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VOYAGE TO PARIS, PART X



Leading off...France President Macron sets expectations soaring for host nation's medal chances

Just a couple of weeks after the *crème de la crème* of Modern Pentathlon gathered at France's National Institute for Sport and Performance (INSEP) for the 2023 French Open Championship the complex welcomed another special guest.

To help mark the six-month countdown to this summer's Olympic Games in France's iconic capital city, French President Emmanuel Macron visited INSEP on January 23 and sent out two loud and clear messages: one, Paris is ready for a magical and memorable Games, and two, he believes the host country's athletes can deliver a historic medal haul.

"Our goal of finishing in the top five at the Olympic Games is more achievable than ever, which shows that France could have its best Games since 1900," Macron said. "I don't want to exert too much pressure, but it's sound, healthy pressure."

The gathered audience at INSEP of 1000 guests included almost 500 athletes and Macron was not shy in heaping expectations on the country's would-be sporting heroes.

“I am counting on you not only to win medals, but also to inspire young people,” he added. “You have to be hungrier than the others, there is no other way.”

Macron took special time to speak with the country’s judo team but he could just as easily have outlined his expectations to France’s leading pentathletes with two men, Valentin Prades and Valentin Belaud, and two women, Marie Oteiza and Elodie Clouvel, currently inside the top 15 in the Pentathlon World Rankings.

Clouvel’s silver medal at the 2016 Games in Rio de Janeiro remains France’s highest place on an Olympic Pentathlon podium. The country has featured in the event a joint-second highest number of times, 24, since it made its debut in 1912, winning just one silver and two bronze in the 112 years since.

As anticipation continues to build with the clock ticking ever closer to the Games, Macron insisted Paris was ready to deliver a modern, efficient Games of which the entire country can be proud.

“These Games will be a great moment of French pride and celebration,” he said. “Our organisation must be flawless.”

No pressure, guys!



> Paris Pointer: Reigning Olympic champion Kate French (GBR) returns in time for title defence

If the festive period offers a lot of thinking time, the start of a new year is instead a time for action.

It would appear that there was plenty of thinking, now converted into action, for the reigning women’s Olympic champion. News emerged in late January that Kate French of Great Britain, who roared to Modern Pentathlon gold in Tokyo (JPN) three years ago, has decided to return to the sport in a bid to reach a third Olympics.

French (GBR) has only been seen in competition on two occasions since topping the podium in record-breaking style at the rescheduled Tokyo Games in August 2021 and took a proper break from Pentathlon during the entire 2023 season to consider her future in the sport. But the lure of Paris and a tilt at defending her crown proved too powerful to resist.

"I didn't want to regret not trying," French told Pentathlon GB. "I don't know what's going to happen this year, whether I will be good enough or not, but I didn't want to be watching the Games this summer and feel like I hadn't given it a go.

"I started training towards the end of August and have built back very gradually. I'm enjoying it and I think I'm doing OK so far. The main thing I am trying to do this year is enjoy the journey. That is my focus and hopefully the results will come.

"The dream is to try and defend my title but first I need to qualify! It's going to be very, very tough. There is a lot of strength and depth in the women's programme but that has always been the challenge with the British squad, not just qualifying but being selected. It's no different this year."

Compatriots Kerenza Bryson and Olivia Green have already claimed the maximum two quota qualification places for Great Britain so French knows she will have work to do. She will begin her season at the Hungarian Indoor Open in Budapest from February 8-12, with not just her teammates but the rest of the contenders at the elite end of women's Pentathlon sure to be keen observers.

"I really don't know what to expect over the next few months so Budapest will be a good indication of where I am," French said.

Numbers game

30,000: The number of police officers and gendarmes who will be patrolling Paris for the duration of the Games. They will be backed up by 15,000 military personnel, with upwards of 22,000 private security guards at the Olympic venues and in the fan zones to ensure Paris 2024 is a secure success.

Qualification latest

Entering 2024, 44 of the 72 quota places at Paris 2024 have been claimed.

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.

The focus now shifts to the remaining 28 places with six on offer at the 2024 UIPM World Championships in June and up to 22 via the UIPM rankings.

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