Laszlo Cseh and the straight eight
Gergely Csurka, FINA Media Committee Member (HUN)

History in the making

Maybe he owns less gold medals than some of the other greats of the sport.

A bit unlucky, Laszlo Cseh was born to the age of Michael Phelps and Ryan Lochte and shared the pools with those two giants for years and could barely beat them (in fact, he never beat Phelps though their very last race ended in a memorable three-way tie including Chad le Clos in Rio in the 100m fly).

But one thing separates him from all other swimmers. He has been racing through the past one and a half decades. No retirement, no return, no break, no skipped meet. He was there.
Every occasion, ready for delivering. And he delivered, indeed.

Whenever he took the starting blocks at any World or European Championships and in four Olympic Games, he captured at least one medal. Or more.

Amazing as it is, he amassed 71 podium finishes only at these competitions (long- and short-course altogether: 35 gold, 19 silver and 17 bronze).

Most of them coming from Europeans, still, six from the Olympics and 13 from the FINA Worlds are something to appreciate. Especially his streak at the World Championships.

No other swimmer has ever reached that: standing on the podium at eight editions in a row. There was only one who made it seven times. Laszlo in Kazan. By finishing second to his great buddy, Chad le Clos (RSA) here in Budapest, Cseh improved his own record. And set the bar even higher for the future generations.

His feat means no less than you have to take part at 8 World Championships in 14 years and have to be good enough to earn a medal on each occasion.

Kazan 2015 - 200m Butterfly / Gold Medal

And it’s going to be harder and harder as you start collecting at the age of 17 but you still have to be in great shape aged 31.

I can still recall how he chased Phelps in 2003 in Barcelona over the 400m IM, two brilliant youngsters raced in the Palau Sant Jordi, went neck-to-neck and many envisioned that one of the greatest duels in swimming history began shaping in front of our eyes. And it really became a great rivalry which peaked in Beijing 2008 when Laszlo finished runner-up three times behind Michael.

Cseh’s programme has been changed in the meantime. During his career he raced in individual medley mostly, at the first years he also added the backstroke events, then switched to the fly and in the last part he let the IM go and stuck to fly (at the world stage, but still dominated the 200m IM at the 2016 Europeans). It happened in London 2012, when – upon walking away from the podium after the 200m IM victory ceremony – Phelps hinted to him ‘Laszlo, why don’t you go for
the 100m fly? Don’t torture yourself with the longer distances now.’ He had a point. Next year wasn’t the best for Laszlo.

In Barcelona 2013 he couldn’t make the podium in the 200m IM. It was the event which had saved his day a couple of times when he struggled to produce his best. In 2007 and 2011 the 200m IM saved his World Championships medal run, but in 2013 it seemed that this would be halted.

Then came the 100m fly... And he even surprised himself by touching in second.

Laszlo Cseh - Rome 2009

Two years later, after changing his coach, he stunned everyone in Kazan by capturing three medals, by this time he opted to race only in fly. But he flew really high: 200m: gold, 100m: silver, 50m: bronze). Close to his 30th birthday he was faster than in his early 20s. Stronger than ever, he repeated his best World Championships performance from 2005 and set a series of records.

He became the first swimmer winning a world title 10 years apart, the first male clinching three medals on three distances in the same stroke (free excepted) and the first to earn a medal in seven straight World Championships editions. And now with a silver in front of 12,000 enthusiastic fans in the Duna Arena, he lifted this number to eight.

Though the 100m fly is yet to come, Laszlo already declared that this medal would be a push to stay for the next season. Or perhaps for 2019.

So the state-of-play for this 31 year-old genius is just that: eight editions, medals from each, 13 altogether – and counting.

14 years, 8 editions

- 2003, Barcelona Silver, 400m IM
- 2005, Montreal Gold, 400m IM Silver, 200m IM Bronze, 100m back
- 2007, Melbourne Bronze, 200m IM
- 2009, Rome Silver, 200m IM Bronze, 400m IM
- 2011, Shanghai Bronze, 200m IM 2013, Barcelona Silver, 100m fly
- 2015, Kazan Gold, 200m fly Silver, 100m fly Bronze, 50m fly
- 2017, Budapest Silver, 200m fly Total – Gold: 2, Silver: 6, Bronze: 5