

Diving Day 2 - Golden start for China but rivals turn the tables

Derek Parr, FINA Media Committee member

China opened proceedings on the diving boards in customary golden style but were then emphatically upstaged at the 17th FINA World Championships by Australia's Maddison Keeney and Russians Evgeny Kuznetsov and Ilia Zakharov.

Ren Qian and Lian Junjie led throughout to retain the mixed 10m synchro crown for China in the Duna Arena but after that the aspirations of the world's leading diving nation were ripped apart as Keeney claimed the women's 1m springboard gold and Kuznetsov and Zakharov charged through in the men's synchronised 3m final to shed the tag of eternal runners-up on the world stage.

It was the first time that China had lost either of those events at the Worlds since 2003, the women's 1m finding them out of the medals completely as gold went to Keeney, silver to Russia's Nadezhda Bazhina and bronze to Italy's Elena Bertocchi.

Cao Yuan, the individual Olympic 3m champion, and Xie Siyi dropped to silver in the men's 3m synchro, with Oleg Kolodiy and Illya Kvasha claiming bronze for Ukraine as Olympic champions Jack Laugher and Chris Mears of Great Britain were left out of the medals in fourth place.

Olympic platform champion Ren Qian added a world gold to her medal treasury when she partnered Lian Junjie to victory in the mixed 10m synchro event to bring China the first diving title of the 17th FINA World Championships in Budapest.

Ren and Lian led through all five rounds to keep the title in China's possession following the victory of Si Yajie and Tai Xiaohu in the inaugural mixed synchronised platform event at the Kazan Worlds in 2015.

Lois Toulson and Matthew Lee, the last of the 16 pairs to dive, held their nerve to claim the silver for Great Britain ahead of Kim Mi-rae and Hyon Il-mong of DPR Korea. Toulson and Lee had moved up to second in the penultimate round of dives as the Koreans also staged a strong late challenge and they were not to be denied the silver.



mixed synchro 10m podium

Ahead of them all, however, Ren and Lian never faltered and crowned their day with the first perfect 10 score in the Duna Arena for their last-round back 2-1/2 somersaults with 1-1/2 twists. The Chinese pair amassed 352.98 points from their five dives, with the British duo second on 323.28 and the Koreans third on 318.12.

Russians Iuliia Timoshinina and Viktor Minibaev featured a combination with the highest degree of difficulty of the final (3.4) in their programme but finished a frustrating fourth on 310.08.

Canada's Meaghan Benfeito, a silver medallist at the 2015 Kazan Worlds with Vincent Riendeau, had to settle for fifth with new partner Nathan Zsombor-Murray, while Australians Melissa Wu and Domonic Bedgood, the Kazan bronze medallists, were seventh.

In the women's 1m springboard final, Maddison Keeney brought Australia their first world diving title in more than a decade, earning gold with a daring series of dives at Budapest's Duna Arena.



Keeney (AUS), 1m sprinboard gold medallist

The 21-year-old Australian prevailed in a see-sawing final, nailing her final forward 2-1/2 somersaults with 1 twist to overhaul Russia's Nadezhda Bazhina, with Elena Bertocchi of Italy taking the bronze in a rare medal shut-out for China.

Eighteen-year-old Chen Yiwen finished fourth, 1.70 points behind 2016 European silver medallist Bertocchi, leaving China out of the women's 1m medals at the Worlds for the first time since 2003, the year in which Russian-born Irina Lashko won the event for her adopted Australia in Barcelona.

That year Mathew Helm and Robert Newbery also won the men's synchronised 10m to make it two titles for Australia but they had to wait a further 14 years for another golden diving strike at the Worlds, courtesy of Keeney.

Keeney, an Olympic bronze medallist in the women's synchronised 3m at the 2016 Rio Games, filled her programme with far and away the hardest dives, four of her five bearing a degree of difficulty (DD) from 3.0 to 3.2, with nobody else venturing beyond 2.6.

The lead changed hands throughout the final, Bazhina and Bertocchi sharing it in the first round, Chen taking over in the second and Keeney bursting ahead in the third. Boldness might have proved the Australian's undoing in the fourth round when her 3-1/2 somersaults went a bit awry.

That gave Bazhina, the 2016 European bronze medallist, a tiny advantage of less than one point, and that was not enough to deny Keeney, who pulled off her final 3.2 DD effort for the highest score of the final - 73.60 - to win by more than 10 points.

Keeney compiled 314.95 points from her five dives, with Bazhina second on 304.70, Bertocchi third on 296.40 and Chen fourth on 294.70. Chen's Chinese team-mate Chang Yani failed to qualify from the previous day's preliminary round.

Tania Cagnotto of Italy, who won the 1m event in 2015 to clinch her first world title, retired after collecting her first Olympic medals in Rio, leaving her crown to be majestically inherited by Keeney.

QUOTES

Mixed 10m platform

Ren Qian/Lian Junjie (CHN), gold: "It looked we weren't happy? Not true, we are quite pleased with our performance. We are a bit tired and we have to prepare the rest of the competition. We are training together for only one month and maybe we split in the future. Still too early to say, we feel OK as it is, but it may not be a definitive solution."

On the possibility of a gold clean sweep for China in Budapest: "The effort and concentration must come from ourselves. If we do it well, the entire team will do it well. Also, if this means gold medal, well, we will be of course very happy".

Lois Toulson/Matthew Lee (GBR), silver: "We are training together for about a year in Leeds, and it's working quite well. We were European champions, but this is our first Worlds together".

On China's supremacy: "Nothing is impossible. The rest of the world can beat them – look at what happened at the Rio Olympics, when a British pair managed to beat the Chinese in the men's 3m synchro. It's difficult, they have a very good level, but it happens".

On the challenges related to mixed diving: “It’s true that it’s not so simple... Guys will most of the time jump higher and stronger. We have to carefully work with our coaches, watch a lot of videos and adopt some strategies to compensate these natural differences between a man and a woman’s body structure”.

Women's 1m springboard



Diving 1m springboard Women / Photo credit by Giorgio Scala/Deepbluemia

Maddison Keeney (AUS), gold: “In Kazan, I have missed the last dive and I was 12th. This time, here in Budapest, regularity paid off and I could get the gold. I got very emotional at the end because my parents are here and they were really happy and proud. It was a great feeling being able to share these special moments with them”.

On China not getting on the podium: “After Rio 2016, we entered a new cycle and new names are appearing. The Chinese may have some weaknesses in this event...”

Nadezhda Bazhina (RUS), silver: “I was so concentrated in my programme and throughout the entire final that only now I notice that no Chinese diver is among us...”

Elena Bertocchi (ITA), bronze: “It’s rare, but 1m is really not China’s event. Two years ago, they were already second and third, behind Tania Cagnotto. She is definitively my reference, and for one reason: her elegance is unique. I am still very far from her level, but this is something that can be worked out”.



Diving 3m springboard synchro men / Photo credit by Giorgio Scala/Deepbluemedias

Men's 3m springboard synchro

Russia's Evgeny Kuznetsov and Ilya Zakharov, so long the silver medallists of synchronised diving, finally claimed global gold when they snatched victory from China's grasp in a tumultuous climax to the men's 3m synchro final at the FINA World Championships.

Cao Yuan and Xie Siyi had led the way through the first five rounds of the final but Kuznetsov and 2012 Olympic individual 3m champion Zakharov slammed down a challenge in the sixth and last round which the Chinese pair, diving last, could not withstand.

Ukrainians Oleg Kolodiy and Illya Kvasha had upset the order with a mighty pair of forward 4-1/2 somersaults (109C) worth 96.90 points, which turned out to spell medal doom for Olympic champions Jack Laugher and Chris Mears of Great Britain, who were next up with the same dive, and US Olympic silver medallists Sam Dorman and Mike Hixon, who fared dreadfully on their own attempted 109C after holding the bronze-medal position.

By contrast, Kuznetsov and Zakharov, who had endured a deeply disappointing Olympics a year earlier, rose to the challenge with monumental forward 4-1/2 somersaults of their own, worth the evening's highest score of 100.32 and the only perfect 10 mark of the competition.

Cao and Xie, who had led from the Russians going into the final round, could not respond in kind on the same combination and dropped to silver, the colour of medal which had been the lot of Kuznetsov and Zakharov at the three preceding world championships, as well as the 2012 Olympics.

It was the first time a Chinese pair had not won the world title since 2003, when they also succumbed to Russians, then in the persons of Dmitry Sautin and Alexander Dobroskok.

Cao, who succeeded Zakharov as Olympic 3m champion in Rio, had won the world 3m synchro title with Qin Kai in 2015, though the pair could manage only bronze in Rio behind Laugher and Mears and Dorman and Hixon.

Kuznetsov and Zakharov, out of the picture in Rio, put all that behind them and bounced back with a vengeance in Budapest.

They claimed their gold at last with 450.30 points, Cao and Xie taking silver on 443.40 and Kolodiy and Kvasha a first bronze of the championships for Ukraine on 429.99.

Laugher and Mears, the 2015 world bronze medallists, had slipped from second to fourth in the fifth round, which is where they ended up (418.20). Dorman and Hixon plummeted from third to sixth in that fateful final round.

Evgenii Kuznetsov/Illia Zakharov (RUS), gold

“We don’t consider the other teams as opponents, we are all friends. We did everything possible to win and we managed to get the gold. The fifth dive was truly good and left no doubts on the final outcome. All we want to do now is to rest and to prepare for the next days. In terms of training and strategy coming to Budapest, nothing significantly changed. It’s good when we arrive to the first competition day and we win – it shows that we are strong and motivated”.

Cao Yuan/Xie Siyi (CHN), silver

“It is the first time we are competing together, and maybe we didn’t arrive in the best shape here in Budapest. It was a learning experience for us, and we will try to do our best next time”.

Oleg Kolodiy/Illya Kvasha (UKR), bronze

“We are extremely happy with this medal. In Kazan, we were fourth, which is always a bit frustrating. In Budapest, things went much better and we could get this bronze medal. At domestic level, we were already performing well, so this result here in Hungary shows that we must continue in this direction”.
