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Norbert Rózsa: „A supportive environment can enhance success”

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When is the World Championships considered successful for a swimmer, what does it mean exactly? Does the home environment and recognising how to improve one's performance make any difference? Will the 17th FINA World Championships be unique? If so, why? In addition to clinching Olympic gold in Atlanta Norbert Rózsa is a three-time World Championships gold medallist, a silver medallist and two-time bronze medallist. We met him in Duna Arena and asked him to help us find the answers to these questions.

World Championships are always considered highly prestigious events?

Professionally World Champs are almost the same level as Olympics concerning that most Olympic contenders race at World Champs, as well. Needless to say, locally hosted World Champs represent increased excitement and prestige. So far Hungarian swimmers did not have the opportunity to race at the World Championships in front of home crowd. I am glad that our most talented swimmers can now do so and show their extraordinary talents demonstrating how special Hungarian swimming is.

Back then were you in fact sorry about not having the opportunity for locally hosted European or World Championships?

Yes, we were, and we missed it greatly. By cheering, Hungarian fans can create such a powerful atmosphere, a force field which cannot be replaced with anything anywhere. Earlier we were wondering how great it would be to race in front of the home crowd. We have experienced that racing in front of only a couple of Hungarian fans attending an international event is already such a huge thing, it inspires us and gives us strength which enhances a better performance like nothing else can. I don't think it is voracious to say that we have longed for it. This is why we feel extensive joy and pride now.



Line 3 was a good omen for Norbert Rózsa in Atlanta, but who will take the advantage of the opportunity this summer? (Photo: Gábor Simon)

Does the environment matter so much?

When performing our job in the water the environment does not matter directly, because wherever you are you have to overcome water resistance. However, indirectly it does, as a supportive environment adds extra inspiration and strength to athletes. It makes a difference knowing that others are there by our side. I may compare it to when a kid starts walking or cycling. After the beginning the kid starts doing it alone but it is important to know that the parents are there providing security. The kid does not need to be grabbed when taking the steps or riding the bike but the he/she can feel that he/she can rely on those around him/her. This support is irreplaceable.

Some of our top swimmers train in Duna Arena. They do not train in the competition pool but in the warm-up pool. Boglárka Kapás and Dávid Verrasztó shared the view that it is better to reserve the mystery of the competition pool and they tried it but do not train in it.

An athlete who is able to clearly define and describe all those important complementary factors, insights which enhance his/her performance is simply right. This skill is an important element of a swimmer's professional toolkit. Declaring and fulfilling needs recognised through self-awareness contribute to success. When one enters the stage, that's

a totally different situation. It is important for athletes –including Bogi and Dávid as well- to distinguish between training and competition conditions. A contender preparing and working consciously will definitely recognise these.

Were you glad to try the Olympic and the World Champs venues?

Definitely I was, because it was important to try the pool, the water, how cold it was, what „kind’ it was, how fast it was, what it felt like swimming in it. It was necessary to get some first-hand experience of it, to get acquainted with it but these issues are rather subjective. One must decide what is important for him or her.

Such insights may result in hundredths of seconds in the result?

Everything is related to everything else, there are several apparently tiny details and factors which in fact make a huge difference. Knowing that one can benefit from such „minute details” may enhance their performance. When one shall do their very best in less than 60 seconds or in a few minutes it is a quite complex challenge. Everything counts. The morning on the competition day, what mood you woke up in, whether there was anything on the way to the pool from the hotel which distracted your attention or prevented you from focusing, what the air was like, whether the temperature of the water was appropriate for you and so on. All these factors may influence your performance in the positive and negative way alike.

Do you always follow the same routine on competition days?

I do because just like with everything else Tamás Széchy had a system to follow. He made a precise schedule to the minute indicating what we had to do, what we had to focus on minute by minute. If it was a prelim, he wrote the schedule in blue ink, if it was a final, it was written in red. On competition days every little detail was included: waking up, leaving, arriving in the pool, changing clothes, training, warming up, the duration of taking a shower, everything really. In the beginning I myself did not really see the point but later I learnt that it gave such a strong feeling of security, directions and a frame that facilitated efficient and successful racing. It helped me a great deal, also.

This summer swimmers will travel to the World Championships from „home”. What is your advice for them when it comes to competition days?

They train for years and years to do their very best at a tournament. Basically everyone knows what is important for them and what they should do but my piece of advice is something I had to learn, too. They should never take their eyes off the task and shall concentrate on the tournament at all times. Health conditions are vital, if someone gets sick there can be severe issues. For me the ideal scenario was when nothing else mattered but the accommodation and the route from the hotel to the swimming pool during the World Championships. I could do my best when I focused fully on the task. The three key focus areas included implementing the professional plan precisely, maintaining ideal physical and physiological conditions as well as improving myself while staying healthy. It goes without saying that plenty of „tiny” factors are associated with these objectives.



Nowadays, however, it is rather challenging to ignore the outside world when everyone has a smart phone at hand to follow the news, comments, articles on them or on the world at all times.

Today it is more difficult in this respect, however, gadgets can be switched off. I know it is not as easy as that but professional sport is not about this. It requires special attention in several aspects. Back at the time I did not bother about anything but concentrated on the race and related factors. Eating is another important factor not only when racing but during the training period, as well. The afternoon of the finals and the days before are devoted to achieving objectives and concentrating more intensively. Today there is no need to queue as long as earlier, but still on a competition day it is not recommended to waste time lining up in the post office to pay some cheques as it can also be done afterwards.

Do you think the members of the current squad have this humility? How coherent, homogeneous is the current swimming field?

As I see it they have all success and outstanding results require. By her professional attitude and awareness Katinka Hosszú clearly demonstrates where one can get from the start. Their model is well established and successful from professional and marketing aspects alike. Their model is uniform, well organised, determined and suits them. I hope that several members of the national squad will manage to achieve what they aim at.

Do you think the model of Katinka and her team could be an efficient alternative in the international swimming community?

There are multiple alternatives, one of them is theirs for sure, since they are successful pursuing their way. They have made up a completely different preparation method than ours. The goal may be achieved in various ways through totally different professional schemes. Back then we attended significantly fewer competitions, I did sport with a different mechanism. Katinka and her team are successful, their results confirm their efforts so I guess many people follow them.

Katinka Hosszú is probably the key figure of the Hungarian women's team while László Cseh is the protagonist of men's swimming in Hungary. Do you think they will be the protagonists again?

I expect they both will do their best and achieve outstanding results as usual. Katinka's career is special and it is based on professional foundations. She lives her everyday life accordingly. Laci is an athlete with long years of outstanding performance implying that he does not only work extremely hard for the proper physical conditions but he has extraordinary mental attitude, as well. I keep my fingers crossed for the members of the national team and I hope they will achieve their goals at the World Championships.

When does a contender feel that „I had a good time here” after a tournament? I do not mean results by this.

Speaking for myself -and other success-oriented contenders- I can tell you that competitions are about achieving goals for me. It all came down to it. Basic conditions had to be ensured.

In the swimming pool for instance, it was important that the temperature of the water is appropriate, the comfort of changing rooms and shower cabins shall be guaranteed. Beside the swimming pool, dining facilities and accommodation as well as undisturbed transport services between the accommodation and the swimming pool are also key aspects.

Do you think it will all be provided in Budapest?

I think so. At the moment a huge bunch of people are working hard to provide the expected conditions and facilities for athletes arriving in Budapest. Swimming races will be staged in a highly impressive venue. I have seen several swimming pools around the world so far and compared to those Duna Arena is a great one considering its functions, also, so it would be appropriate for hosting the Olympics, too. The quality of the water is another important aspect and they say it is absolutely fine and the pool is fast. It is quite good news because this way in addition to witnessing brilliant accomplishments we may expect some new world records, also. There is a good chance that it would be a successfully organised, high quality tournament in Budapest. In my opinion we must say thanks to Gyárfás Tamás for getting the right to host the World Championships and Hungary shall be grateful for him for having the new Duna Arena constructed. He is someone who does not need to demonstrate his skills any more. Many thanks also to the different officials and experts of swimming pools. Having organised the European Championships in 2006 and 2010 Hungary is now hosting the World Championships is a venue which will be in use after the event, as well, and it can promote and enhance the activities by younger generations of swimming and aquatics.

For the record, what makes a 50m pool slow or fast?

Key aspects include the quality, chemical composition of the water and the depth of the pool. When someone covers multiple kilometres a day in a particular pool, he or she will know every tile, each square centimetre on the bottom and the sides of the pool. The cohesion between swimmers and the water is so strong that swimmers perceive everything. This is a sophisticated system and mechanism; a swimmer can tell whether a pool is slow or fast after a couple of minutes. You can feel it in the pulling or pushing sections how fast you advance. These are minute details but they make tenths of seconds difference in the result.

Where did you prefer to train?

I liked Komjádi Swimming Pool, that was my HQ, I swam there most often. It matters a lot for a swimmer to train in an environment where everyone is friendly from the mechanic through the doorman to the swimming-master. Komjádi featured such people and the atmosphere was like in a family. Of course you must love what you do in any walk of life, otherwise there is no point in making effort. If you like working or training, you can cope with difficulties better.

You have participated in the World Championships three times so far and returned as a medallist each time. Which one was the most remarkable?

No question, the 1994 World Championships in Rome. I achieved such a result there which meant a lot to me professionally, since I could clinch gold in 100m and 200m breaststroke. In my career 100m and 200m events were usually separated, I always focused on either one

depending on whether my speed or physical fitness was better at the time. In certain periods I focused on training for 100m while other times 200m was the objective. I proved to be successful in both events in Rome, that is why it was a special experience. My first World Championships in Perth were quite notable, too, since a world record can add special feeling to a tournament.

How much do you follow the international field, who could be the most successful swimmers of Duna Arena this summer?

I hope Hungarian ones; I follow them primarily. I hope Katinka would do a similar job as at previous international tournaments but luckily there are some more members of the team with great potential. Laci Cseh, Dani Gyurta, Bogi Kapás, Ajna Késely, Liliána Szilágyi, Dávid Verrasztó, Evelyn Verrasztó are all widely known swimmers. I wish great results and performance for the women's national water polo team led by Attila Bíró as well as for the men's team of Tamás Márcz and to all Hungarian contenders. In addition, spectators and fans may also feel like celebrities having the opportunity to experience athletes' success, what is more, their support creates a such a powerful atmosphere, a force field which cannot be replaced with anything.

Norbert Rózsa

Born on 9 February, 1972 in Dombóvár.

Notable results: Olympic champion (200m breaststroke, 1996 Atlanta), Olympic silver medallist (100m and 200m breaststroke, 1992 Barcelona), world champion (100m breaststroke, 1991 Perth, 100m and 200m breaststroke, 1994 Rome), World Champs silver medallist (200m breaststroke, 1991 Perth), World Champs bronze medallist (4x100m medley relay, 1994 Rome, 1998 Perth, 200m breaststroke, 1998 Perth), European champion (100m breaststroke, 1991 Athens), European Championships silver medallist (200m breaststroke, 1991 Athens), European Championships bronze medallist (4x100m medley, 1991 Athens)