



LASER GUIDED

Throughout its recent history, the International Modern Pentathlon Union has not always lived up to its name. It is endeavouring to change that, however, and *SportsPro* went behind the scenes at the UIPM's latest break-out event in Lisbon, Portugal, to talk lasers, Olympics, and the future of modern pentathlon.

By Tom Lloyd

On 18th August 2016, Czech modern pentathlete Barbora Kodedova took her position at the indoor Youth Arena in Deodoro, just outside Rio de Janeiro, clad head to toe in fencing equipment, to compete in her first ever Olympic Games. Kodedova qualified for the Games following a ninth-placed finish in the International Modern Pentathlon Union (UIPM) World Cup in Sarasota earlier in the year, and was the Czech Republic's sole female

competitor in the sport. Ranked 33rd in the world, she finished the Games in 26th place, notching 1230 points overall, after a strong performance during the horse-riding stage of the event.

It therefore came as quite a surprise to see Kodedova competing in the UIPM's second ever Laser Run competition, the federation's latest breakout event, just weeks later. Set up as a means to get more youth competitors into the sport, the event is attended more by those on the fringes of the elite

competition or the very young, more inclined towards the combined event of running and shooting than the pentathlon overall. But such is the essence of the UIPM, and its overwhelming inclusivity of athletes from all levels, to see Olympian Kodedova competing alongside the emerging youth talent that the sport has to offer. And *SportsPro* is also here, in Lisbon, Portugal, at the second edition of the UIPM Laser Run World Championships.

The Laser Run is the latest original creation of the UIPM,

and features athletes from ages eight to 80 competing across the spectrum of classes and standards. The event features only the running and shooting stages of modern pentathlon, with the standard pistol replaced with the eponymous lasers. The event is designed to be fast-paced, compact and energetic, aiming itself more at spectators and youth than purists of de Coubertin's original ideals. Much of the event is set to music, with a DJ on site, and is hosted within metropolitan areas, with audiences milling in and out of competition.

The first edition of the Laser Run World Championships took place in September 2015, in Perpignan France, to widespread acclaim. In glorious sunshine, the home nation ran away with many of the medals, while athletes from Georgia, Mexico, Egypt, the Czech Republic, the USA and Belarus also claimed podium finishes. While the event featured a richly diverse collection of nationalities, it was the UIPM who had brought them altogether. At a first-time event, the federation elected to support the participation and, according to secretary general Shiny Fang, it was an important step in ensuring the new event took off.

"Last year was our first edition, and we took the step to support a lot of countries to come to Perpignan and compete," she says, talking to *SportsPro* in a sun-drenched section of Lisbon's Parque das Nações area, where the competition is taking place.



"We had to pay for the last year, because it is very difficult sometimes to promote a new event to the community, and some of the federations are conservative and struggling financially, so paying for a new event is difficult and they don't want to do it. So instead, we helped get them involved.

"This year, we took a risk and only supported the countries whose federations were really struggling, financially. But it certainly worked. Last year, for example, there was only one athlete at the event who was representing South Africa. At this event, we have 65 athletes from South Africa representing all age ranges. All it took was the initial push and now it is growing phenomenally."

And Fang certainly isn't lying. The Parque das Nações area of Lisbon is one of the Portuguese capitals more modern districts.

Czech modern pentathlete Ondřej Polívka competed at the London Olympic Games in 2012

Entirely redeveloped for the 1998 World Expo, the area plays host to a cable car that runs over the Tejo River, a theatre, and a major shopping centre, and is awash with white stone that stands out in stark contrast to the blue coast. But for the event, these colours are blurred as the green of the South Africans, blue of the French, and bright orange of the Egyptian athletes, among hundreds of others, dominate the setting.

The first and most noticeable aspect of the UIPM Laser Run World Championships is the overwhelming sense of community. As Fang explains, many of these athletes have never met each other before, and those that have will only have done so fleetingly. But the day sees under-11 aged athletes from Egypt trying to communicate with their Georgian counterparts, while South African teens swap their nation's shirts with competitors from Burkina Faso and vice versa.

During one medal ceremony later during the day, a 17-year-old French silver medal winner takes a selfie on the podium with his fellow winners from Egypt and Portugal. When they step down from the stage, they can be heard hurriedly exchanging numbers and discussing when they might next compete against each other. Friendships are certainly made here, and within a niche sport, those that are made look set to continue well into the future. And according to Fang, the youth involvement is



The Laser Run was established to help encourage younger competitors into the sport of modern pentathlon



one of the key elements that help them to market the Laser Run.

“The purpose of this event really is to get more people in to pentathlon,” she confirms. “This is not about separating up pentathlon, but it is about boosting participation across the spectrum. The event is completely original, and anyone can really get involved. There is so much space in this sport to improve, and this gives us this great focus that the youth can really get excited about, it gives them that basis to then build into the wider sport from.”

The foundations of the UIPM Laser Run have certainly been set and, as the weekend progresses, there are few signs that this is only the second edition of the event. But while useful for increasing participation and bringing new eyes to the sport, Fang says the intention is to eventually develop it into a more elite area of the UIPM event portfolio.

“The first thing that’s great about the Laser Run is that it can take place anywhere,” she suggests. “That gives us great flexibility. There is no reason why we cannot turn this into the ultimate urban sport that can tour from major city to major city. But we’d also like to make it bigger and better, and the eventing longer. If you have more people, then you begin to get more elite athletes involved, and once we grow, the event will become stronger and stronger.”

It comes as no surprise to hear Fang talk so openly about the Laser Run. A former synchronised

swimmer and vice competition manager for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, she has a steely determination to see the sport updated quickly. What does come as a surprise, however, is to hear the excitement and vigour with which UIPM president Dr Klaus Schormann talks of the event. A 53-year veteran of the sport, the former teacher has an extensive career within the Olympic movement and beyond. But he is no ordinary president, and it quickly becomes clear that he too shares Fang’s ideals for the modernisation of the “modern” pentathlon.

“This event is all about pentathlon, and how we link our sport together,” he says. “It is a wonderful advertisement for our sport, it promotes it so well. Promotion has to be the last goal of everything we do, and this is a superb example of doing that. It’s brilliant for our sponsors, as well, as it is another event they can put their name to, and I know that we can establish it around the world.

“We will begin to get more elite athletes coming, and when we do it will expand further and make people realise the enjoyment of pentathlon as a whole. We look for feedback from all our countries on how to grow, and this has been incredibly well received.”

Conversation with Schormann is enlightening; it’s uplifting to hear someone with such experience talk so eagerly about the future and his traditional sport’s breakout events. But as it does with Fang, talk inevitably turns to the Olympics,

The introduction of the laser gun has made the sport more flexible and accessible to a wider audience

Masters modern pentathletes compete in the Laser Run



which have taken place just 14 days earlier. And for both of them, Rio marked a big moment in the sport’s modern history.

“Rio was our most visible Olympics yet,” says Schormann. “It is the first time we have had outdoor fencing, which made every sport visible to the spectator. This is often our problem, where something is hidden away, and the spectator loses the plot of the sport. But at Rio it was visible, and that is what made it so successful for us.”

Fang adds: “The structures Rio had in place did well. The fencing outdoor gave the spectators a great idea of what was going on, which is key. It showed the sport in a compact way, and this is really important for us.”

The two days of events in Brazil saw 27 different nations compete, while all six medals across both the men’s and women’s competitions went to six separate nationalities. That diversity shows a measure of globalisation for the sport, and there can be no question that Rio was a success. But Schormann’s real excitement is reserved for four years’ time, where modern pentathlon history looks set to be made.

“Tokyo will be something special, it will really be a turning point in modern pentathlon history,” he says.

“At Tokyo, we are going to have a completely dedicated stadium, just for modern pentathlon. It will have the fencing, the swimming, the shooting, the running and the horse-riding all within one stadium, all taking place at the one time. The athletes will fence, then get changed and go to the swimming, and then they will move to the horse. The



stadium plans are phenomenal and I cannot stress enough how important this innovation is for our sport. It is going to be our theatre.”

According to Schormann, one of modern pentathlon’s most common hurdles is the geographical set-up of the event. With such a complex sport, with so many moving parts, it is often hard to keep spectators engaged, while ensuring the fairest competition for the athletes. But from the plans he shows to *SportsPro*, it looks as if Tokyo may have found the most advanced solution yet.

“Tokyo has been fantastic, and they have really worked hard with us,” he says. “Our negotiations have been fantastic, and we have benefited because everyone on their organising committee speaks my native language, German, so discussions have been great. They are on board with our sport, which is a great feeling for us, and we hope that it will be one of our greatest showcases yet.



“It is now becoming a real priority of ours to work hard with host cities, because the geography is so important to our success. We are already in discussions with the groups behind Los Angeles, Paris, Rome and Budapest for the 2024 Olympics, and we are working hard alongside those bidding to host our World Cups and World Championships. We have to ensure that the people that are bidding are ready to provide the highest level of competition for our sport, and we have to know that we can work with them as well. We have a lot of experience in this sport, and there is little point in working with a city that is unwilling to work well with us, because they will end up having to change things they have done without us.”

While all of this planning is reserved for the top level of the sport, however, it is the Laser Run that truly epitomises the grassroots work that is also being

An artist’s rendering of how the modern pentathlon arena at the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo will look

The venue for the modern pentathlon in Tokyo will be completely dedicated to the sport, with all five events taking place in the same space

done. As Fang says, many of the national federations are struggling financially, and it is to the UIPM that they all ultimately turn. It is a notion that is not lost on the forward-thinking Schormann.

“Overall, our ultimate goal is to make the federations and countries that participate in our sport as stable as possible, and to give them support with trainers and facilities,” he says. “We hope to set up specialist courses to aid with coaching, which will also create more elite competition. We know that working hard at the bottom, will always eventually change the top.

“I have a saying; if you want a long and fulfilled life, then you need many grandchildren. It is exactly the same for us; for us to continue to achieve we have to look after all of our federations.”

With that, Schormann brings the sport full circle. From the Olympics in Rio, Tokyo, and beyond, to the youth promoting energetic grassroots Laser Run event, the UIPM is making great strides towards success. As the sun sets in Lisbon on a second Laser Run event, the athletes from across the globe start the journeys back to their respective countries. Many will return next year, while others will compete in more events over the years to come. But for anyone who has watched modern pentathlon before, change is certainly afoot.