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Michael Phelps: “My hat’s off to Kristof”

Gergely Csurka, FINA Media Committee

The last man to beat a Michael Phelps' World Record was Serbia's Milorad Cavic in Rome in the semis of the 100m

fly – only to see that Phelps regained his WR on the very next day while winning the event at the 2009 World

Championships. Since then: no one could get even close to an MP WR. Then came 24 July 2019, 20.42 in the evening

here in Gwangju, at the FINA World Championships.

No wonder that it took so long to see the first man bringing down an MP WR. Having Phelps during his absolute heydays (one year prior he was at his best while staging his historical 8-gold haul at the Beijing Olympics), dressing him into a supersuit and letting him swim a less demanding schedule ended up global marks in the 100m and 200m fly which, after swimming returned to the textile suits, were regarded records out of reach for humans. However, his 49.82 in the 100m fly was almost caught two years ago when Caeleb Dressel stopped the clock at 49.86 in Budapest.

But his 1:51.51 seemed simply untouchable. For the vast majority even to go under 1:53 was a challenge, between 2009 and 2018 only Chad Le Clos (2012, London, while upsetting Phelps at the Games), Phelps himself (2015) and ER-holder Laszlo Cseh (2016, Europeans) could get inside. Arguably the three greatest butterflyers of the new millennium. But all three were 'only' 1:52.9s.



The longest sitting king of the 200m fly... - Credit: Giorgio Scala



...and his successor - Credit: Istvan Derencsenyi

Then Milak surfaced and clocked two 1:52.7s within four months last year and added a 1:52.96 here in Gwangju while finishing atop in the semis.

Still, he insisted that breaking the WR would not come at this edition of the Worlds.

"I didn't expect to happen here. I was preparing to do it some day but it wasn't in the cards that I could do it right now" he said.

Then it just happened.

Chad said a day before that Milak was set to lift butterfly swimming into a new dimension. He thought of the near future. But might not of the very next day.

Milak's new dimension is really a category of his own. He skipped the Phelps' level of 1:51s and created the class of 1:50s. Bettered MP's WR by 0.78sec. And improved his PB by 1.98sec.

Talking to the New York Times, Michael Phelps praised his young successor.

"As frustrated as I am to see that record go down, I couldn't be happier to see how he did it," Phelps said. *"That kid's last*

100 was incredible. He put together a great 200 fly from start to finish."

“It happened because there was a kid who wanted to do it, who dreamed of doing it, who figured out what it would take to

do it, who worked on his technique until it was beautiful and who put in the really, really hard work that it takes to do it. My

hat’s off to him.”

But how it came together like this?

“The whole day was simply perfect” Kristof said. “I was absolutely free of pressure as I didn’t think of swimming for a

single moment until I arrived to the pool but still didn’t feel any tension during the warm-up. Then in the last call room a

very special nervousness took over but that was so unique that I knew it was going to be something really great” he

described the hours leading to the big moment.

Then the race unfolded in the best possible way.

“I was fully aware that Chad (le Clos) would go out pretty fast I just wanted to keep up with him. Though when I saw that

he gained a body-length or so at the first turn I was a bit worried and decided to gear up. Retrospectively, now I can say

that I can thank this WR to Chad as he set an amazing pace during the first 100m, that really set me up for the second 100m.

Once I turned at the 100m, I closed out everybody and everything. There was me and the wall – nothing else. I fully focused

to get the pace I practiced a lot in training. And it paid off that after changing my club last autumn I had to train alone for

most of the time in Budapest. I got used to swim on lane 4 lonely in the Duna Arena. I deliberately chose to swim there, as I

was expecting myself to enter the competition with the best time, to clock the best time in the semis and to swim on lane 4 in



At the wall, becoming part of swimming history

Indeed, Milak wasn't aware of what's happening with the virtual red line marking the actual WR on the giant screens – the view which lit up the pool and the warm-up area as well since no one could believe that anyone would be able to swim way ahead of Michael Phelps' pace.

“I’ve heard the crowd roaring but I couldn’t imagine that they were yelling because of the WR. Thought they were kind of

amazed that I was swimming so far in front. I felt that it was a good speed but guessed a kind of 1:51 or low 1:52 swim. But

1:50.73... man, I was shocked. Words can’t describe how it felt to look at the scoreboard. All the pressure and tension just

went off my back and all the joy came out.”

He bowed to the applauding crowd once out of the pool (*“It worked in Budapest, so I thought why I should not do it again –*

people love this kind of show, don’t they?”) and soon learned how tough was the life of a new world record holder once he

entered the Mixed Zone. No broadcaster, agency and media outlet wanted to miss him. And almost all questions sounded the same. How does it feel to beat Michael Phelps’ WR?

Aged 19, he was not used to face such a flood of questions and definitely not prepared to tell the same replies at every stop in front of cameras and mics. Though he tried to give its best.

“It’s a tremendous honour to better the world record of such a great champion. It’s an amazing feeling.”



When it starts sinking in...

However, he was quite straightforward when he was asked if Michael Phelps had been his childhood hero. Most of the press people would expect that a teenager who had been a one-year old baby when Phelps first cracked the 200m fly WR in 2001 (aged 15), should become a kind of admirer of the 23-time Olympic champion. Instead, Kristof came up with his most honest reply.

“No, Phelps was not my role model. I tried to watch a couple of his races in order to look at his technique but the videos’

quality wasn’t good enough to really see the details. As a kid I didn’t look for finding a hero. I wanted to be the best and

Still pushed for a name, he then gave one. *“You really want to know who I consider a hero? Then it should be Katinka*

Hosszu. She also trains in the Duna Arena and I get amazed every single day as I watch her working brutally hard. The

workloads she takes, that’s my inspiration. Yes, Katinka is my role model.”

Soon he was asked if he looked forward to the Olympics next year. He might have offered a good old panel about his

expectations and so on. Instead, he said: *“Definitely not. It’s the 100m fly I’m looking forward to. To clash with Caeleb*

Dressel on a maximum speed.”

It’s coming in two days time.

Perhaps the last two days of the other MP WR standing.
