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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Katie Ledecky adds another 400 gold, with a rival absent and a new one present

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There were any number of ways to frame Katie Ledecky's victory in the women's 400-meter freestyle Saturday at Duna Arena in Budapest. You could zoom in on the 15-year-old Canadian in the next lane over who announced her presence as a serious challenger to Ledecky in the coming years. You could zoom all the way out to Australia to find the world record-holder whose glaring absence loomed over the race.

But Ledecky, 25, didn't become the greatest female distance swimmer in history by focusing on her rivals, present or absent. What Ledecky saw Saturday in her opening event of the FINA World Championships were the things that mattered most:

- Another gold medal, the 16th of her career at world championships, five more than any other female swimmer in history.
- A time, 3 minutes 58.15 seconds, that may have disappointed some who wanted to see her retake the world record she lost to Australian sensation Ariarne Titmus (3:56.40) last month but that broke Ledecky's own meet record from 2017 and represented the fourth-fastest 400 of her decorated career.
- And perhaps most importantly to Ledecky in a year in which she set no specific time goals and aimed only for improvement, a personal-best time for the 2021-22 season by more than a full second.

"I wanted to push to the point of pain tonight," Ledecky, who will also swim the 800 free, 1,500 free and 4x200 free relay, told reporters in Budapest. "It's the fastest I've ever been at worlds, so I'm really happy with that and really excited about the rest of the [meet]. I'm just always trying to improve ... We kind of set out this year [without] setting any time goals, just trying to improve each meet, and so far I've done that, so that's pretty good."

Canadian phenom Summer McIntosh was a strong runner-up, pushing Ledecky throughout and earning the silver in 3:59.39, becoming just the fourth female in history to go under four minutes, along with Titmus, Ledecky and Italy's Federica Pellegrini. McIntosh pulled within a second of Ledecky with 100 meters to go, but Ledecky held her off with a furious finishing kick. Nonetheless, the 400 free at the 2024 Paris Olympics, which had been setting up as a two-way battle for gold between Titmus and Ledecky, may have just gained a third contender.

"I was a little nervous. [McIntosh] hung in there the whole time, so she definitely pushed me a lot," Ledecky said. "... Summer is now in the sub-four-minute club, so it's only going to get harder, these races. So I know I have my work cut out for me. It's a good steppingstone here, to just kind of have a baseline for the next couple years moving [toward] Paris."

American veteran Leah Smith took the bronze medal in 4:02.08, the seventh world championship medal of her career. All told, Team USA won six of the available 15 medals awarded on the opening day of the world championship meet. Seven-time Olympic gold medalist Caeleb Dressel helped the Americans to the gold medal in the 4x100 free relay, though it was Ryan Held's 46.99 split in the second leg that put that race away.

As for the women's 400 free, no one will ever know whether the dynamic would have been altered had Titmus chosen to swim at worlds rather than skip it in favor of July's Commonwealth Games. It's possible Titmus — whose world record last month at the Australian national championships took down Ledecky's mark (3:56.46) from the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics — would have vanquished Ledecky head-to-head the way she did at last summer's Tokyo Olympics.

It's also possible Ledecky, who seems rejuvenated by a move last fall to a new coach (Anthony Nesty) and training group at the University of Florida, would have summoned something extra in the presence of her top rival. Ledecky, though, on Saturday shot down any notion she was motivated by trying to regain her world record from Titmus.

"That wasn't any added motivation," said Ledecky, a seven-time Olympic gold medalist. "A lot of people are like, 'Oh, it must motivate you more.' But I'm always motivated. I'm always excited to see what I can do. ... If I didn't have motivation before, that would've been a problem."