TUN) added: "It's tough out there. You don't have your own lane line and it's sometimes a battle against the watch, sometimes a battle against the elements, and it's always a battle against other swimmers."

The race will be remembered for the heroic effort of Australia's Poort who made a noble drive for the Olympic podium but was swallowed up by the field that overhauled him within sight of the finish line. Poort finished in 20th place, 40.9 seconds behind the new Olympic champion. Jack Burnell (GBR) and Vitaly Khudyakov (KAZ) were disqualified. The reigning world champion Wilimovsky (USA) was slotted into 5th place. Richard Weinberger (CAN), the 2012 bronze medallist finished in 16th place.

Medallists:

Gold: Ferry Weertman (NED), 1:52:59.8

Silver: Spiros Gianniotis (GRE), 1:52:59.8

Bronze: Marc-Antonie Olivier (FRA), 1:53:02.0
