

03 APR 2024

VOYAGE TO PARIS 2024: PART XII



Leading off: The golden horses of Versailles are ready to welcome Modern Pentathlon's shining lights

Horses have played a central part in life from the very first days of the Chateau de Versailles.

This summer, when the former royal residence of King Louis XIV will provide arguably the most stunning and dramatic backdrops of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, the equine history of the grounds will again come to the fore.

As well as Modern Pentathlon, Versailles is playing host to all of the equestrian events at this summer's Games and as it nears the end of its Olympic makeover, the palace put its most iconic horses front and centre again.

Last week at a special ceremony at Le Bassin d'Apollon, the Sun God – a symbol of the Sun King Louis XIV with its sculpture of Apollo rising out of the water with a four-horse chariot – was lowered back into the fountain with a gleaming fresh coat of golden paint.

The refresh is understandable given the statue is over 350 years old. But it is also part of a special equine focus ahead of the Games, with an exhibition celebrating the history of horses at Versailles

opening in July.

The sprawling stables opposite the Chateau were a constant hive of activity during its history. According to the Palace, in the 18th century more than 2,000 horses at any one time were housed in the Royal Stables.

August 8-11 this year will see the curtain come down on Riding as a discipline in Modern Pentathlon, with the new Obstacle discipline replacing it for the 2028 Olympic cycle and beyond.

For one last time, mastering the opening Riding discipline could make or break the Olympic dreams of all 72 pentathletes who make it. Versailles feels like a fitting place to mark the end of an era.

Right now Versailles is a hive of activity with Lorick Joseph of the Olympic Organising Committee reporting at the Sun God ceremony that “around 70 per cent” of the preparatory work has now been completed with temporary grandstands which can accommodate more than 16,000 spectators completed.

The wider gardens which will be used will host crowds of over 40,000.

“Horses are so obviously in the iconography of the palace, including in paintings, sculptures and fountains,” Versailles Palace President Christophe Leribault said. “So it’s a wonderful meeting of this old tradition and the modern sport.”

Paris Pointer: Timing is everything as the Olympic clock starts ticking a little faster in a hectic April schedule

In her interview with UIPN News last month, Hungarian hotshot Michelle Gulyas opened up on her decision to turn from gymnastics, a sport she excelled at as a child, to Modern Pentathlon.

“I started gymnastics when I was five years old, did it for six years. When I was 11 that’s when I was thinking about changing to a less subjective sport where it’s not about connections or people’s interpretations. In Pentathlon you run what you run — that is your time. There’s no arguing with that.”



There was little arguing with what Gulyas subsequently produced in this season's first Pentathlon World Cup, where a blistering return marked her return to form and the top step on the podium. Gulyas is, of course, correct: in Pentathlon you do "run what you run". But running form is vitally important, and never more so than in an Olympic year.

In the women's competition in Cairo (EGY), Gulyas showed the off-season work she had put into her Running and Swimming had paid off handsomely. Finding improvements with Paris just around the corner is a skill in itself.

Equally, reinforcing your position in a competitive pecking order is always a good idea, which is exactly what Tokyo 2020 Olympic silver medalist Ahmed Elgendy (EGY) did in front of both a home crowd and national team coaches and selectors as he won the Men's Final.

Timing proved to be against some of the biggest names in the sport, as Great Britain's Olympic champion Joseph Choong (GBR) and fellow two-time world champion Elena Micheli (ITA) were both hobbled by injury issues; neither made it to Super Saturday's finals.

The good news for those two heavyweights, and everyone else who needs to find their Olympic timing, is that the clock ticks even faster in April.

Across just 12 days from April 16-28 the UIPM 2024 Pentathlon World Cup season will rapidly moved through its second and third instalments. In the Turkish capital of Ankara (April 16-21) and then Budapest, Hungary (April 23-28), the world's best and those looking to gatecrash the elite at the last minute can't afford to waste their time. As Gulyas says, time to "run what you run".

Numbers game: 45,000

The number of Paris 2024 volunteers who gathered at Paris La Defense Arena on March 24 to spend a festive day exploring the Games as well as discovering their uniform, designed by French sportswear company Decathlon.

Qualification latest

Now things are getting very real. With UIPM 2024 Pentathlon World Cup Cairo already in the books, jostling for the final 28 qualification spots for Paris 2024 has begun.

While we know that 44 of the 72 quota places at this summer's Games have been claimed, the plot is thickening.

Here's a reminder of who has qualified already. **Women:** Italy (2), Great Britain (2), China, Japan, Korea, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Spain, Lithuania, France, Hungary, Germany, Egypt, Australia, Czech Republic, Mexico USA, Brazil, Ecuador and the International Athletes Team (EAI). **Men:** Egypt (2), Mexico (2), Italy, China, Japan, Korea, Thailand, Kazakhstan, Great Britain, Hungary, France, Germany, Poland, Ukraine, Switzerland, Australia, Ecuador, Cuba, Argentina and EAI.

Up to six places are on offer at the UIPM 2024 Pentathlon World Championships in June, but there are at least 12 coming through the UIPM Olympic World Rankings, which makes the World Cup season so key for those targeting rankings points.

Full details of the Paris 2024 qualification process can be found at uipmworld.org/olympic-games