

Australia's Curtis McGrath and Great Britain's Emma Wiggs both won their 12th world titles and Charlotte Henshaw held on to narrowly claim her ninth on a gripping first day of finals racing on the Friday.

McGrath overcame a slow start to win the men's KL2, Wiggs had to hold off a spirited challenge from Canada's Brianna Hennessy in the women's VL2 and fellow Brit Henshaw just held out teammate Hope Gordon in the women's VL3.

Wiggs has had a stranglehold on the women's VL2 since before it made its Paralympic debut in 2016. Despite occasional injury struggles, the former UK sitting volleyball captain said she's feeling ready for a third Paralympic campaign.

'This is very much a benchmark for us so it's nice to be able to just pip it,' Wiggs said.

'The rest of the field is getting very close but it's great to have a race that feels very tight.

'If we can get through selection and be on that start line in Paris it's going to be pretty special. Another Games would be an incredible opportunity and I'm excited to, hopefully, be there and, hopefully, have some tight racing.'

Hennessy finished second and Australia's Susan Seipel third.

McGrath has similarly been a dominant force in paracanoe for nearly a decade but had to work his way through the field to win the men's KL2 on the Friday.

'The competition out there today was pretty tough for me; it gave me a good little scare in the middle but I knew my strength was at the end of the race and I can't panic,' McGrath said.

'A lot of us have trained right into this event so when we go to Paris it will be all about tapering and sharpening that spear and making sure we've crossed all the Ts and dotted the Is.

'Everyone's getting stronger; it's pretty amazing how much faster every competition is.'

A determined David Phillipson from Great Britain finished second and, in doing so, picked up another Paris quota for Team GB while Brazil's Fernando Rufino De Paulo was third.

The women's VL3 will make its Paralympic debut in Paris. Henshaw has been unbeatable in the race in the lead up to the Games but came close to a rare defeat on the Friday with a tense tussle with Gordon.

Henshaw said she expects Gordon to be even tougher to beat in Paris. 'When I first joined the sport I was doing va'a to get the numbers up, to showcase what the event could be, so to get it into the Games was a really exciting step forward,' Henshaw said.

'We've showcased it again today. We've not only put it into the programme but it's a very exciting race; it's close racing. The girls are stepping up all over the world, really embracing that we've got this new event.

'It's what we want from paracanoe; we want exciting races and I'm just proud to play a small part in that.'

Uzbekistan's Shakhzoda Mamadaliyeva finished third.

The non Paralympic women's VL1 was won by Italy's Viktoriya Pistis Shablova, ahead of India's Pooja Ojha and Chile's Jocelyn Munoz.

The first races on the sprint World Cup programme also got underway on the Friday with the first medals set to be awarded on Saturday.

Germany sent out a pre Games warning they will be the crews to beat after both their men's and women's K4 crews stormed to World Cup gold on the Saturday.

The Chinese pairing of Shixiao Xu and Mengya Sun continued their dominance of the women's C2 500, New Zealand's Lisa Carrington and Alicia Hoskin won the women's K2 500, Australia's Tom Green and Jean Van der Westhuyzen the men's K2 500 and the neutral canoeists Alexey Korovashkov and Ivan Shtyl took out the men's C2 500 just days after earning an Olympic quota.

The German women's quartet came together just one week before the World Cup but showed no teething issues with a slashing win against last year's gold, silver and bronze medallists.

Paulina Paszek, Jule Hake, Pauline Jagsch and Sarah Bruessler staked a big claim to be the German K4 team in Paris after beating Poland and China with reigning world champions New Zealand finishing fourth.

'We just came together one week ago; we had some struggles in the training but in the competition it worked really well, fortunately,' Hake said.

'We will see now what happens with the selections and, hopefully, we can be in Paris.'

The German men's team are looking to defend their Olympic crown in Paris and showed they are on track with a powerful win over a much improved Australia and Spain.

The win confirmed Max Rendschmidt, Max Lemke, Jacob Schopf



Emma Wiggs.

canoephotography.com/Bence Vekassy (ICF) photographs

and Tom Leibscher-Lucz will once again represent Germany at an Olympic level.

'The first race of the year is always pretty tough and the last two years were not easy for us,' Schopf said.

'I think the German crew are not the best starters but we are getting better and better so it was good to see we could paddle fast at the beginning of the year.'

Shixiao Xu and Mengya Sun have not been beaten in a women's C2 500 race since before the Tokyo Olympics and once again showed they will be the pair to beat in Paris with what almost seemed to be an effortless win in Szeged.

'Everyone is improving; our opponents are also improving so this is a good gold medal to win,' Xu said.

'We try and avoid the pressure and just focus on ourselves. If you compare us with before Tokyo I think we are faster.'

Canada's Sloan MacKenzie and Katie Vincent finished second with Spain's Antia Jacome and Maria Corbera taking third.

Lisa Carrington and Alicia Hoskin are hoping to defend New Zealand's K2 Olympic crown in Paris and made all the right moves on Saturday with a win against world champions Denmark and Sweden.

Australia's Green and Van der Westhuyzen won K2 1,000 in Tokyo and have struggled to turn that into winning form over the new Olympic distance of 500 metres but in Szeged they showed they are ready for Olympic glory again by beating world champions Portugal and Spain in the World Cup final.

'We've lined up for this so many times and most of the time we've finished on the podium but we haven't got that first step yet,' Green said.

'I guess patience has paid off.

'It's been hard the past two years trying to work out what type of race plan is going to work for us and how we want to race the race. We've had some close races; we've had some races we were pretty disappointed in so I think to have a good race leading up to the Games is great,' Van der Westhuyzen said.

Great Britain, Brazil and Spain all picked up two more world titles while there were also wins for Ukraine and Chile on a busy final day of competition on the Saturday.

Charlotte Henshaw continued her merry romp through the garden of world titles with a 10th crown while Fernando Rufino de Paulo, Ukraine's Vladyslav Yepifanov and GB's Laura Sugar all successfully defended their 2023 championship wins.

Yepifanov showed his win in the highly competitive VL3 last year was no fluke, once again holding off a crack field to take the title.

'This confirms for me that I deserve this title. I have worked really hard for it,' Yepifanov said.

'If I can win in Paris it will mean a lot for Ukraine.'

Charlotte Henshaw chalked up her 10th 24 hours after winning her ninth world title, this time in the women's KL2. The late withdrawal of Emma Wiggs relieved some of the pressure for Henshaw but she once again showed she is the competitor to beat in Paris.

'I couldn't have imagined getting to that number or anywhere close to it when I took up this sport in 2017. I'm just incredibly grateful that I'm still able to be here amongst the best in the world,' Henshaw said.

'It's always tricky when there's a last minute name change but we prepare for all sorts of eventualities. I was racing out there with both of us in mind and doing it for the team.'

Laura Sugar is also on track to defend her Paralympic crown in the women's KL3, holding out Hope Gordon.

'You don't know what to expect when you come into the first race