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PENTATHLON PERSONALITIES - BACK IN THE FAST LANE: MEET MICHELLE GULYAS



Imagine a season like this: kick off with an emphatic victory in your home Indoor Open; win gold in the season-opening World Cup; silver in your next World Cup event; another top-10 finish; then win a precious Olympic qualification ticket to the European Games; and, finally, a top-20 place at the World Championships.

Sounds pretty damn good, right? It is not only mere mortals who would be ecstatic with a campaign like that. There is quite a section of the Modern Pentathlon elite who would call it a season to remember.



Michelle Gulyas is no mere mortal. And she is not like a lot of her fellow competitors, either. At various moments during a compelling conversation and reflection on her journey to date, the Hungarian described her 2023 season as ‘tough’, ‘frustrating’, ‘a bad year’ and once going so far as to call it ‘terrible’. These are the sky-high standards that Gulyas lives by.

“I had a good year and a bad year really. There were so many things to learn and take away from it,” she told UIPM News from her home in Budapest as she wound down from a long day of training. “I had to skip a few competitions last year because I had to write a thesis.

“In Hungary it’s a long way to finish university and I had my head more on that than on sports. But I’m really happy that I was able to get an Olympic quota at the European Games — even in a bad year.”

At the outset of the 2023 season Gulyas would have been a hot favourite for gold at the Paris 2024 Olympics. The level of podium consistency she had shown over the previous two years was nothing short of remarkable.



But if the past 12 months have seen her slip from that position at the very apex of the sport, her performance at the Hungarian Indoor Open in her home capital last month was a signal of intent: in this Olympic year, Gulyas is aiming to get right back to pentathlon's summit.

"I learned from last year," the 23-year-old added. "You have to be mentally so prepared for it all. Because of school last year I was definitely a little mentally tired. I was there at the competition on the starting line and was physically ready. I don't think mentally I was, don't think my body and mind were fully in sync.

"This is why I was so happy with [the Hungarian Open]. You get the hunger from maybe not doing as well as you [can]. You want to get better, get stronger. And maybe my coaches are motivated as well.

"They all want me to get back to where I was and to find the spots where we can still improve to make it to the top. I think I had more hunger this pre-season for sure.

"It's good to leave behind what didn't work and now we have something new and strategic for running especially that I hope will work better."

After the very relative disappointments of last season Gulyas took a solid month of decompressing, visiting Greece with friends and catching up with family. Like sport, loved ones got squeezed a little during her hectic final years of studying to be a police detective. Remarkably it was arguably her greatest sporting rival who helped her clear her final university hurdle.



Gulyas and world No.1 Elena Micheli of Italy are what the internet would call the best of frenemies. Fierce competitors who go toe-to-toe at World Championships but close friends too. So close that when Gulyas had to do her thesis last year, she turned to Micheli for help.

"I think I would say she is one of my best friends from another country. Rebecca Langrehr is the other one but I think with Elena I just know her for such a long time," explained Gulyas.

"We were 16 or maybe even 15 when we first met at a competition and since then, at all the European and World Championships, we've been together. We've been to Rome for a training camp, they have come to Hungary for training camps.

"She helped me with my thesis actually. Because the police has this separate place for sportspeople and athletes who also want to be police, this was my thesis: can this system really work in Hungary or not? And she was one of my people who I interviewed. She was my case study. We have a good relationship, we chat sometimes on social media."

The 2022 season was mostly spent with Micheli and Gulyas trading positions at the top of the podium as their rivalry became captivating. With Gulyas weighed down with university commitments last year, Micheli drove on, winning a second consecutive UIPM Pentathlon World Championships gold. Now the Hungarian wants to get back to business with her close friend.

"Yeah I want it! I'm working hard to be back there so I hope the rivalry will be back."

It's important to look back at the consistency which had become Gulyas's trademark. Between April 2021 and April 2023 she competed in the finals of 14 competitions and finished on the podium in 13 of them. Her 12th-place finish at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics was the only outlier. Except for difficulties with her horse, the result in Japan could have also been a medal. So how is she so consistent?

"I wouldn't say that I have a best discipline," Gulyas responded. "There are lots of athletes who are the best runners in the entire field. So we know, for example, that if Laura Asadauskaite is coming from fifth or sixth place in a Laser Run she is surely winning the entire competition because her running and shooting is so good that she'll make it.

"My strongest field is that I'm not actually the best in anything but I'm so good in everything that I can still make it to the top. I don't really have a weak discipline that can give me a big setback."

In hindsight, Gulyas feels that Tokyo almost came too soon for her. "It was a surprise...I wasn't totally ready." This time around is a sharp contrast.

"This year is completely different because I already have my ticket to Paris and my whole preparation is about Olympics," she added. "I'm going to competitions to test the techniques and strategies that I can use at the Olympics."

The Gulyas clan can plan in advance this time, too. Pan-European travel is part of the family history. Gulyas's father Gergely worked for Shell across the continent and her mother Judit and the family were always by his side. Michelle was born in London where they lived until she was two before moving to Milan where her brother Richard was born.



It was Gergely's Shell connection that first made Michelle fall in love with Ferrari and Formula 1. As she racked up the medals, her red Ferrari cap became an iconic part of her Laser Run routine.

"The logo is too big for the Olympics so maybe I will message Ferrari and say 'hey, I love running in your hat, can you arrange one with a smaller logo for Paris'!"

Either way, this summer the Gulyas family will be packing up their own car and setting off from Budapest, collect elder sibling Claudia in Vienna and make it to Versailles in time to see Michelle compete. "They have already bought their tickets. They have planned where they are staying. They are the most excited about the whole situation."

That, of course, is only partly true. Gulyas is plenty excited herself. Hungary's golden Modern Pentathlon tradition at the Olympic Games is one of many motivating factors as she heads to the French capital aiming to deliver the performance she knows she is capable of.

"I am very, very excited. I love Paris. I have been there more times...with family and friends. I've been to Versailles too and I know where the venue is. It's amazing," she said.

"I have never competed in front of as many spectators as there will be there. I'm sure it will

motivate me a lot but I think I will get very emotional. So few people make it to an Olympics.

“It’s a privilege to be there and to compete there. I usually appreciate all the little things in life but something this big...I almost can’t imagine it.”

By Joe Callaghan