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PENTATHLON PERSONALITIES: MEET VALENTIN BELAUD, A MODERN-DAY FRENCH PHILOSOPHER

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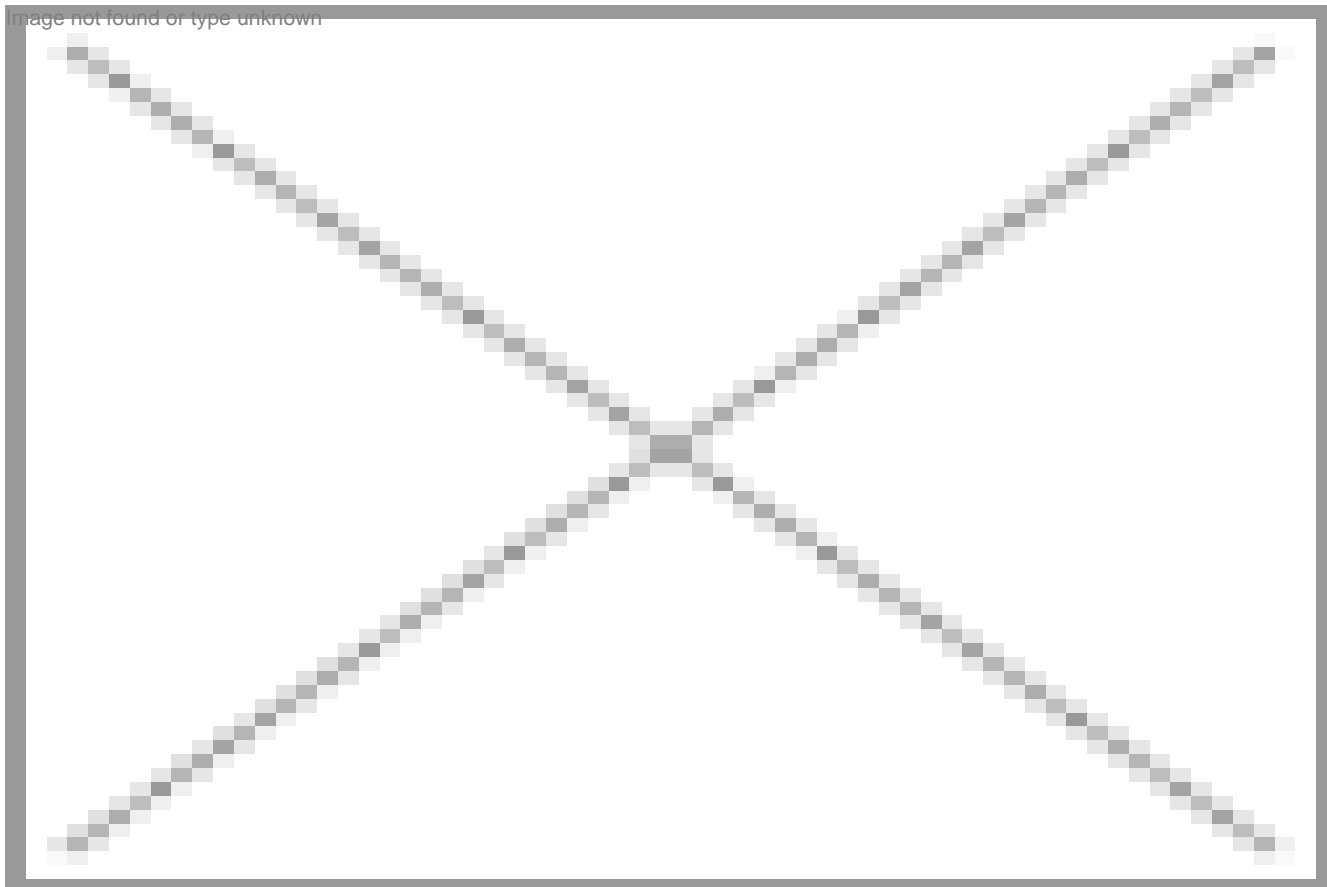


For many of those at the elite end of Modern Pentathlon the thought of walking through the shimmering golden Royal Gates at the Palace of Versailles this summer is a once-in-a-lifetime dream. For Valentin Belaud, however, that walk used to be a once-a-week kinda thing.

France's two-time world champion spent his over-energised childhood in the opulent shadows of the Chateau, growing up in the commune of Le Chesney, just a couple of kilometres from Versailles' gates. You could call this summer's Olympic Games a homecoming and you'd be right. You could also call it a life coming full circle and you'd be correct too.

Belaud's place in the Games isn't yet assured, of course. The host nation boasts the kind of strength in depth of talent that leaves rival nations envious. But the 31-year-old is one of the sport's most open minds as well as one of its deepest thinkers. So when you ask him to wonder about what this summer could mean, he's happy to reflect on how it all started in Versailles.

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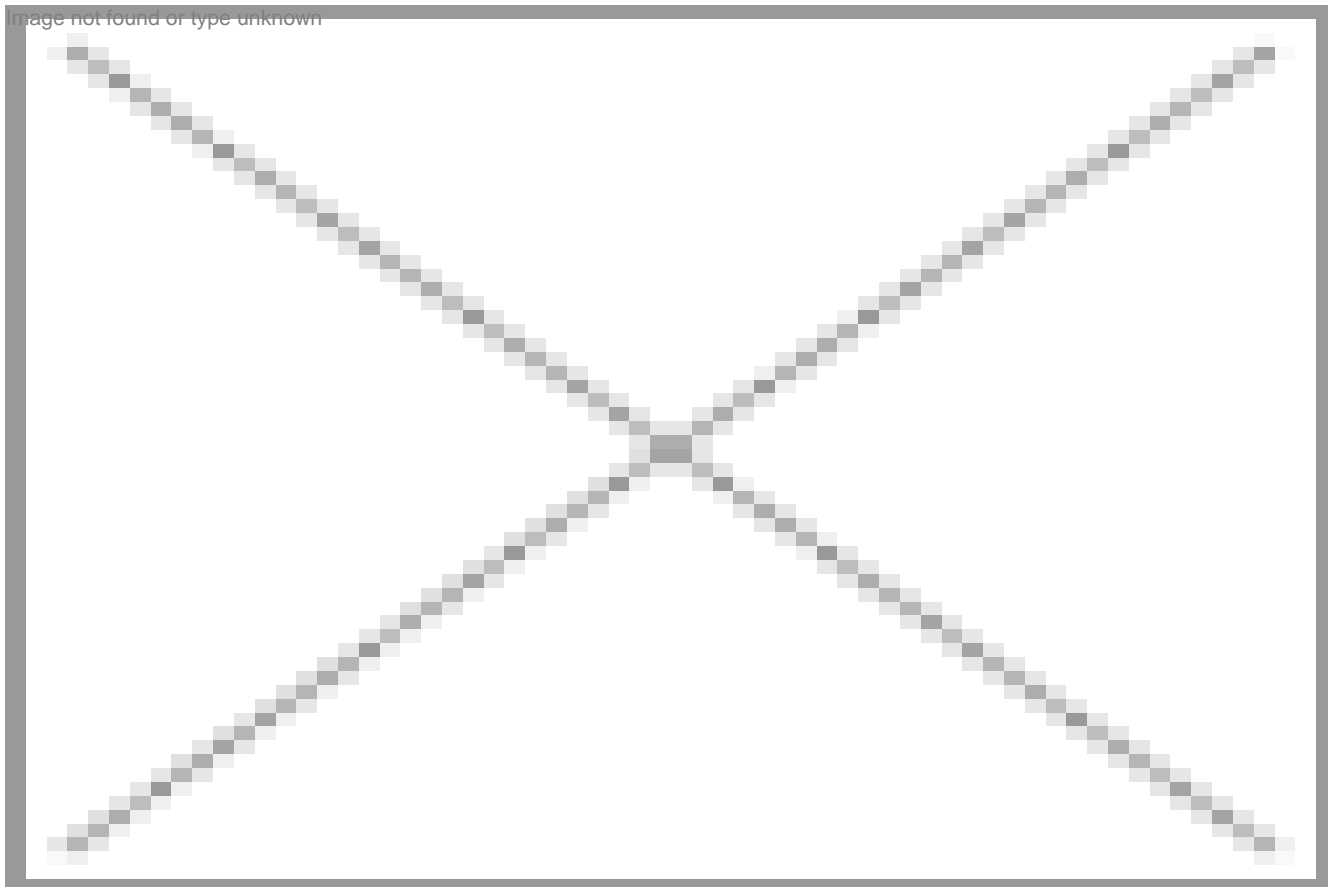


"I was born in Le Chesnay. My father was a republican guardsman, so I was born more or less at the republican guard, which is about 5km to the gardens of Chateau de Versailles," he explains. "I have a big brother and a little sister. I quickly wanted to become stronger than my big brother. I naturally became a competitor. For me, to do things at the surface is uninteresting, I get bored. I like to delve deep into what I do, get to the bottom of things. It's what drove me to sports."

"I was also hyperactive, turbulent. There is a strong moment, when I was around 10-11 years old. At school it was not going well, because I was unruly, too active. A hyperactive child in a French school system can be difficult. My parents got called in, and the teachers at the time told them to take me to see a psychologist. And my father's reaction was to say I had too much energy and they would just make me do more sports. It was a great move, a green light for me to do more sports."

"It may have seemed a lot for a young kid, doing judo and Modern Pentathlon at the same time, but that's what I needed to channel my energy. And as soon as I had done my hours and fully exercised, it was great at school. I am thirsty for novelty, being able to learn constantly, try new things, and be in a rich environment where I can keep learning. So this is how I grew up, and the day I heard the news about Olympics at Paris and Versailles, it was something."

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It's not just the familiar turf that has the potential to make it a poignant August for Belaud. The hooves which thunder through the turf will be familiar too.

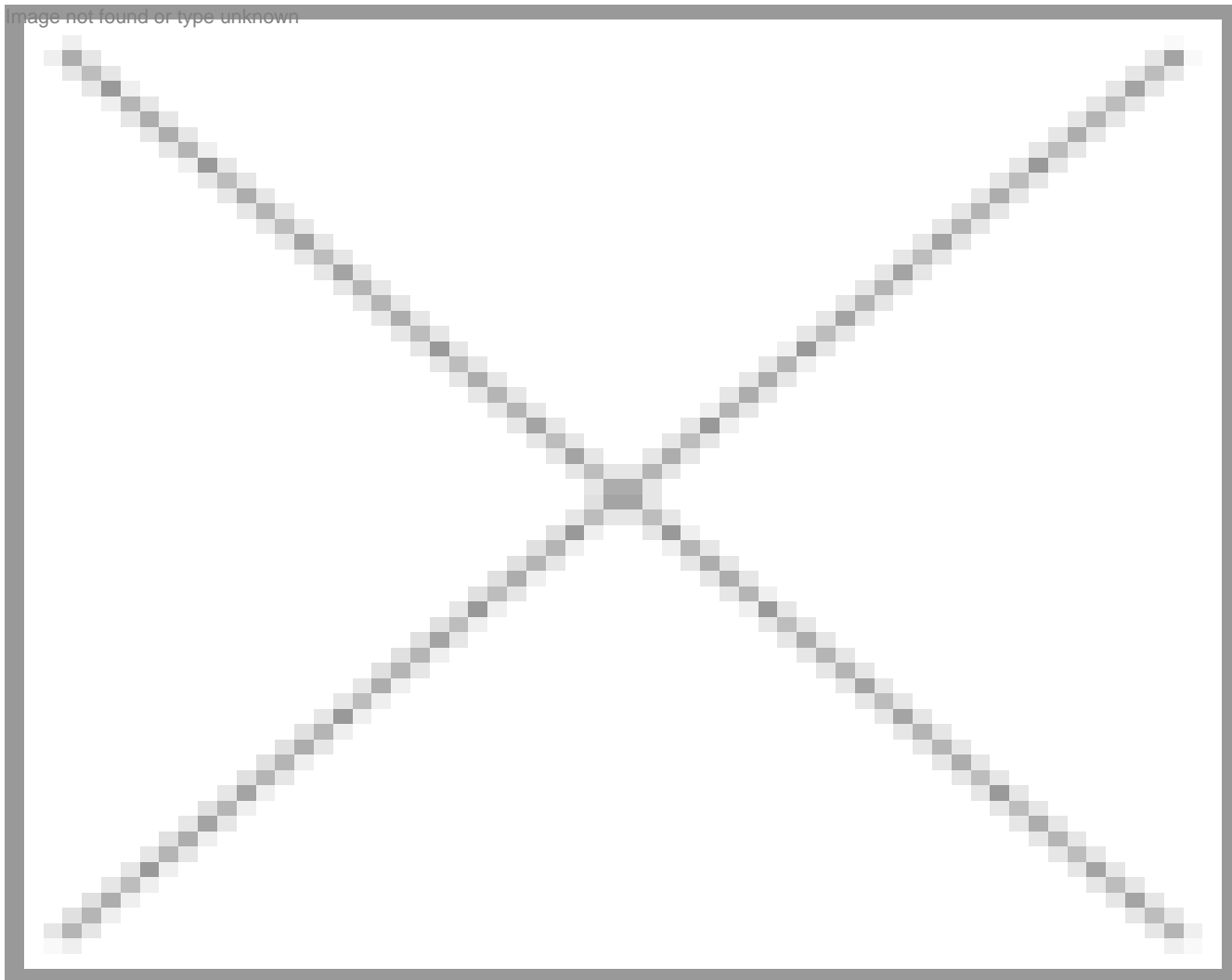
"Even more important [is] the Riding discipline taking place there for the last time," he adds. "I grew up in the republican guard, and horses have always been something that calmed me. Some of the horses that will be selected for Modern Pentathlon will come from the republican guard. It will be one last dance, maybe with a horse from the republican guard, or maybe with a horse from Saumur or Fontainebleau. It's a nice story for me and it's motivating. Writing a book will not help me win the competition, but it's definitely a page that closes a chapter.

"It's also a lot of pride. I remember when I was young and people would tell me I that I wouldn't succeed in life because I was weird, I was hyperactive and I couldn't calm down. I'm proud to move forward in my life, in my process, and that people who know me for a long time, the real me, can see this beautiful loop. My father will retire this summer, as the horses do in our sport, in Versailles, and it's a funny thing. It's not something I've chosen, it's how life works, but I like it."

How life works is something which fascinates Belaud. How this life that he has chosen intertwines with the world around him is a constant curiosity. And in this Olympic year he is seeking out inspiration wherever he can find it — but distraction too.

After opening the season with a trademark top-10 place at UIPM 2024 Pentathlon World Cup Cairo, a training camp trip to South Africa became something different after he came down with a sickness. Instead of hectic high-altitude work, Belaud explored recovery.

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“Having times like these when your body tells you ‘no, you cannot work like this now, you have to adapt’, is difficult to accept. I do psychological work to understand that – if I fell sick, it was because my immune system was a bit too weak, so it meant there was fatigue behind it. Sometimes passionate people tend to say ‘I can push a bit more’, like a running car going low on gas and we still go a bit, you get trapped and end up with a broken car on the side of the road. For me the goal in this Olympic year is to not get broken down, but rather listen to these signs.

“Recovering is not just lying down, it’s also recharging, going somewhere else to get inspired. When we were in South Africa we took the opportunity to do a safari. First time we were there we had gone to a wildlife sanctuary, or to a restaurant to try new culinary experiences. In Paris, it would be exhibitions. It’s about finding how to recharge your batteries fast.”

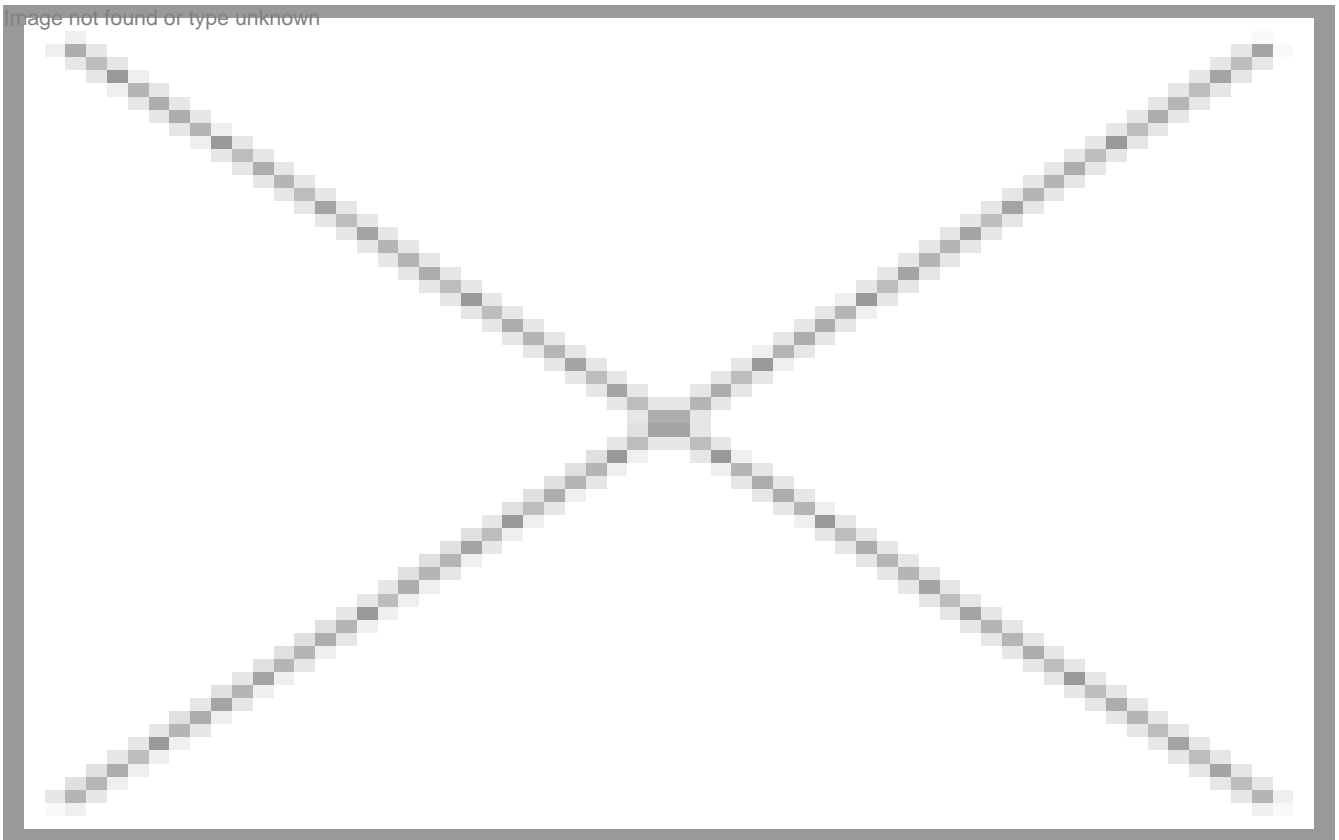
In this ultra-competitive cutting edge of elite sport, some athletes may have been inclined to keep the sickness and setback under wraps. That’s not Belaud’s way. On social media he is a wide open book and outlined the developments in Pretoria.

“When I was young, with coaches I had at the time and watching adults, I used to believe you had to enter the competition as ‘Superman’, strong and showing that you are tough even if you’re down. It took me some time to realize that it’s not what suits me best,” says Belaud, who was first crowned world champion in Moscow in 2016 before repeating the feat in Budapest in 2019.

“This is part of life for everyone, not just athletes, and sharing it is a pleasure. It’s also a shared vision with my sponsors. I feel stronger being able to share these things.”

If Belaud’s life is very much about sharing, it is Elodie Clouvel who undoubtedly gets the lion’s

share of it all. It's corny to call the pair Modern Pentathlon's golden couple but in an Olympic year of piqued interest, their story of romance and triumph has been irresistible for media in the host nation. By now, they're used to the spotlight.



"We've known each other for a very long time, we met 18 or 20 years ago. Nine years ago we got together, kind of naturally. We had personalities that connected. She is my support number 1. She is there for my victories, of course, but she is there most importantly every day," Belaud says. "When I doubt, when I'm not okay, she's there for me and I'm there for her. We are a team together, and it's unconditional support. I will take the worst example — let's say I don't make it to Paris Olympics, I hope it doesn't happen but if that does, she will be there.

"What's funny too is that she is kind of my muse; an inspiration. I remember in 2016 she was world silver medallist, and when we got back to the hotel in the evening, she just winked at me and said 'well, you know what to do if you want to beat me'. Not in a competitor way, because we would never be against each other but more in a 'go for it' way. She has that heritage, in her mind everything is possible. It took her three years to qualify for her first Olympics, she was the first French athlete to win an [individual] Olympic medal.

"I have been doing Modern Pentathlon in France for a long time. We used to train, hoping to succeed, but we wouldn't go beyond that point and reach those medals. She brought that. When Elodie arrived, she proved that everything was possible."

This year the couple have again opted to spend some time training separately from the French national team before linking up with compatriots around competitions. It's a mutual strategy.

"Every time she can be there for me she will be, and it's the same for me. It's a strength. In competitions I know she will be there every time. To be together in our choices, our training approach, which can be atypical, it's a real strength," Belaud says. "It would have been much more difficult to do the project I do this year if I was alone. My best sparring partner is Elodie, my best competitor is Elodie, because she allows me to ask myself the right questions. With Elodie I can

only be true. She knows the true Valentin, all my colours, the dark ones too, same for her. In one look we know, sometimes we don't need to say it. And that's a strength to me."

There is so much more to discuss and Belaud doesn't shirk any topic. But in what could be the most consequential few months of his career, time is a precious commodity too. Before he gets up to leave, he stops and ponders again.

"When I tell my story, I try to think also to be careful not to tell a tale," he says. "We are in real life. I'm not a movie producer. You need to create your reality. Every day. It may sound like it's meant for me. Of course I want it, I want to go to Paris and win, but I am also conscious. I stop myself and think 'go easy. Go every day, step by step'. It will be this story or another. We will see!"

By Joe Callaghan