

23 AUG 2015

LANIGAN-O'KEEFFE IS THE NEW EUROPEAN CHAMPION

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Arthur Lanigan-O'Keeffe produced an outstanding performance across all five disciplines to be crowned as men's champion at the Modern Pentathlon European Championships at the University of Bath.

The Irishman held a 20-second lead going into the combined run/shoot and extended it even further to take victory – and a Rio 2016 Olympic Games qualification place – by a comfortable margin. Silver went to Valentin Prades of France, while Italy's Riccardo De Luca – this year's World Cup Final winner – took the bronze medal. There was plenty for a packed home crowd to cheer as well as University of Bath student Joe Choong produced a storming finish to take seventh spot and one of the eight Rio 2016 places on offer. The others went to London 2012 champion David Svoboda and Czech Republic team-mate Jan Kuf, Hungary's Robert Kasza, Russia's Egor Puchkarevskiy and Valentin Belaud of France.

An ecstatic Lannigan-O'Keeffe said: "It feels unbelievable!"

The newly crowned European champion believes his training in the past year was fundamental to his new title. "My fencing was the weakest this year so I really concentrated on it for the last month

and I turned it inside out" he added.

"I just stuck to my process in the riding and I loved riding so it was comfortable.

"I worked on my shooting technique this year by joining a gun school and it has really paid off in return."

Silver-medallist Prades said: "I feel really good. I was very sad after the riding because I picked up a lot of penalties but in the semi-final I had a good combined which really helped my confidence.

"Before the combined I said to myself 'you are crazy, come on, try and run fast!'."

De Luca, who already had an Olympic qualification place after his World Cup Final win, said: "It was my last competition of the season and I did a good job. I've been doing a lot of good work with my coach."

Svoboda finished just off the podium but said putting himself in contention to defend his Olympic crown in Rio was more than a worthy consolation prize. "I have a spot for the Olympic Games but I am not nominated yet because that our coaches will decide next year," he said.

"It is amazing, though, because I was injured for two years after the Olympics in London so this season is my comeback.

"I wanted to try and be in the top ten here and finally I am fourth – much better than expected."

Sixth-placed Puchkarevskiy said: "I'm very happy. Last year I won the Junior World Championships and now I have qualification for the Olympic Games so it's amazing."

Another youngster to excel was home favourite Choong, who beamed: "It's the best feeling ever [getting the Olympic qualification standard]. It's what I've been trying to do for four years now and to have finally done it is just amazing.

"It was definitely a home advantage. I could hear the crowd screaming as I came around the last lap and I thought there's no way these guys are going past me now."

HOW THE DAY UNFOLDED

Great Britain's Jamie Cooke got the men's final off to an explosive start by recording a clear-water victory in the London 2012 Legacy Swimming Pool. His time of 1:56.16 was quicker than his qualifying performance and made him one of only two swimmers to go under two minutes, the other being compatriot Joe Choong. Russia's Kustov Maksim and Egor Puchkarevsky were the next two fastest athletes.

Following a weak swim, World Cup Final winner Riccardo De Luca seemed determined to get back on track for the European title by demonstrating exceptional skill at the start of the fencing event. Despite his efforts, a few unfortunate losses saw him drop down the rankings. Instead it was reigning Olympic champion David Svoboda who was quick to use his expertise and skill to climb to the top.

Frenchmen Valentin Prades and Christopher Patte decided it was their turn to challenge the number one spot, with Prades spending a considerable amount of time in first place. However, it was Russia's Kustov who eventually claimed the top ranking going into the bonus round, just ahead of Lanigan-O'Keeffe. Latvia's Denyss Cerkovskis had a good outing on the bonus round but the biggest treat for the home crowd was when GB athletes Cooke and Tom Toolis faced each

other. Cooke went on to record the fastest hit of the bonus round, winning in just four seconds.

The quality of the athletes was highly evident from the start of the riding event as Patrick Dogue from Germany, 35th seed and second to venture onto the course, managed to score a clean ride. The home crowd struggled to maintain the silence as Jamie Cooke swiftly galloped around the course to score another clean round, putting him in the lead and eliciting a huge cry of 'yes!' from the delighted Brit. Leader Kustov had a nightmare as a refusal and two knockdowns left him 34th in the riding rankings and dropped him to sixth overall. That was nothing compared to Hungary's Bence Demeter, who was fourth going into the ride but was not allowed to compete after his horse was deemed lame after training had begun. A subsequent appeal was dismissed. It was Ireland's Lannigan O'Keeffe who took the last clean ride to head into the combined event in first place.

GB's Cooke and Hungary's Kasza closely behind with handicaps of 20 and 23 seconds respectively. That gap grew when Lannigan-O'Keeffe produced a near-perfect shoot in the first round at the shooting range. Cooke lost ground whilst shooting, allowing the Hungarian and Russia's Pucharevsky to overtake him. However, it would all change by the fourth and final shoot as France's Prades and Italy's De Luca powered through at astonishing speed to finish in second and third place respectively behind a very pleased Lannigan-O'Keeffe. *Source: Pentathlon GB*
Picture credits: Phil Searle