

05 JUN 2023

VOYAGE TO PARIS: OLYMPIC GAMES COUNTDOWN PART II

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How the former home of France's King Louis XIV will prepare to welcome pentathlon royalty

As one of the green lungs of Paris, the estate of the Palace of Versailles has been helping to breathe life into the French capital for generations. Next summer it will do the same in fittingly grandiose style to the 2024 Olympic Games.

The one-time royal residence of King Louis XIV has long since become a getaway for millions with the palace, its iconic gardens and sprawling parklands declared France's first UNESCO World Heritage Site almost half a century ago. These days Versailles attracts more than 15 million visitors a year.

Next summer it will welcome 72 VIP guests when the brightest lights of Modern Pentathlon compete for Olympic glory in the historic surrounds of the palace gardens. Fresh from Tokyo Stadium being transformed into a Pentathlon Arena in the Japanese capital city's delayed Games in 2021, pentathlon will again find itself in a spectacular setting for its Olympic moment.

The Château de Versailles, 35km west of central Paris, will also host a number of equestrian events during the Games with a temporary outdoor arena set up on the Etoile Royale esplanade at the heart of the Palace's gardens.

While the opulent surroundings and history may at first seem somewhat removed from elite sport, King Louis XIV and his royal family enjoyed sporting pastimes from the very first days of the palace with jousting, carousels, sled races and early versions of golf and tennis all played at Versailles.

From August 8-11 next year it will be pentathlon royalty that will be checking in — and aiming for a coronation.

Paris Pointer: Can Micheli (ITA) end a 36-year wait and build a bridge back to Olympic glory for Italian fans?

When Italy's Carlo Massullo added a fourth Olympic medal to his collection in Barcelona (ESP) in the summer of 1992, his home country could hardly have imagined it would be the last they would see of such scenes for a generation.

Massullo, Gianluca Tiberti and Roberto Bompreszi claimed team bronze that year as Massullo continued his remarkable streak. He had taken individual silver and helped compatriots Daniele Masala and Tiberti to team silver at the Seoul 1988 Games. Four years earlier, Masala himself had claimed individual gold in Los Angeles with Massullo winning bronze and the pair combining with Pierpaolo Cristofori for team gold. It was an Azzurri medal rush!

To this day, Italy still sit in seventh place in the all-time Olympic medal table. But Massullo's silver in 1988 remains the last time an Italian stood on an individual Olympic podium. There have been some admirable near misses — Alice Sotero finished 4th at Tokyo 2020 and five years earlier, at Rio 2016, Riccardo De Luca finished 5th after a mass sprint to the line.

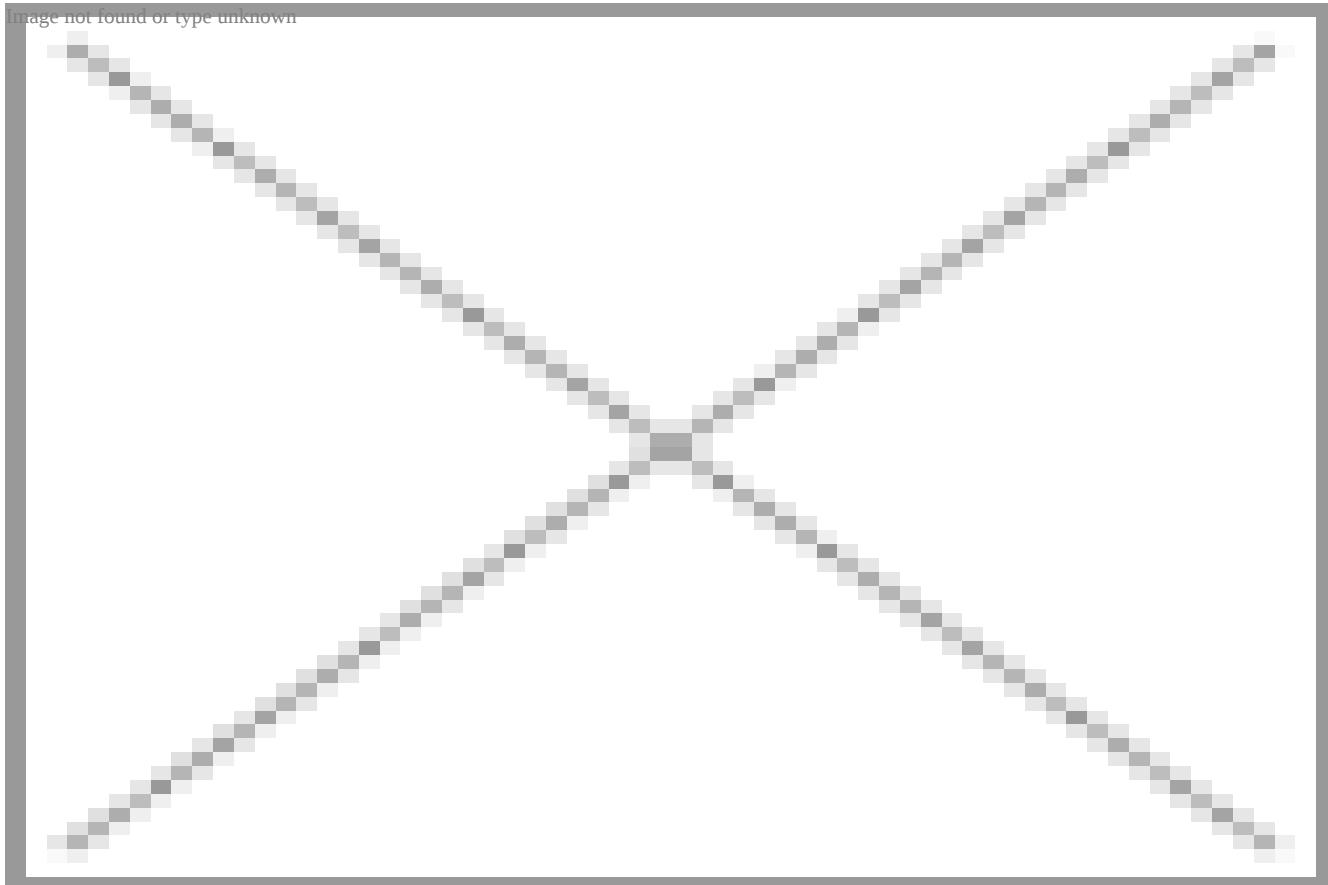
Yet Italian fans now have reason to believe their drought won't stretch all the way to 40 years, with next summer's Paris 2024 Games offering the country a route back to Olympic medal glory.

Elena Micheli's stellar performance claiming gold at the UIPM 2023 Pentathlon World Cup Final in Ankara didn't just secure Italy the first direct qualification quota place at Paris 2024 — it also confirmed Micheli's return to her podium best.

The 2022 season was remarkable for the 24-year-old, who finished inside the top 10 in every event she entered, winning UIPM 2022 Pentathlon World Cup Cairo and returning to Egypt to be crowned world champion in July.

While form and minor injuries led to a slightly less red-hot start to this season, the world No.3 is again showing her major event pedigree and it's enough to get Italian fans dreaming of glory.

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Numbers game: 45,000

... the total number of Olympic volunteers who will help to keep the Games running next year. The Olympic volunteers are an absolutely crucial part of any Games and that will again be the case next July and August, especially with Paris hosting events across a total of 35 distinct venues.

Qualification latest

Now that the first two quota places at Paris 2024 have been secured by Micheli (ITA) and Mohanad Shaban (EGY), the chase begins for the remaining 70 spots.

Things will get hectic in a hurry with another 16 athletes ready to realise their Olympic qualification dreams by the end of June.

The upcoming 3rd European Games in Krakow-Malopolska (POL) offers eight qualifying spots for women and eight for men from European nations. Full details can be found at www.uipmworld.org/olympic-games.