

Farah caps unforgettable year with Europe's top award

This year has been one that Mo Farah will never forget, regardless of what he goes on to achieve in front of his family, friends and many, many fans at the Olympic Games next summer in his home city of London.



The pinnacle of his achievement was, of course, winning the 5000m gold medal at the World Championships but there were so many other outstanding moments for the 2011 European Athlete of the Year to savour.

The first indication that this was going to be a hallmark year came in Birmingham back in February when he set a European indoor record over 5000m, circling 25 laps of the National Indoor Arena in 13:10.60. The following month he defended his 3000m title at the European Athletics

Indoor Championships in Paris.

Moving into the summer, the 28-year-old runner set a European 10,000m record of 26:46.57 when winning at the Diamond League meeting in Eugene, Oregon, in June and in July he ran a 2011 world-leading 5000m of 12:53.11 in Monaco, a time which ranked him second on the European all-time lists for the event as well as being a national record.

However, all this was a prelude to his feats at the World Championships in Daegu. He had to settle for the silver medal in the 10,000m – one of only two defeats in 14 competitions on all surfaces during 2011 – but bounced back to run a tactically perfect race in the 5000m to become the first European runner to win a global title at the event for nearly two decades.

"I can't quite believe it. I pictured the 10,000m on the last lap and I was thinking, 'I came so close then, I'm not going to let anyone pass me,'" reflected a determined and delighted Farah after the race.

After a slow early pace, Farah covered the final lap in a super-quick 52.87 seconds, sinking to his knees in prayer after crossing the line in triumph before being overcome by tears of joy.

"It was key today to wind it up and not let anyone go past me and then dig in after that. I knew (American runner and former world champion) Bernard Lagat coming up from 1500m would have the speed. It was a tactical race, physical at times, but that's the nature of championship races. There was a lot of pace changes, going faster than slower.

"This is something you train for every day, two times a day, three times a day, it is what you want to do as an athlete: win. It's an amazing feeling.

"The race came down to a sprint finish and I am glad I took it. I believe in my coach and that's important mentally. You

have to be strong. When you come so close to gold; you want that gold. You do everything you can," added Farah paying tribute to his mentor, the American distance running guru Alberto Salazar.

Salazar has been working with Farah since March and it's fair to say that Salazar has taken the 2010 European Athletics Championships 5000m and 10,000m gold medallist to another level.

Farah will now have to deal with the pressure of being one of Britain's big hopes for success at the 2012 Olympic Games but the level-headed Londoner seems capable of coping, if anyone can. "I'm going to have a couple of weeks of break and then just start the winter season slowly. You've got to forget about what you've done this year and just focus on 2012, it's going to be a big year but I'm looking forward to it and I aim to stay positive," said Farah after his last race of the season, a win over two miles on the road in Newcastle in September.

"A lot of people are talking about London. It's great that the Olympics are on our doorstep, but at the same time we're guaranteed nothing, as you saw in the 10,000m (in Daegu)."

At the time of writing, Farah has still not decided on whether he will use the SPAR European Cross Country Championships in December as part of his preparations for the Olympics but if he does run in Velenje it would be an emotional return to the Slovenian city as it was there that he first came to international attention, finishing fifth in the junior race at the 1999 edition of the championship.

Farah also continues a strong tradition of British men taking European Athletics' top accolade.

He joins Linford Christie, Colin Jackson, two-time winner Jonathan Edwards, Dwain Chambers and Phillips Idowu on the roll of honour after being named European Athlete of the Year.

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Smiles and spikes marks are Savinova's symbols of success

Middle-distance runner Mariya Savinova has become the fourth Russian woman – after her compatriots Irina Privalova, Svetlana Masterkova and Yelena Isinbayeva – to be honoured as the European Athlete of the Year presented by MONDO.

The highlight of Savinova's splendid year, in which she only lost one of her 10 outings over 800m, was without doubt her victory at the World Championships this summer.

She grabbed the gold medal over two laps of the track in a stunning time of 1:55.87.

Not only did it smash her personal best by more than a second, it was also the fastest time by a European runner for almost nine years.

In addition, it also added to her burgeoning gold medal collection from major championships after victories in 2010 at the European Athletics Championships and World Indoor Championships.

Savinova gave notice that she was also likely to be a medal contender in Daegu after winning the Russian title back in July in a personal best of 1:56.95, which at the time was a world-leading mark.

Not even an untimely, but fortunately mild, bout of food poisoning at the Russian holding camp in Vladivostok just before she departed from Daegu could knock her off track.

She confidently won her heat and semi-final in South Korea but few, including herself, anticipated the fireworks that were to follow in the 800m final on the last day of the Championships.

"I did not expect that the girls would start so quickly, the first 400m was in about 55 seconds (in fact 55.50). I have always run the distance at a steady tempo and I feel more comfortable if the laps are done in about the same time," said Savinova in the wake of her win.

"However, I followed the tactics exactly as I had planned with my coach. In this last 30 metres, when I hit the front for the first time, I almost came to a halt. I just smiled from ear to ear. In fact, I still had a little in reserve.

"I am always very nervous before the start of a big race and it was the same this time but both my husband (1500m runner Aleksey Farnosov) and my coach calmed me down and convinced me that I was stronger than others, that I had an advantage in speed and tactics. I think now that I would have won even if it had been a slow race.

"However, I am always very careful to treat every opponent with respect. We run right next to each other, and you must keep track of everything going on. The slowest girl can knock you out of the race. I have a visible reminder that you cannot afford to lose your concentration: a few small scars on one of my legs.

"It was at a local meeting in the Chelyabinsk arena, I was spiked almost from the gun, then again and again. Now, every time, just before the race, I look at these marks as a reminder to keep very focused and attentive," added Savinova, giving away her secret of how she keeps her mind on the job in hand.

The pictures of the delighted 26-year-old from Chelyabinsk in the Urals crossing the line made some of the most memorable images of the nine days in Daegu.

"I did feel that there was enormous pressure on me at the World Championships itself. The smile appeared unconsciously, it was almost one of relief," revealed Savinova in a recent interview on the Russian athletics federation website www.rusathletics.com.

Other big wins in 2011 included victories at the SPAR European Team Championships, where she helped Russia retain its place as Europe's top athletics nation, and the Samsung Diamond League final in Zurich.

However, like every one of the summer's world champions, she has now turned her thoughts towards the Olympics, in which she will obviously be the long-distance favourite.



Russia has a fine tradition in women's 800m running but there has not been any of her compatriots on the podium, let alone winning, since Masterkova took the gold medal in 1996; the year she was also the European Athlete of the Year.

"The most important thing in my diary is now the Olympics but I know that there will be even higher expectations by the press and the public. I haven't decided what I will do in the indoor season yet, I'm still absorbing what I did this summer," she added, before departing for a deserved end-of-season holiday in Egypt.

Mariya Savinova fact file

1985	13 August – Born in Chelyabinsk, Russia.
2007	First medal at a national level, finishing second in the Russian U23 indoor championships 800m.
2008	Runs third leg for the Sverdlovsk Region team that sets a world indoor 4x800m record of 8:14.53.
2009	Breaks two minutes for the first time at the Russian indoor championships, wins the European Athletics Indoor Championships 800m title, finishes fifth over 800 at the World Championships that summer.
2010	Wins 800m gold medals at both the World Indoor Championships and European Athletics Championships.
2011	Wins the World Championships 800m title in 1:55.87, the fastest European time over two laps of the track for nine years.

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