

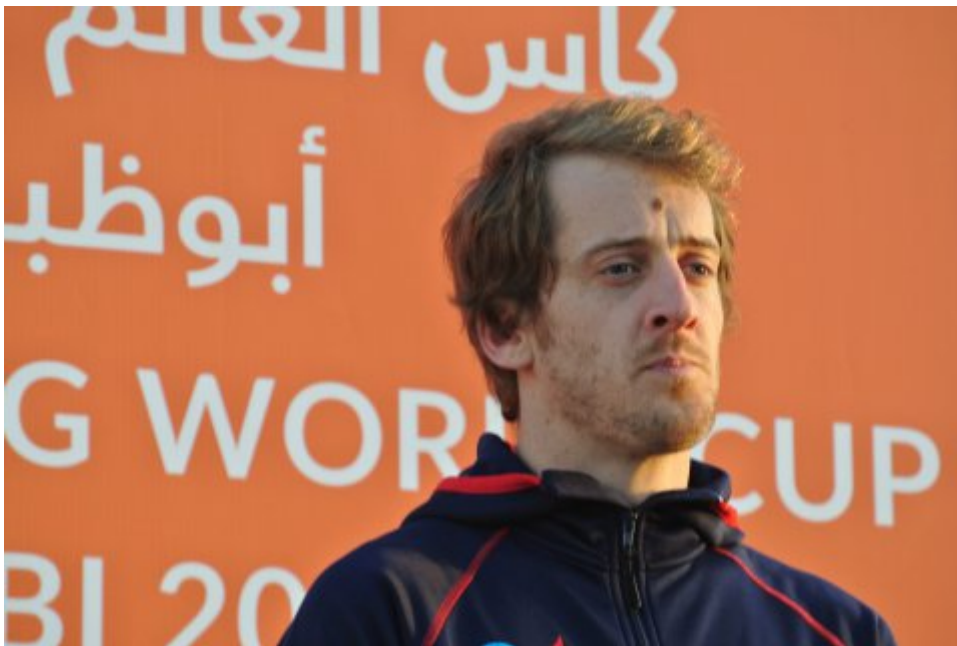
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Abu Dhabi, Day 2: Third title for Hunt; Iffland shines among women

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Under challenging conditions – strong winds almost compromised the men’s competition – the fifth edition of the FINA High Diving World Cup concluded this Saturday in Abu Dhabi (UAE) and consecrated Gary Hunt (GBR), among men, and Rhiannan Iffland (AUS) in the women’s category. For the British star this was the third consecutive title in the competition, while the Australian – world champion in 2017 – got her first World Cup crown.

The men’s gold medal was decided after the initial dive from Jonathan Paredes. The Mexican star, the 25th and last of the field to perform was the leader after Day 1, but his first dive on Saturday was not so successful – in a front 3 somersaults 1 ½ twists in the pike position, he only got 81.00 points from the judges and managed to keep the second place, but it was obvious that this slight mistake would be fatal for Paredes’ golden ambitions. Some minutes earlier, his main rival, Hunt, had perfectly executed an inward 3 somersaults with ½ twist, earning 99.00 points. The difference of 12.25 points from the previous day was gone and the Brit was now leading by 5.75 (291.15 for Hunt, against 285.40 for Paredes).



Gary Hunt (GBR)

In the fourth and last round, the British ace shone in his “signature dive”, the “triple quad” – a back 3 somersaults with 4 twists – collecting a massive 140.40 from the judges. At the same time, Paredes was again shaky, in a final front 4 somersaults 1 ½ twists, only noted 3.5 to 5.0 from the judges. Not only the gold had gone, but the hope of a medal had also vanished. In the end, Gary Hunt totalled 431.55 for the gold, while the Mexican was only seventh in 344.15.

“The conditions were far from ideal up there, but everything went well, including my triple quad. I had no running dive or armstand this year, but the training was really complicated because of the wind. These conditions put a lot of people off – whether we compete or not, that was the question until the very end -, but my experience paid off this time and took me to the victory”, Hunt considered.

About his preparation to the event, he recalled: “I had a ‘rocky’ year, especially during winter, but despite that gold was my objective here. I was having problems with twists, but I compensated that with my strength. At a certain point, I didn’t want to dive as my twists were weak, but I went to the gym and I got stronger. At the end of the season, I am injury-free, and that’s the most important. After Day 1, I was second and this is sometimes good, as you dive more relaxed”.

In contrast, Paredes was frustrated at the end of his effort: “There is no excuses. I don’t know what happened... I was feeling well, but unfortunately the rhythm was somehow ‘broken’ during the training period because of the strong wind. It affected me more than the others... It’s very sad”. Reflecting on his shape coming to the competition, the Mexican was clear: “I was feeling very well, I trained in very good conditions in Mexico, and I did a perfect first day here in Abu Dhabi. But, today was not the day. I hope to get my revenge in Korea and to finally get a medal there. It’s possible and my first day in this competition showed that I can do it”.

With the gold medal settled and Paredes out of the way, the question was on who could get the minor medals. After Day 1, Steve LoBue (USA), the 2017 world champion, was third, but his first combination this Saturday was not so perfect. Executing not so well an inward 3 somersaults with ½ twist, he dropped to fifth. The situation wouldn’t get better in the last round, with his back 3 somersaults and 3 twists (marks between 5.0 and 6.5). LoBue finished in sixth, certainly a modest ranking for the current world champion.



Constantin Popovici (ROU)

In fourth after the first two rounds, Romania's Constantin Popovici – in his first participation in a FINA event – took advantage of his challengers' weaknesses and performing quite solidly he managed to get the silver in 424.65. His two combinations of the day were excellent – firstly, a front 3 somersaults with 1 ½ twists (97.20), and then an impressive armstand back with 3 ½ somersaults and 2 twists, getting the same superb note as Hunt from the judges (140.40). Popovici was a pool diver until 2011 and is competing in his first year as high diver.

Also a former pool diver, Oleksiy Prygorov, from Ukraine, was the bronze medallist in Abu Dhabi, getting his first podium in a FINA event. Prygorov concluded the four-round final with 392.30, with his best combination being a front 4 somersaults with 2 ½ twists in the pike position (126.90 points from the judges).

Michal Navratil (CZE), silver medallist at the 2017 Worlds improved one position from Day 1 and concluded in fourth, while Alessandro De Rose (ITA), third in Budapest last year, was only ninth in Abu Dhabi.



The women's podium

In the women's event, Rhiannan Iffland added the World Cup title to her 2017 world championship gold medal, finishing the competition in Abu Dhabi with 322.95 points. Her supremacy over the four rounds of dives was undisputed, and the lead after Day 1 was never challenged in the final two rounds.

The Australian started quite well in the dive with limited DD, for which she got 70.20, the best score of the 12 participants. In her last combination, an inward 3 somersaults ½ twist in the tuck position (DD 3.8) she received marks from 9.0 to 9.5 from the judges for a total of 102.60, the only dive over 100 points in this final.

Iffland had been second in Abu Dhabi last year – behind Mexican Adriana Jimenez -, but then got the world consecration in Budapest (HUN), leaving Jimenez with the silver. This time, the Latin American was not present (she is injured), so the victory was somehow more predictable.

“The event was great, and the conditions were perfect, at least for the women's competition... I was training hard and preparing really well in Australia for this last event of the season. Surprisingly, I felt quite relaxed at the top of the platform”, confessed Iffland, also winner of the 2018 Red Bull Cliff Diving World Series. “After my gold at the Worlds in 2017, my objective was also to win here in Abu Dhabi. It's hard to think about that when you are on the top of the platform; there, it's more important to focus on how to put together safe and consistent dives”, she continued.



Rhiannan Iffland (AUS) in action

Asked if the absence of Jimenez somehow facilitated her task, the Australian great admitted: “There is always something I think while going to a competition: I cannot change what other divers are doing. I need to focus on my own dives and performances”. For 2019, the gold at the FINA World Championships in Gwangju (KOR) is a “real goal”. “I cannot say that I am the ‘athlete to beat’ at this stage. Each competition is different, is anyone’s game, really!”, Iffland concluded.

Behind Iffland, Lysanne Richard (CAN) also confirmed her second position of Day 1, securing the silver in 285.75. The Canadian ace, winner of the World Cup in 2016, ensured her ranking in the last dive, a front 3 somersaults 1 ½ twists in the pike position, receiving 87.75 points from the judges (the DD was 3.9).

“I am really exciting with this medal. My goal was to be in the top-3, and this happened! I was injured for most of the year in 2017, so 2018 was a challenging season for me. I did well at the Red Bull Cliff Diving Series and I get silver here. I couldn’t expect for more!” confessed Richard.

“Rhiannan was very strong throughout the two days and she has presented very solid dives. For the rest of the group, it’s quite rewarding to see that new girls are joining the high diving family and that the ones being here for a while are presenting more difficult dives. We are like a family and it feels great”, admitted Richard, mother of three children in Montreal.

This World Cup is a qualifying event for the 2019 FINA World Championships and the first eight ranked women are automatically selected. “This is done! I will be in Korea and I really look forward for it. I performed well here, so I am quite optimistic on a good 2019 season”, she concluded.

The bronze medal in Abu Dhabi went to Eleanor Smart (USA), a newcomer to the high diving world. At 23, she is participating at her first FINA event and concluded the four-round final with 277.70.
