

06 OCT 2023

PENTATHLON PERSONALITIES: PARIS ON HER MIND – MEET ELENA MICHELI



In the second part of the Pentathlon Personalities series, a two-time world champion discusses the role of two-legged and four-legged friends in her success

Written by Joe Callaghan

Amber and Rio Micheli now have a UIPM Pentathlon World Championships gold medal each. But they're just as happy when their mother comes through the door with no medals at all. Which, ultimately, is the beauty of dogs and their constant companionship.

Elena Micheli is 24 years of age, a Carabinieri, a two-time world champion and current world No.1 pentathlete. She's also a 'dog mom', a role she takes just as seriously as her athletic career. In fact, Amber and Rio, a pair of mother-and-daughter Rottweilers, have played a big part in Micheli's soaring performances over the past 18 months.

"They and Pierpaolo, they are my best medicine," Micheli tells UIPM News from the home she

shares with her dogs and boyfriend, Pierpaolo Petroni, outside Rome. “When things are going bad, with training or a competition or university, whatever, I just come back and see my dogs and they are happy anyway.

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“They are always happy to see you. They might not have seen you for a while but every time you

come back they are there for you. It's hello but also it seems like a big smile. Passing my time with them...is incredibly happy for me."

They can sometimes get in the way of preparation, too. Earlier this summer, as she was counting down the days to the UIPM 2023 Pentathlon World Cup Final, Micheli was walking Amber and Rio when an arch nemesis appeared.

"With humans, with everyone, my dogs are great. They are so gentle. But with cats...no!" she explains. "They literally go crazy. I was walking with them, they saw a cat and that was it. I was gone."

She took a heavy fall and feared it could affect her performance in Ankara (TUR). But in keeping with how things have gone for the past two seasons, Micheli picked herself up and won. Another medal to bring home. Since making her Olympic Games debut in Tokyo (JPN) in August 2021, Micheli has competed in 11 senior competitions. She has claimed a podium place five times, winning four golds, and finished in the top 10 on every occasion but two.

The most recent gold — a second consecutive UIPM Pentathlon World Championships title in Bath in August — may have been the sweetest. Micheli and Petroni took a well-deserved break in New York City soon after and, in a quiet moment, she reflected on what it meant to be a repeat world champion.

"Actually I was on the plane and I couldn't sleep, I just couldn't get comfortable. So I sat there and started thinking about the World Championships in Bath. I thought about my attitude after the European Games," Micheli says of the continental competition in Krakow (POL) in July, when she finished 11th and watched compatriot Alice Sotero (ITA) took gold.

"It wasn't my best competition. Even if I was happy for Alice, I was sad for my performance there. I think I hadn't been focused enough, maybe thinking about other things.

"But when I came home from Poland I was sitting there thinking 'okay, the Europeans didn't go how you expected it to go. Well then demonstrate to yourself, to Elena, that you can win another World Championship!'

"That's the focus I had in mind all the way [in Bath]. When I crossed the line it was the first thing I thought about — you demonstrated it to Elena. It was maybe about being more grateful to myself this time. The first World Championship, you never forget it, but the second one is the one that I had been looking for."

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It was her victory in Ankara (TUR) which enabled Micheli to book a quota spot at next summer's Olympics in Paris. Gold in Poland allowed Sotero to complete the Italian job with a second qualification place. While Micheli is understandably excited at all that her second Games may promise, her first experience in Tokyo, when she finished 33rd after being eliminated from the Riding discipline, played a big part in shaping her journey too.

"After the Olympic Games, I swore to myself that I can do this," she says. "No one is going to win every time but you can be on that line, the kind of athlete where you look at them and say 'I want to be one of them, one of the elite'. After Tokyo that's what I wanted to be and it's what I achieved.

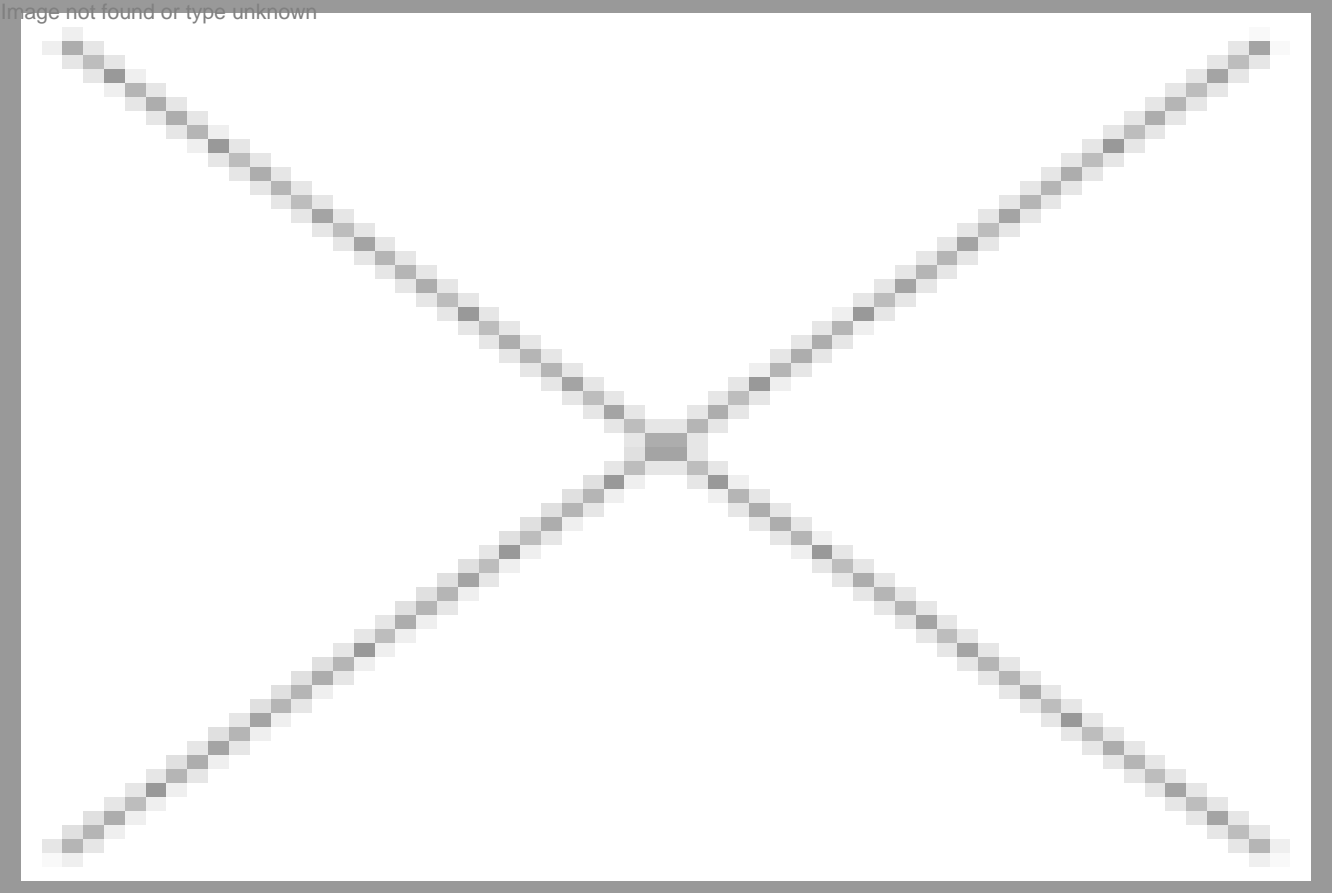
"But I must say that I didn't do this alone. When any athlete competes, there are people behind them. And behind me there are a lot of people, a few coaches in the shadow because they are not with the federation.

"Three years ago, I decided to choose my coaches and we said to one another that this will be difficult but we did it...which is completely crazy. We are full of happiness. It's like taking the stairs instead of the elevator. I love to say thank you to them because I wouldn't be anything today without them."

Micheli says the influence of her partner Petroni, himself an Olympian in Rio in 2016, has been huge too. But technically, what has changed most in the past three years?

"In Tokyo, I was younger and wasn't so sure of myself, particularly in Riding," she says. "I was living a dream as a young athlete who thinks 'I'm at the Olympics, let's enjoy it' but at the technical points and confidence, I can say now that I wasn't ready at all.

"In the last three years we have worked a lot on this: on the feeling of being safe, in a safe zone and being sure of myself when I compete. Of course there are times I have doubts. But in those moments I can feel I can do it, go over it."



Her friendship with Sotero (ITA) has blossomed too. Where in the early days they were strictly rivals, they have grown particularly close, realising they have much in common. It just took time.

“Alice is literally a piece of my heart,” Micheli, the younger by eight years, says. “We weren’t previously as close friends as we are now — because of me and because of her. Alice was a bit close to herself.

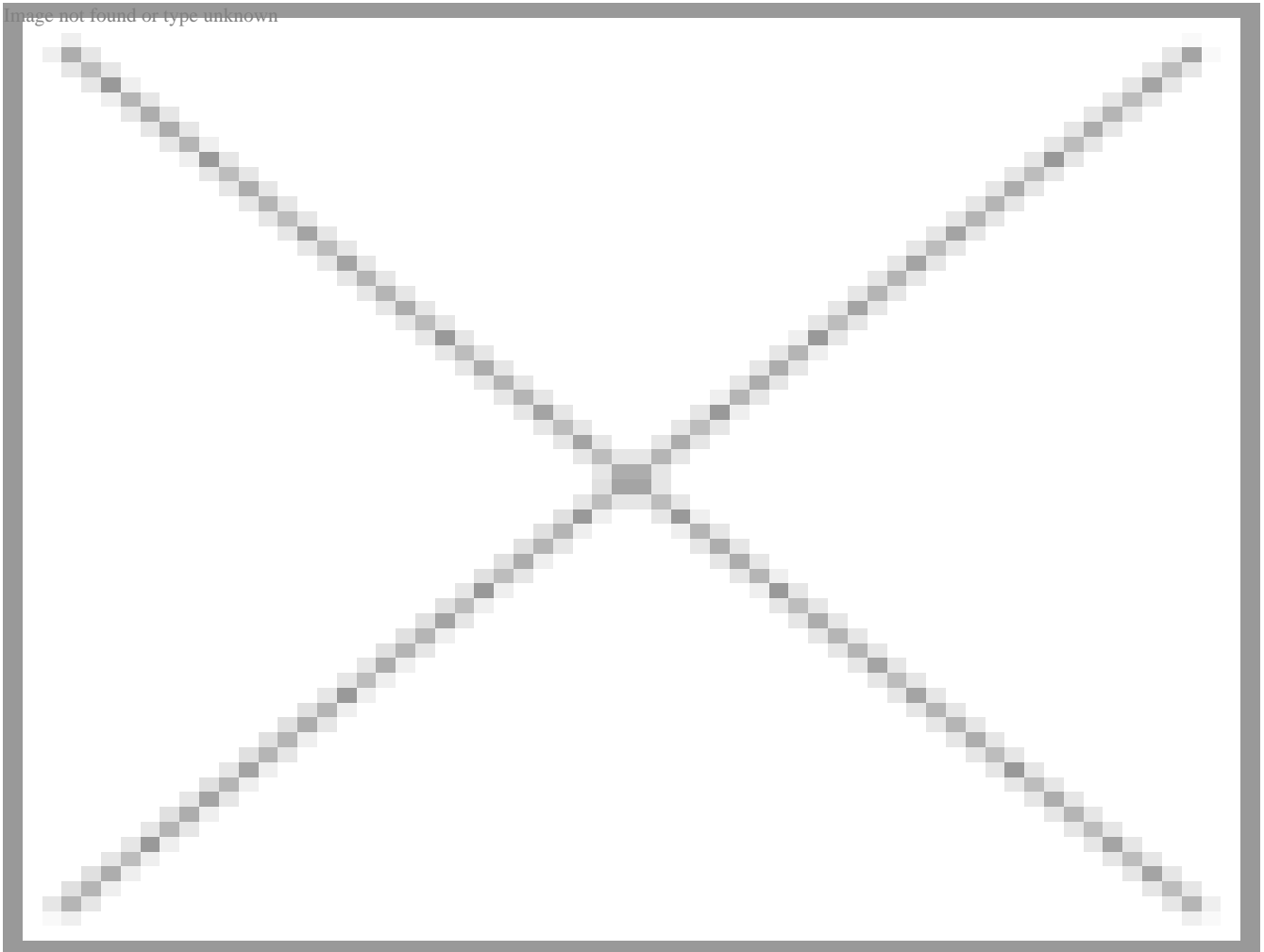
“She needed to think that we are all enemies, there are no friends in sport. But as the years pass by, we start to change, to see that we can leave sport where it is. Why couldn’t I be myself with Alice? Why couldn’t she be herself with Elena? We changed.

“We started to share — our problems, our thoughts, our doubts. Alice is smart and she has such a big heart. She is able to listen and that’s a good thing that not all people have.

“In hard moments I have always had Alice by my side. I wish to be the same for her. I really, in a friendly way, love her. I need her as an athlete but I need her as a friend too.”

It may be a national stereotype but the Italian ability to speak so openly about emotional connections is refreshing. Pentathlon is very much a family affair for Micheli, too. The middle sibling with two brothers either side of her, the sport has been a constant. Elder brother Roberto is currently ranked 64th in the world. Younger brother Giorgio competed in the UIPM 2023 Junior World Championships in September.

But an athletic career was never something her parents pushed her towards. With all three children, Maria and Giacinto Micheli were encouraging but never overbearing.



“It’s strange because my parents never did much sport. They studied,” smiles Micheli. “My father is an engineer and my mother is an interpreter, she speaks about six languages. They just let us go in our sport and when we discovered that Pentathlon was the sport we wanted to do, they did what in my opinion the best parents should do – let us do it our own way – and followed us.

“They always support us and sacrifice for us. Always by our side but never any pressure. It’s so cool that for all of us, my older brother, me and my younger brother, we have made our sport our job. We are doing what we love as our job. I’m a Carabinieri, they are two policemen. It’s funny.”

Micheli confirmed that both parents have “already booked their tickets” for Paris. In Tokyo, Italy won a record 40 medals. But that number carries more weight for Micheli and Sotero. By the time they arrive in the French capital it will be 40 years since Italy’s last Modern Pentathlon medal in an Olympic Games.

“It’s definitely a goal that me and Alice would love to reach — that would be a huge reason of pride for our country,” Micheli says. “Being in Tokyo while Italy won so many medals was really motivating, but at the same time made me feel really hungry to have the same feeling.

“We said it to each other, me and Alice, we weren’t part of that dream in terms of that record number of medals, even if we were part of Italy’s Olympic team – and we could be. So we start again and now we will see in Paris.”