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EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIPS: SCINTILLATING MEN'S QUALIFICATION IN BATH



BATH, ENGLAND - Lithuania's Justinas Kinderis and Hungary's Adam Marosi led the qualifiers for the men's final at the Modern Pentathlon European Championships, being staged at the University of Bath.

Kinderis, the 2013 World Champion, overtook home athlete Jamie Cooke on the last stage of the combined run/shoot to win qualifying Group B on Thursday.

"The most important thing was to qualify for Saturday's finals – I just did my job in the combined and everywhere," Kinderis said.

"I think it will be very tough this weekend – the semi-final is one thing and the final is another. I hope you can congratulate me on Saturday."

Kinderis had started in sixth after the fencing and swimming, as had Group A winner Marosi – no stranger to success in England having won the World Championship, World Cup Final and

Olympic bronze on previous visits.

"It was a very good competition because the last seven days I have been so sick," Marosi said.

"The swim was very good – 2:01:40 is one of my best times – and the shooting went very, very well."

The Hungarian hopes to have another successful outing on Saturday, saying: "I will try my best so we will see."

Three Pentathlon GB athletes also progressed to the final, with Cooke being joined by University of Bath students Tom Toolis and Joe Choong.

Cooke, who led going into the run/shoot after impressive swimming and fencing performances, said: "I'm feeling good for the final; it's always nice to be able to jog the last lap of a combined course."

"Finishing in the top eight would be amazing on Saturday but I'll just take it as it comes. I think it will come down to my fencing, if I can put myself in the top eight going into the combined anything can happen."

Choong, who recovered from a poor fencing round to finish tenth in Group B, said: "It was good. I shot pretty well, I think I missed five shots overall and that's what kept me in it."

"Swimming and running felt really good. I think it's the worst senior fencing I've ever had, but I can improve in the final."

"I've got all my family watching, my grandparents are here. It's a big support. You can hear them coming along that home straight and you think 'I've got to do this for them'."

Toolis impressed in all three disciplines on his way to a comfortable sixth-placed finish in Group A.

"Qualifying is that one step closer to getting in the top eight in the final and gaining an Olympic spot, so I'm chuffed to bits," he said.

"The support is great. You talk about the home advantage and it really builds up a fire in your belly. I definitely increased my performance in the fence and the swim."

Runner-up in Group A was Bulgaria's Dimitar Krastanov, who moved through the field impressively after starting the run/shoot in 17th.

"I am happy with my position," he said. "This is the last competition for the season and it is amazing that I am in the final. My aim is to try to qualify for Rio."

Ireland's Arthur Lanigan-O'Keeffe, who finished fourth, said: "I'm very happy with my performance. I knew I had a job to do and I came out and put in a solid day."

Fifth-placed Fabian Liebig of Germany added: "I was fifth after the last shoot and thought I could take it easy but then I looked behind me and saw ten guys running like there was no tomorrow!"

"I was very happy with my fencing and the swim was OK, so everything is looking good for the final."

Compatriot Patrick Dogue, who was sixth in Group B, believes Saturday's final will be a real spectacle.

"There is no-one who has gone through who is bad, they are all strong athletes so anything could happen," he said.

It is the women's turn to bid for qualification on Friday, with reigning World Champion Lena Schoneborn – a gold-medallist in the team relay on Wednesday – and Olympic Champion Laura Asadauskaite among those competing.

The action starts at 11am, with the final taking place on Sunday.

How the day unfolded

With so many athletes fighting for one of the 36 places in the men's final, the field of play was certainly very busy today.

The men's qualifier kicked off with fencing for the qualifications group A. Greece's only athlete at the European Championships, Alexandros Pantazidiz, proved fencing was definitely a forte for him as he held the lead for the majority of the competition.

Despite losing ground occasionally, Pantazidiz managed to come out on top with 20 wins and just ten defeats – much to his personal delight.

"That is one of my best fencing performances ever so I am very pleased," he said. "Hopefully it will help me through to the final. The facilities are perfect and I am really enjoying it here."

Jan Kuf of the Czech Republic also performed strongly throughout but was edged into joint third with Latvia's Pavels Scecovs after but Russia's Maksim Kustov scraped a few points late on.

Tom Toolis was the highest-ranked Brit in fifth with 18 wins, while Nick Woodbridge recovered well from receiving an early red card and ten-point penalty to place ninth with 19 wins.

The Brits built on those performances in the pool, with Woodbridge going under two minutes to win his heat and set the fastest time of 1:58.95 in Group B.

Toolis also set a season's best of 2:02:58 to win his heat, while Latvia's Ruslan Nakonechnyi and Italy's Auro Franceschini also produced formidable performances to dominate their races.

Russia's Kutsov set the third-fastest time overall, though, to take an 11-second advantage over Woodbridge into the combined run/shoot.

Kutsov went on finish third overall behind Hungary's Adam Marosi, who was quick to take the lead with exceptional shots at the shooting range, and Bulgaria's Dimitar Krastanov, who charged through the field from 17th.

Woodbridge struggled for fitness in the run/shoot and finished 26th.

Group B got under way in the swimming pool and it proved to be particularly enjoyable for the home crowd as Jamie Cooke and Joe Choong finished first and second in their heat by an emphatic margin.

They were the only swimmers to go under two minutes, clocking 1:56.28 and 1:57.77 respectively – Cooke's time for the first 100m was a rapid 55 seconds.

Italy's Fabio Poddighe was third fastest in the group with a time of 2:02.22, three-tenths of a second faster than Lithuania's Dovidas Vaivada.

The fencing event was very tight. Lithuania's Justinas Kinderis took control of the top rank for an extended number of rounds with some excellent hits.

However, it was Latvia's Deniss Cerkovskis and Aleksander Lesun from Russia who finished joint first by winning an astounding 22 bouts each.

That meant Lesun started the combined event just two seconds behind overall leader Cooke, who was briefly overtaken by the Russian but seemed determined to win and performed exceptionally well in the following shoots.

He held the lead going into the final stretch but former World Champion Kinderis rallied on to finish a few meters ahead in first place.

Italy's Fabio Poddighe maintained third place and France's Valentin Belaud came through to finish fourth ahead of Lesun.

Belaud said: "My shooting was good and I feel my running is getting easier. I finished in a good position overall, so I am really happy with my performance."

Lesun added: "I think today went very well. I did well with the running and the shooting. We will see how Saturday goes, in particular with the fencing and the riding."