

Chasing Olympic places

Barnaul Regatta



The journey to this year's Tokyo Olympic Games came down to one more race for a handful competing at the global Olympic qualifiers in Barnaul, Russia.

Competitors from all over the world battled on the Thursday for places in one of the six finals which offered an Olympic quota on the Friday afternoon. For the men, tickets would be available in the K1 200, K1 1,000 and C1 1,000, while the women would compete for the K1 200, K1 500 and C1 200.

Competitors from former Soviet states posted the strongest performances in the cold and windy Siberian conditions, posting the quickest times over the 200 metre distances.

Mariami Kerdikashvili from Georgia was quickest in the women's C1 200, one of the new Olympic events this year, while Russia's Natalia Podolskaia, a former U23 world champion, provided cheer for the home fans by posting the quickest time in the women's K1 200.

Ukraine's Oley Kukharyk, the 2017 world championship bronze medallist in the men's K1 500, was fastest in the men's K1 200 while Lithuania's Vadim Korobov, the reigning European U23 champion, was fastest in the men's C1 1,000.

Italian Andrea Schera posted the quickest time in the men's K1 1,000 and Poland's Justyna Iskrzycka, a silver medallist in the women's K1 1,000 at the 2019 world championships, was fastest in the women's K1 500.

Singapore's Stephenie Chen, who narrowly missed a Tokyo quota at the Asian qualifiers, also progressed straight to the women's K1 200 final by winning her heat.

'Conditions are cold and windy, just a little bit different to what I am used to,' Chen said, 'but I think I had an advantage with an inside lane. I'm not really nervous, just excited to see what I can do. I'm kind of an underdog here so I'm trying not to focus so much on what might be and more on what I can do best.'

Joaquim Lobo went to bed on Thursday night believing his Tokyo 2020 Olympic dream was over.

The 26 year old from Mozambique had spent the day trying to qualify for the final of the men's C1 1,000 but had fallen short. He had paddled in Rio in 2016 and wanted nothing more than to go to a second Games.

Despite the disappointment, he climbed back into his canoe and headed out on Friday morning to contest the heats of the World Cup, knowing that no matter how well he paddled it would have no bearing on his chances of getting to Tokyo.

That door, he believed, was now firmly closed.

Little did he know as he paddled back to the boat sheds after his race, having qualified for the semifinal, that good news awaited him. Overnight the IOC had confirmed that he would be offered one of the two tripartite quotas available to canoe sprint athletes for Tokyo.

At first he had no idea why the ICF was congratulating him. We showed his coach the email from the IOC. Joaquim Lobo would be going to his second Olympics for Mozambique.

'I can't believe it; this is like a dream for me,' a stunned Lobo said.

'I trained so hard after Rio but I have had such a difficult season because of Covid and other things, so now I'm just so happy.

'Yesterday was not a good day so today I just wanted to do my best and see what happens and now I am going to Tokyo.'

The second tripartite quota would be going to Amado Cruz, a 33 year old kayak paddler from Belize, who would make history in Tokyo by becoming his country's first ever canoeist at an Olympic Games.

Five years ago Lobo and C2 partner Mussa Chamaune were the first paddlers from Mozambique to compete at the Olympics and their experience captured the hearts and minds of fans back home.

'It's very important for Mozambique because the kids there saw us as



Joaquim Lobo racing for Mozambique.

an example. Now we can motivate the kids again to try canoeing,' he said.

'I have had to change my paddling because in Rio I was doing C2 1,000 and now I will do C1 but I will be there again. I can't believe it.'

Tripartite positions are open to athletes from countries that have small teams at an Olympic Games.

Six Olympic quotas were up for grabs and six different countries booked their tickets for Tokyo on the final day on Friday.

Lithuania, Croatia, Portugal, China, Moldova and host nation Russia were the final pieces of the Olympic jigsaw after an international qualification process severely disrupted by the Covid 19 pandemic.

Natalia Podolskaia was set for her second Olympics, having competed in the women's K4 at the London Games. On Friday she took the honours in the women's K1 200 in front of an enthusiastic home crowd.

'This is so important for me to be able to get to another Olympic Games,' Podolskaia said.

'Unfortunately I couldn't do it last week in Hungary but it was special to do it here. This is very unusual for us to race here; we usually have to travel to other countries to compete so this was a real pleasure to make everyone happy.'

Portugal's Joana Vasconcelos was also at the London Olympics and, after missing Rio, was set to return to the Olympic fold after winning the women's K1 500.

Serghei Tarnovschi would get the chance to seek redemption in Tokyo five years after the Moldovan was stripped of his bronze medal from the Rio Olympics because of a positive doping test.

The 12 month delay to the Tokyo Games has allowed the 23 year old to serve out his four year ban and return to racing, winning the C1 1,000 quota on Friday.

Tarnovschi grabbed victory in the final stroke, overcoming Russian Iliia Shtokalov in a tense finish. It was Shtokalov who inherited Tarnovschi's bronze medal in Rio after finishing 4th.

'Every athlete is very happy when they get to go to an Olympic Games and this Games has been much harder because of Covid 19,' Tarnovschi said, 'And it's not easy because for four years I didn't have competitions and I trained alone and it was very hard. Some of the athletes welcome me; some don't like me. It's a choice for everyone.'

Croatia's Vanesa Tot, a graduate of the ICF's canoe development programme, would be part of Olympic history when women's canoe made its Games debut in Tokyo. She would also join women's K1 paddler Anamaria Govorcinovic as the first female canoe sprint paddlers to represent Croatia at the Olympics.

'This was one of my best races of my life; now you can see how happy my coach and I are. We can't believe we have made it,' Tot said.

'It's amazing that I have been paddling on the river for just four years and now I come 1st here and I get to go to the Olympics. This morning I said to my coach that I thought I could do it, that I could be 1st.



Dong Zhang.



A Olijnik.



Elos of Portugal.

ICF photographs