

# Sprint races with portages

## Szeged Regatta

It was business as usual for the biggest names in international paracanoe on the opening day of the World Cup in Szeged. Rio 2016 Paralympic gold medallists Emma Wiggs, Curtis McGrath and Serhii Yemelianov were among the athletes to cruise through their respective heats, qualifying directly for finals on Friday and Saturday. Great Britain's Wiggs was untroubled in her heat of the women's KL2 200. 'It was really nice to get out on the course and get racing, the course is phenomenal and it's brilliant to be in the spiritual home of canoeing,' the multiple world champion said. 'It's been a really tough year, been a really hard winter, so we're really looking to peak towards the end of the year so this is a great stepping stone to give us an idea how much the brutal winter has made a difference.' Wiggs would also be racing in the va'a competition in Szeged after the outrigger canoe was added to the programme for Tokyo 2020.

Australia's McGrath would also compete in the va'a but on Thursday he was comfortably winning his heat of the KL2. 'It was fast start call but good hit out, good competition,' McGrath said. 'I was really just trying to nail the start, which I didn't quite do, but I had a good middle of the race and then came home strong. I followed my race plan, so looking forward to see how we go in the final.' Ukraine's Yemelianov showed he has maintained his good form from Rio and last year's world championships, winning his heat of the men's KL3, while British duo Robert Oliver and Jonathan Young also won their KL3 heats.

Paralympic and world champion Curtis McGrath survived a late scare to hold the men's KL2. Italian world champion Estaban Gabriel Farias also scraped through to win men's KL1 but there were no problems for Emma Wiggs and Serhii Yemelianov. Australia's McGrath just held on to beat New Zealand World Cup debutant Scott Martlew in a photo finish. 'It just goes to show New Zealand are producing some very good paddlers,' McGrath said. 'I've never raced against him before. Scott was there when I first jumped in a kayak so it's pretty cool to race against him now. I'm unfit. It was a better result than I thought I would get. I think at the end I was a little bit wobbly.'

'Wiggs was racing a va'a boat for the first time since 2014 and held out team mate and KL1 Paralympic gold medallist Jeanette Chippington and multiple world champion Susan Seipel to take gold in the new Paralympic event. 'It's brilliant to have it in the Games for Tokyo; it's



really great to be racing alongside Jeanette because I know she's a world class athlete so, to have both of us on the podium, it's the first time ever and a bit of a dream of mine because she's my room mate and a total legend,' Wiggs said. 'It certainly makes it a bit more challenging and we are trying to juggle it at the moment. It's going to be a real challenge to try and do two boats and remain competitive in both of them. 'It's something we are going to look to see if we can do it but for me it's a brilliant new challenge.'

In the closest finish of the day Farias had to wait for official confirmation before being declared winner of the KL1 final. The 2017 world champion was given the nod just ahead of Brazil's Luis Carlos Cardoso Da Silva. 'I have been training a lot for this season but my start was not very good,' he said. 'For the first two or three paddles I did not stay with my brain. I saw the line and I pushed a lot at the end. It's a good result for me.'

Yemelianov once again proved he is the premiere men's KL3 paddler in the world, comfortably winning Friday's final to add to his 2016 Paralympic gold medal and 2017 world championship title. 'This is a good result but, at the moment, I am just in my heavy training period of the year,' Yemelianov said. 'I will focus more on speed now ahead of the world championships. I feel good with a lot of strength and energy. It's very hard to be at the top and to climb to the top.' Ukraine's Nataliia Lahutenko won the women's VL3 200 final.

World champions Marko Tomicevic and Milenko Zoric once again showed they were the team to beat in the K2 1,000 after posting another strong win in the Olympic event. Tomicevic and Zoric broke through for the first big win of their career at last year's world championships and were too strong for a world class field in Hungary on Friday afternoon. 'We are focusing on this season first,' Tomicevic said. 'We have the Europeans in Belgrade this year so we would like to show our people what we can do. For us we just focus on our race. Last year was important for us because we had our first big win.'

Cuba's Serguey Torres Madrigal and Fernando Dayan Jorge Enriquez won the men's C2 1,000, following up their World Cup win last year. Tokyo will mark 20 years competing at the top level for Madrigal. 'I feel very good because this year I set my personal best time so I think I can do better,' Madrigal said. 'I think I will finish in Tokyo; it will be my last Olympic Games. It would be nice to finish with a medal.'

Hungary's Anna Kárász showed she is over injury problems which have dogged her career by winning the women's K1 1,000. Kárász said the win was important for her confidence. 'I feel like I'm not afraid of the 1,000 now,' Karasz said. 'It's been a tough year but I feel like I'm really close to my top form now but I need a lot of patience. Of course it is frustrating; it was really hard when you feel like you want to push harder and train harder but your body won't let you.'

The New Zealand women's team, Canada's brutal C2 combination, Spain's versatile men's team and Portugal's Fernando Pimenta shook off any early season nerves with blistering performances on Saturday. Laurence Vincent-Lapointe and Katie Vincent, already red hot favourites for the first ever women's C2 500 Olympic gold medal in Tokyo, took advantage of a strong tail wind to chase down the early Chinese leaders, knocking a massive three seconds off the previous world best time in the process. 'We stuck to our race plan and it was perfect,' Vincent-Lapointe said. 'We knew that the best part of our race is the finish so we really knew we could get them back.'



Emma Wiggs won the women's L2.



The men's L2 went to Curtis McGrath.



Marko Tomicevic and Milenko Zoric took the men's K2 1km.