

PREVIEW – SWIMMING

Foro Italico Showdown – Rome 2022 celebrates participation of 46 LEN member federations – 14 individual European Champs from Budapest 2021 to retain their respective titles

After the COVID-19 pandemic halted aquatics for more than a year and following the 35th LEN European Aquatic Championships in the Duna Arena in Budapest 2021 without the cheers from enthusiastic crowds, fans will be back on the stands in Rome to witness the last major long-course showcase of the swimming season with 557 swimmers from 46 LEN federations on the starting blocks.

As for Italy's capital and the magnificent venues in the Foro Italico, it will be the first major international event here after the legendary pool complex hosted the 2009 FINA World Championships. That was the second edition here as Rome also played host in 1994. Now the Eternal City is to stage its second European Championships too, the first was held in 1983.

Back then 30 events were in the programme, now 43 finals are in the schedule – which has been completely reshaped compared to the previous editions. It includes the unique 4x200m mixed free relay, contested only at the European Championships.

More than 550 competitors – Italy, Great Britain and France with large teams

It comes as no surprise that host Italy has entered the largest team and will compete with a total of 57 swimmers. Great Britain (41), France and Poland (both 30) will also arrive with a big team. And there are more populous delegations: Germany (29), Hungary (26), Sweden (25), the Netherlands (23) and Spain (22). A total of 46 of the 52 LEN Member Federations are to send 557 athletes (according to the final entries, however, late withdrawals are still possible).

Last year in Budapest three nations, Great Britain, Italy and Russia continued to dominate. The top three nations combined medal tally (GBR 26, RUS 22, ITA 27) showed overwhelming performances: they took 75 medals altogether, 58% of the medals handed over. In Glasgow 2018 they had 72 medals (55%). For the first time after Berlin 2014, Great Britain topped the medal chart in swimming as they won a record number of titles, 11. Both this number and Italy's 27 medals in total was a record since the mixed relay events have been inaugurated in 2014. GB also set a new record by winning 7 relay titles out of 9 (finished 7-2-0 in relays, Russia was 2-2-1, Italy 0-1-7, Netherlands 0-3-0). With Russia being banned from this event, host Italy and Great Britain may have a chance to come up even stronger.

Though putting things in perspective while talking about dominance – these countries' success is nowhere next to what happened here in Rome in 1983. That was the edition where the East German females managed to produce the most dominating performance by a single nation in history. They not only swept all female titles (15/15) but came 1-2 in all 12 individual events. (Though a decade later painful revelations proved what everyone had suspected back then.)

Youngsters and veterans

A 14 year-old young lady from Kosovo, **Hana Beiqi** will be the youngest competitor in the field, she was born on 8 September 2008. Among the men, Italy's **Lorenzo Galossi** is the Benjamin of the meet, he celebrated his 16th birthday on 25 May – and he is fresh from winning two titles (400-800m free) at the junior Europeans in Otopeni.

On the other end of the age-scale, we have three fine swimmers all born in 1988. Spain's Jessica Vall, two-time silver medallist in the 200m breast (2016, 2018) is the oldest among the women, while two former champions, Italy's Fabio Scozzoli and Hungary's David Verraszto are the two veterans among

the men – 15 days separate them, Scozzoli, a 3-time European champion (2010-12), just celebrated his birthday on 3 August, while Verraszto will return to Hungary by the time he turns 34 on 18 August, perhaps with another medal from the 400m IM where he won three straight titles between 2014 and 2018.

Rome 2009 – 7WRs set in this pool in shiny suits are still on the list

Thirteen years ago, at the 2009 FINA World Championships, the Foro Italico witnessed a real flood of world records, thanks to the supersuits which were banned only at the end of that season. Almost all events had a new global mark by the end of the meet (43 new WRs were set in total) and many speculated that those times would remain untouchable for painfully long years as swimmers wouldn't enjoy the aide the shiny suits offered them.

However, naysayers were proved wrong, and the next generations of brilliant athletes started to bring down the 'unbeatable' records in succession. As of today, only 6 world records are still standing in the men's events and only one survived in the women's events from the Rome WR-massacre (in total we have 9 male WRs from the shiny era and 2 female marks).

Here are the times are yet to beat from Rome 2009.

Men

100m free: 46.91 by Cesar Cielo (BRA)

200m free: 1:42.00 by Paul Biedermann (GER)

400m free: 3:40.07 by Paul Biedermann (GER)

800m free: 7:32.12 by Zhang Lin (CHN)

200m back: 1:51.92 by Aaron Peirsol (USA)

4x200m free: 6:58.55 by the United States.

Other 'shiny WRs to beat (not set in Rome): 50m free: 20.91 (by Cielo), 400m IM: 4:03.84 (by Michael Phelps, since 2008, the oldest standing individual WR), 4x100m free: 3:08.24 (by the USA, since 2008).

Women

200m free: 1:52.98 by Federica Pellegrini (ITA)

Other WR from 2009: 200m fly: 2:01.81 by Liu Zige (CHN).

Young 2009 heroes, Sjoestroem and Hosszu are racing for the all-time glory

There are other memories from Rome 2009 which are still with us – as a couple of heroes are still racing from the line of champions 13 years ago. Back then, the Foro Italico saw two young greats making their breakthrough in this very same pool: Sweden's Sarah Sjostrom burst to the scene as a 15 years-old prodigy to clinch the world title in the 100m fly. And Hungary's Katinka Hosszu, rejuvenated in the US, also won her first 'big gold' in the 400m IM, and added two bronzes to her tally which in the meantime has been transformed into a treasury, now featuring 96 medals from major FINA and LEN events (Olympics, Worlds, Europeans, long- and short-course included).

Their goals are different, though. Sjoestroem made a successful return after a serious elbow injury she had suffered in February 2021. After missing the 2021 Europeans in Budapest, she managed to claim a silver medal in the 50m free at the Olympics in Tokyo, then enjoyed a great week at the short-course Worlds in Abu-Dhabi. This year, at the FINA Worlds in Budapest a few weeks ago, Sjoestroem also proved that her speed hit the same gear as in the good old days: she won the 50m free and 50m fly as well as an additional silver medal in the 100m free.

Sjoestroem left the Budapest Worlds in June as the female swimmer with the most individual World

Championship medals, claiming 19 podium spots (10 gold). That leaves her only one shy of the all-time record count, still held by Michael Phelps (20).

And the Swede doesn't seem to stop any time soon and here in Rome she can renew her rivalry with Hosszu for the No 1. spot on the all-time medal ranks at the long-course European Championships. Hosszu retook the lead in Budapest (while Sjostrom was away), now she is 24-23 up, with 15 golds, 6 silvers and 3 bronzes. Though a triple seems a bit unlikely this time as she turned 33 in May, still, she has a theoretical chance to catch up Franziska van Almsick (GER) who amassed the most European titles so far (18). Sjostrom stands with 14 golds, all from individual events, also a record.

As mentioned above, Hosszu has collected 96 medals altogether from the majors (64-20-12) and she announced that her goal was to reach the 100-mark (unprecedented in swimming history). She will have three individual events (200/400IM, 200m fly) and she may swim in the 4x200m relay so she may hit the target and then, perhaps, say goodbye to the sport.

Queen and princess: Quadarella could complete a triple-triple – Pilato faces tough duel against Meilutyte

Local hero Simona Quadarella will certainly be the top favourite in the long-distance freestyle events. The Italian won the 400, 800 and 1500m free in Glasgow 2018 as well as in Budapest 2021 – it was the first time in history that a swimmer achieved these back-to-back triples. Another triple triumph – especially in front of a home crowd – would be the culmination of her career.

Fellow Italian Benedetta Pilato will face a tough duel with Comeback Queen Ruta Meilutyte who had a stunning win at the London Olympics as a 15 years old, then her career started derailing and last year she announced her retirement. However, half years later he made up her mind and while 17-year-old Pilato won the 100m breast, the 25-year-old Lithuanian came first in the 50m at the FINA World Championships. Last May in Budapest Pilato won the dash, crashed the world record in the semis – so it's going to be a mouth-watering clash here in Rome.

Thriller to be continued: Paltrinieri, Romanchuk and Wellbrock in the spotlight

The men's long course freestyle events will once again be one of the Championships' highlights. The only question is: who will be the main actor this time? At Budapest 2021, it was Ukrainian Mykhaylo Romanchuk who claimed the top spot both in the 800 and 1500m freestyle, ahead of Italy's Gregorio Paltrinieri. This spring Romanchuk trained with Wellbrock in a safe shelter, away from his war-ridden Ukrainian home, and that had an impact at the World Championships: after his bronze in the 800m, he also came third in the 5km in his first-ever open water race.

“King Greg”, on the other hand, presented a super show at this year's World Championships, dominated the 1500m free on lane 1 from the beginning of the race and had a shot at World Record too. Besides his 1500m gold in the pool (with a new European record), the 27-year-old add gold and silver in the 10km and 5km open water events respectively.

And there is Florian Wellbrock, the German emperor who did the open water-pool double (10km+1500m free) at the 2019 World Championships in Gwangju, triumphed at the Olympic 10km marathon in Tokyo where he also claimed silver in the 1500m free, and also had a great run this June at the Worlds in Budapest: silver in the 800m, bronze in the 1500m, followed by world titles in the open water event in the relay and over 5km. However, the German was forced to a longer break due to a Covid infection after Budapest, but still has to be considered one of the favourites.

14 Budapest champions hope to retain their titles – but we have the missing icons too

In Rome, new European champions will be crowned in 16 individual events (7 women, 9 men) as the 2021 title-holders will not participate due to different reasons or will compete in different events. However, 14 Budapest champions – out of 34 individual events – will try to retain their respective titles.

Apart from the athletes from Russia and Belarus, whose countries are banned to attend this edition – and among them many did well in Budapest last year –, some other swimming icons will be missed too. We have a longer list of retired greats since Budapest 2021. First gone the six-time Olympic medallist Hungarian **Laszlo Cseh** whose seemingly infinite career included swimming in 10 editions of long-course European Championships between 2002 and 2021, which is an absolute record – just like his 14 long-course individual European titles. Among the ladies, we are already missing Italy's 200m freestyle queen **Federica Pellegrini** (whose world record from Rome 2009 is still standing), and two Dutch greats, **Ranomi Kromowidjojo** and **Femke Heemskerk**, who won three titles in Budapest 2021 between them (Kromowidjojo: 50m free and 50m fly / Heemskerk: 100m free). Romanian Robert Glinta, Spaniard Hugo Gonzalez as well as Pernille Blume from Denmark, champions in 2021, will also skip the Championships.

Ready to rumble: Milak, Ceccon, Popovici, Auboeck & Co. in the hunt for gold

In June, two individual world records were set at the World Champs in Budapest, both by swimmers who are to shine in Rome as well: Kristof Milak and Thomas Ceccon.

Hungary's superstar Kristof Milak has staged an unbeaten run in the 200m fly since Glasgow 2018 (won all long-course titles: Glasgow ECH, Gwangju WCH, Budapest ECH, Tokyo OG, Budapest WCH) – last time in Budapest he added the 100m title at the Europeans and he also won that event at the Worlds this June, plus he bettered his own WR in the 200m. He might not come up with another record-breaking blast in Rome as that event will be the last in his demanding schedule and he is to test himself in the 100m and 200m free too.

Italy's **Thomas Ceccon** stunned the swimming pundits with his victory and his new world record in the 100m back at the Worlds in Budapest, pipping USA's Ryan Murphy and Hunter Armstrong for the title – now he is back for more in front of the home fans.

Another top medal contender is Romania's **David Popovici**, who first hit the headlines last year here in the Foro Italico by sweeping the 50-100-200m free titles at the junior Europeans, smashing junior WRs en route. Then he made his real breakthrough at senior level this June at the World Championships by winning the 100m and 200m freestyle (the first to achieve that double since 1973). The 17-year old had celebrated his first international title at the European Short Course Championships last November in Kazan (200m free). A couple of weeks ago he also entertained the home crowd at the junior Europeans in Otopeni, claiming four gold medals (50/100/200m free and 4x100m free).

Austrian **Felix Auboeck** had won Austria's first ever freestyle medal in Budapest 2021 in the 400m free but in June, again in Budapest, missed the World Championship podium by a tiny margin. Great Britain's **Benjamin Proud** (World gold medallist 50m free), France's 100m World silver and 50m free bronze medallist **Maxime Grousset**, and his compatriot **Analia Pigree**, who entered the international scene at the last short course Europeans and recently won her first medal (bronze 50m back) at World Championships, might step into the limelight too.

Poland also made headlines with sprinters such as **Ksawery Masiuk** (World bronze in the 50m back and a fine medal haul in Otopeni at the junior Europeans) and **Katarzyna Wasick** (World silver, 50m free). Switzerland will be represented by **Jeremy Desplanches**, who surprised many by winning the 200m IM in Glasgow 2018, plus **Maria Ugolkova**, **Roman Mityukjov**, **Noé Ponti** and **Lisa Mamie**.

Israel's **Anastasia Gorbenko** hopes to defend her title in the 200m IM as well as Greece's first ever female champion **Anna Ntountounaki** and France's **Marie Wattel** in the 100m butterfly who shared gold after a dead heat. As for France, the new king of the men's medley, **Leon Marchand** should have added more 'items' to the nation's medal tally – he doubled down the IM events at the Worlds while having a shot at Phelps' WR in the 400m (the longest standing individual mark today) – but he opted to rest before gearing up for the next season.

Thrillers expected with Martinenghi, Kamminga and Wilby – if Peaty stays away

A broken bone prevented **Adam Peaty** from continuing making history. The British Lion was about to expand his winning streak in the 50m and 100m breaststroke events both at the Worlds and now at the Europeans – he started dominating in Berlin 2014, ever since he has always delivered the double at long-course Europeans and World Championships and won back-to-back Olympic titles in Rio and in Tokyo in the 100m. Last time in Budapest he surpassed Laszlo Cseh on the all-time ranks as he completed his 4-gold-rally for the fourth time in a row (50-100m breast, men and mixed medley relays). Thanks to that, he was also set to tie Cseh and Katinka Hosszu for the longest winning streak in the same event: the Hungarian rulers of the medley both had 5 wins in a row (Hosszu in the 400m, Cseh in the 200m and 400m respectively). Peaty had 4 straight wins both in the 50m and 100m but after bypassing the Worlds due to his injury, he may also stay away from Rome. An official announcement is yet to be heard but after his mixed results at the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham (missed the podium in the 100m before roaring to a win in the 50m), he made a hint that he'll be back to the pool only in September.

Peaty, together with Dutchman **Arno Kamminga** and Italy's upcoming breaststroke star **Nicolo Martinenghi** made Europe's only sweep of the medals at the Olympic finals in Tokyo. This meet would be another brilliant chapter of their blazing rivalry – but if Peaty opts to not race in Rome (or not in the individual events), his compatriot and Commonwealth Games champion **James Wilby** may jump in to maintain Britain's stronghold on the European breaststroke titles.

Kamminga, Olympic silver medallist in the 100 and 200m breast, left the World Championships in Budapest with some mixed feelings. After finishing second in the 100m race, the Dutch had to withdraw from all other starts due to illness. In Rome Kamminga, the second swimmer ever to dip under the 58-second threshold in the 100m breast, makes a new attempt to snatch his first European long course title.

But he needs to face a big challenge from Martinenghi who beat him in the 100m and came runner-up in the 50m at the Worlds – and who was also instrumental in Italy's stunning medley relay win over the USA in June.

By the way, that was a perfect ending of Italy's fairy tale-like performance as the swimming team produced the nation's best-ever World Championship medal count in the pool with 9 podiums (5-2-2) – was it a preview of what is to come now at the European Championships in their home?