

## GB has biggest Paralympic team

### Szeged Regatta

The fight for ten European canoe sprint Olympic quotas got underway in Szeged, Hungary, as the final country lineup for this year's Olympics slowly came together.

The battle for the one boat quota available in each of the 10 races was intense on the opening day of competition but would lift to another level on Thursday with a ticket to Tokyo on offer for the winners.

Eight different countries would take the fastest qualifier into the next day's finals, including Georgia and Moldova, while the Italians had the fastest qualifier in both the men's C1 1,000 and the women's K1 200.

Three time Olympian Rene Poulsen was in a desperate battle to get to his fourth Games and the Dane was a comfortable winner in his heat of the men's K1 1,000.

He was pipped by Serbia's Bojan Zdelar for the quickest time but said he was just happy to be back on the water after a challenging 12 months.

'I had a big mental trauma which I found out in 2019 so I had time to work on it and spend some time figuring out how to solve it and how to work with it,' Poulsen said, 'so both physically and mentally it's been great for me. I think everybody is a bit nervous, because nobody has been competing. Because it's been such a long time since we had international competition we don't know where we are compared to everyone else.'

Portugal's Joana Vasconcelos posted the quickest time in the women's K1 500, Georgia's Miriami Kerdikashvili was fastest in the new Olympic event, the women's C1 200, and Hungary's Kolos Csizmadia showed he would be tough to beat in the men's K1 200.

Italy would be eying off two additional Olympic quotas on the Thursday after 2016 Olympian Carlo Tacchini was quickest in the men's C1 1,000 and Francesca Genzo was very impressive in winning her heat of the women's K1 200.

On Monday it was confirmed Great Britain would get a second quota for Tokyo, in the women's K1 500. Deborah Kerr was second quickest in the women's K1 200 and said the news this week had relieved some of the pressure.

'There's been a bit of a generational shift on our team and a lot of us are still pretty young so to just be out here is really exciting,' Kerr said.

'Yesterday we had confirmed that we have an extra spot for Tokyo so today is just all about trying to secure another one. This is probably the best I've felt for a couple of years.'

In the two person boats, Moldovan brothers Oleg and Serghei Tarnovschi were quickest in the men's C2 1,000, Simon Sculd-Jensen and Morten Graversen of Denmark would go into the men's K2 1,000 final as the fastest crew and Sarah Bruessler and Melanie Gebhardt had kept German hopes alive for Olympic qualification in the women's K2 500 with a quick time in their heat.

Paracanoe quotas were confirmed on the penultimate day of qualifiers on Friday.

Blake Haxton, who competed at the 2016 Paralympics in para rowing, would get the chance to compete in two sports in Tokyo after successfully qualifying for the men's VL2 in paracanoe.

'I hadn't really raced until last year and I really didn't know how this race would go,' Haxton said.

'I'm surprised. I hoped to stick around and maybe get to Paris and make that team soto get here and qualify, I really hadn't let myself think this was a possibility. I didn't want to get my hopes up.

'Now I get to go. This is pretty unreal, really. I'm having a blast. I'm going to double up. I'm going to give it a shot. I'll need to do my homework; there's a couple of days off in between. I figured we won't know unless we try.'

Brazil's Fernando Rufino de Paulo already had his ticket booked for Tokyo and confirmed his medal prospects with a strong win in the men's VL2.

Rufino was eying off both the VL2 and KL2 in Japan.

'It's so good to be back here in Szeged, where I won my ticket for Tokyo,' he said.

'I'm so proud to represent Brazil. I'm yellow and green. I'm looking forward to representing millions of people in Tokyo. I believe so much in our team and in our potential.

Brianna Hennessy struggled to hold back the tears after booking her ticket to Tokyo in the women's VL2, less than 12 months after sitting in a kayak for the first time.

The Canadian became a tetraplegic after being hit by a speeding taxi



Deborah Kerr.



Nevin Harrison.

while crossing the road in 2014, putting at threat an active sporting career that included ice hockey, field hockey, boxing and rugby.

'For me the best part of it is to be able to inspire others that have had a catastrophic accident or that have disabilities, that you don't have to stop believing in yourself or your dreams,' Hennessy said.

'I've been an elite athlete all my life before my accident so it's an absolute honour to be able to represent my country. Once you find the new perspective that there is strength in the struggle then it starts to mean a lot more and you find yourself again.'

Russia's Mariia Nikiforova, already qualified for Tokyo, won the women's VL2.

Spain's Adrian Mosquera made the decision to cross from KL3 to VL3 because he felt it gave him a better chance of getting to Tokyo and on Friday that decision paid off when he won the final and secured a Paralympic ticket.

'In my first race in Vaá I finished 4th and now, after training hard all the winter, now I am a champion. It's incredible,' Mosquera said.

'At the start of the season I was unsure but as time passed the sessions in the water were much better. This sensation, to be going to Tokyo, is the best. This has been my dream for four years; now reality, it's unbelievable.'

Eddie Potdevin was also set for his first Paralympics after the former motocross rider secured a quota for France in the men's VL3.

It's been a long two years for the Frenchman, who had hoped to secure his quota in Szeged in 2019.

'It's been very difficult for me; two years ago I wanted to qualify at the world championships but I couldn't do it,' Potdevin said.

'Today is very special for me, my family, my wife, my coach. I have been working every day to make it happen but it has been very difficult in the conditions but the problem is now finished; it is a good day in Szeged.'

Many of the world's best sprint paddlers finally returned to full international competition on Friday.

After two days of watching the European Olympic qualifiers, paddlers from the rest of the world got their chance to join the competition and to test their progress after more than one year of restricted competition.

The first of the finals would be contested on Saturday but the scene had been set for some thrilling contests after preliminary rounds on Friday. The men's K1 1,000, which has had three different world champions since the 2016 Rio Olympics, was once again shaping as one of the races of the weekend.

Reigning world champion, Balint Kopasz of Hungary, recorded the fastest time in the semifinals but Czech Josef Dostal and Portugal's 2018 world champion, Fernando Pimenta, also impressed in the perfect racing conditions but all three would be watching closely Germany's Jacob Schopf, who had been given an opportunity to prove himself in the K1 after successfully partnering three time Olympian Max Hoff to a world title in 2019.

21 year old Schopf had a relaxed semifinal and was looking forward to testing himself in Saturday's final.

'I was a little bit nervous before the race but I'm happy that I can manage this and now I would like to see what I can do in the final,' Schopf said.

'I don't have any expectations, just to get some experience hopefully