

Clarke makes a fast start

Tacen Slalom

Australia's Jessica Fox showed she was close to returning to her incredible 2018 form while speed machine team mate Daniel Watkins also impressed on the opening day of the World Cup in Tacen, Ljubljana but it was Great Britain's Joe Clarke who put down the most impressive run of the day, the Olympic gold medallist returning to the water after a one week break to post the fastest time in the men's K1.

In news that will no doubt send a shiver down the spine of all Clarke's opponents, he revealed he is still troubled by a shoulder injury.

'The week off didn't actually do it any good but, hopefully, it will sort itself out in time,' Clarke said.

'It's not hindering me too much as you can see but it's just there in the back of my head but we'll deal with it.'

Clarke's time was 75.19, just ahead of Watkins in 75.90. Watkins had earlier posted the fastest time in the men's C1. Portugal's Antoine Launay was third fastest in 77.94.

Watkins finally showed his capability with a sizzling quickest run in the men's C1 and then finishing second fastest in the K1.

After teasing at the opening two World Cups with superfast runs, only to cruel his chances with careless gate touches, the 23 year old Australian set an error free time of 82.14 in the C1 on the short Ljubljana course.

'I was really happy with that qualification but a little surprised with how well it stacked up,' he said.

'I always surprise myself when I paddle well; sometimes it can feel like I'm really controlled and really patient and not going crazy fast and then the actual speed on the boat proves to be really strong.'

'Being qualification, I guess I relaxed a little bit and took those split seconds to make sure I was really safe around the poles.'

Slovakia's Matej Benus finished 1.30 seconds back on 83.44, while Czech Lukas Rohan was third in 83.91.

Jessica Fox was more than 4 seconds quicker than the next best paddler in the women's C1 qualifying and only just missed out on fastest time in the first round of the women's K1.

'I didn't expect to replicate 2018 but I think there have been some good parts to each World Cup, Fox said.

'It's not going to be the perfect 2019 like I would have liked but every race is a new race. I don't judge the season off the first race or the second race. It's four months overseas for us so you have to ease yourself into it.'

Fox posted a fault free 94.19 in the women's C1 with Austria's Viktoria Wolfhardt second in 98.44, and Slovenia's Alja Kozorog third in 100.94.

Italy's Stefanie Horn showed the benefit of taking a week off by posting the fastest time in the women's K1, her 89.53 time just 0.09 second quicker than reigning world champion Jessica Fox.

Horn said she feels at home paddling in Tacen.

'When you start in Tacen there's a really big jump and you feel like you are flying,' Horn said.

'You start with a good experience and it's really nice. I love Tacen; it's my favourite course.'

Brazil's Ana Satila qualified third fastest in 91.10.

There were double celebrations for Italy on Saturday as Stefanie Horn and Roberto Colazingari both broke through for their first ever gold medals, triumphing in Slovenia.

It was a breakthrough win for 2016 Olympian Horn, who began her international career with Germany in 2006 before moving to Italy in 2013. Despite being a consistent finalist at World Cup and world championship finals, gold had always eluded the 28 year old but the signs were good in Slovenia with Horn posting the quickest time in both the heats and the semi finals, before securing gold in 94.13.

'I think it helps that I am in love with this place; the people are so nice here. You have a great feeling so I just love paddling,' Horn said.

'In London I did a great semi final and I was convinced I could also

do a great final but I put so much pressure on myself that I missed a gate. Pressure is sometimes too much for me.

'I have a new coach now; we are working on being more self confident and learning that even if you do a small error you can still do a good run.'

Horn finished ahead of local hope Eva Terceelj, who posted 94.39, while Ukraine's Viktoria Us recorded 95.04. She also had a 2 second penalty for a gate touch, which denied her a first ever World Cup gold.

Three time world champion Jessica Fox did not make the final after picking up a 50 second penalty for a missed gate.

For Colazingari it was not only his first gold medal but also his first medal of any colour. The 26 year old won the U23 slalom world championships but has struggled to make the podium since.

'Finally,' he said.

'We worked hard towards this and this is a result of the hard work we did during the winter. I hope that this is the start and not the end.'

Colazingari finished with a time of 87.48 with Slovenia's Anze Bercic 2nd with 88.84 and Slovakia's Alexander Slafkovsky 3rd on 89.56.

Italy recorded its best ever world cup result and Jessica Fox returned to the winner's podium for the first time this season on a dramatic final day and there was an incredible bronze medal for 15 year old American Evy Leibfarth, competing at just her second World Cup.

Giovanni De Gennaro won the men's K1, adding his gold to those won by team mates Stefanie Horn in the women's K1 and Roberto Colazingari in the men's C1.

De Gennaro broke the hearts of a jam packed Slovenian crowd by edging out local favourite Peter Kauzer by just 0.05 second.

'It was very stressful for me, watching all these guys coming down, but I think I had good luck and I had a good run,' De Gennaro said.

'It's amazing. Italy has won three gold medals in the past five years and now we win three in two days. It was hard for me to race after two golds because the expectation was really high.'

'I feel good. I just hope I can be this consistent in important races as well, like the world championships.'

He finished with a penalty free 83.10 with Kauzer recording 83.15. Czech Jiri Prskavec finished 3rd in 84.97, which included a 2 second penalty which cost him the gold medal.

After dominating the 2018 season, Jessica Fox has struggled to find her groove this year but she made a long overdue return to the top of the podium on Sunday, posting 103.06, including 4 seconds of penalties, to win the C1.

Fox had been left devastated 24 hours earlier after picking up a 50 second penalty which kept her out of the K1 final.

'It's been a hard start to the year and yesterday I was really upset and disappointed with my race in not making the final so I really wanted to bounce back today and show what I could do,' Fox said.

'There were a couple of mistakes in that run but overall I'm super happy and super proud.'

'I train to do my best and strive for excellence in every run and when it doesn't happen it's disappointing so you do put pressure on yourself but you have to learn. Everyone is vulnerable.'

Austria's Viktoria Wolfhardt was 2nd in 104.22 while teenage Leibfarth picked up the bronze in 110.69. After making both the K1 and the C1 at her debut in Bratislava one week earlier, she followed up with another two finals in Tacen and topped it off with the C1 bronze.

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K1W: 1 S Horn, Italia, 94.13. 2 E Terceelj, Slovenija, 94.39. 3 V Us, Ukraina, 95.04.

K1M: 1 G De Gennaro, Italia, 83.10. 2 P Kauzer, Slovenija, 83.15. 3 V Prindis, Ceska, 84.97.

5 B Forbes-Cryans, GB, 87.10. 6 J Clarke, GB, 90.05.

C1W: 1 J Fox, Australia, 103.06. 2 V Wolfhardt, Osterreich, 104.22. 3 E Leibfarth, USA, 110.69. 15 E Gibson, GB.

C1M: 1 R Colazingari, Italia, 87.48. 2 A Bercic, Slovenija, 88.84. 3 A Slafkovsky, Slovensko, 89.56.



C1 winner Fox.



Watkins shows speed.



K1 winner De Gennaro.



Leibfarth 3rd, aged 15.