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PENTATHLON PERSONALITIES: IT'S WHEELS OVER REELS FOR OBSTACLE TRAINING ADDICT ?LKE ÖZYÜKSEL



In the latest Pentathlon Personalities interview, Turkish legend ?lke Özyüksel explains why she is putting everything on the line for a fourth shot at the Olympic podium, even going the extra mile on Instagram

?lke Özyüksel spent the lead-up to her 29th birthday on her sick bed. A virus had floored her for over a week but, as her special day approached, Özyüksel perked up. She had a joint birthday party planned and couldn't let her fellow celebrant down...

"I had it with our President. Because it is also his birthday!" Özyüksel reveals. "He gave me a present and I went to dinner with him — along with 70 other athletes from a lot of other sports and the Sports Minister."

So the President of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was at least partly responsible for Özyüksel finally getting back to training. After nearly 10 days of reluctant rest, the now 29-year-old shook off the virus and some rust the morning after the big birthday bash in Ankara. UIPM News caught up

with her later that evening. She was, unsurprisingly, glad to be back.

Özyüksel is many, many things. A multiple-time UIPM Pentathlon World Cup medallist, a World Championships and European Championships medallist, a three-time Olympian, a former Laser Run world record-holder and Youth world champion, and the newly-named CISM Athlete of the Year. Most of all, though, she is a competitor, a fierce one. On her day (and there have been many of those), she is one of the most dynamic and eye-catching talents in Pentathlon.



Photo credit: @cwz_sport

There have been many highs and some lows but as she begins her 30th year, Özyüksel is as hungry as ever. Although she's trying hard to control that.

"The one problem is that I am always rushing," she says. "That's the type of athlete I am. I want to do so much that my trainers, the thing they have to repeat the most to me is: 'slow down, don't rush, not so fast, that's enough'. I am someone in a rush. So they try to slow me down and now I try to slow myself down too.

"Because now with OCR, if I can't make what I want one time on one obstacle, I will work, work, work for four hours on that one piece. Other athletes have come and gone from the gym and I'm still there on that one thing. So I tell myself 'you don't need to go fast, just do it as normal, you're going to be okay'."

She is going to be okay. Even if her sporting journey has made her feel at times that she would not. A teenager who made history by becoming her country's first Olympian in Pentathlon in Rio de Janeiro (BRA) a decade ago, she has walked away from the two subsequent Games with regret and pain, despite placing 5th (Tokyo) and 6th (Paris). She feels that tweaks to the format in both cycles counted against her.

“Everyone can run now, whereas in the past, I could start the Laser Run in like 24th position and finish maybe even 1st or 2nd position. But after [the format changes] sometimes I would start 5th and then finish 7th. I was shocked. In a big way. The hardest thing was that everyone had so much expectation on me, so much pressure. They would say ‘okay, so in the past you would start 22nd and come 3rd. Now you’re starting 5th so you have to be 1st, right?’ But it wasn’t working like that anymore.”

Paris was a stinger, but Özyüksel is all too aware she’s part of a golden generation of female talent and there are only three places on any podium.

“It’s unbelievable. I don’t know how it can be possible to have so many great athletes at the same time,” she says, with despair. “I did everything and I was still so disappointed. For almost one month after Paris I still couldn’t quite handle these feelings. And my trainer as well. Because we had really believed in that medal. But it wasn’t ours.

“So after that competition, the next day I cried, of course. But one month later, when I spoke with my psychologist, I said ‘OK, I’m going to start this new discipline and again I am going to work for that Olympic medal, and again I am going to believe that I can take that Olympic medal’. It’s 20 years of my life now and four years of preparing only for this thing. It’s my life.

“Really soon after the Paris Olympic Games, my mom, she didn’t understand it, she would say ‘you’re so tired. You don’t get time with your friends’. She worried. I said ‘look mom, if I can, I am going to do this until my last day. If my body says you can’t? Okay. But this is my job and I really like it. I am choosing this. So, please, mom, think of me as a normal person in a normal job. This is my job’.”

Özyüksel’s defiance and determination shouldn’t come as a surprise, and least of all to her closest loved ones. Having survived a potentially deadly battle with hemangioma as a child, she found an early calling in sport. Her inspirational story was the subject of a Turkish film in 2019.



Sport was not really in the Özyüksel family DNA until she found running, but the support, particularly from mother Gülcan, is unwavering.

“Mom is like my centre,” she explains. “We are living in the same building, different apartments but the same building. She is all my life. My guardian. So it’s really important to me that she’s thinking and speaking her mind. Sometimes I ask her not to think so much but... this is mom! Always thinking.”

Özyüksel jumped back in after Paris more quickly than some of her contemporaries. While we have seen other leading lights of that Olympic cycle feel their way back to the sport and its newest Obstacle discipline in the off-season, the current world No.13 already has one campaign with the new format under her belt.

“I have spoken with Elodie [Clouvel], she is my good friend. And of course I see my other friends on Instagram,” she says of the likes of Italy’s Elena Micheli and Great Britain’s Kerenza Bryson.

French icon Clouvel is the only other woman of their generation to have recorded top-six finishes in both Tokyo and Paris. The Los Angeles cycle has already begun and top-10 finishes in the 2025 World Championships and European Championships proved Özyüksel had got to grips with Obstacle in a hurry.

This season she hopes for further growth. The 2026 European Championships will be a big focus given it’s on home soil in Istanbul and will serve as a great springboard to the UIPM 2026 Pentathlon World Championships in Guiyang (CHN) in late August, as well as the multi-sport European Games – a crucial qualifier for the Los Angeles 2028 Olympic Games – taking place at the same venue in 2027.



One area where Özyüksel is okay to let her close friend Clouvel streak clear of her is in the world of influencing. While Özyüksel is no slouch with tens of thousands of followers across her social media accounts, she jokes that she probably needs an account manager.

“I really don’t see myself as an influencer — mostly because I cannot use Instagram so well!” she laughs. “I don’t have the time. I have only the time for training and then I come back home and okay, I am on social media but, really, I don’t have the energy for doing reels. Ugh. And doing big posts. I’m so tired already. In Turkish we’re also superstitious about sharing too many positive things. We don’t want to get ‘bad eyes’ or bad luck on us.

“I know that I have to do some work on social media because of my sponsors and because I have fans, but I also know that when my sporting career is finished, I am going to close all my accounts right away. I like to live my life not online.”

There is a legion of real-world fans in her daily life, too. Husband Harun Mihrioğlu is also her Fencing coach. As she embraces this era of her career, she’s still listening to all of the advice — but she has lots to lean back into.

“I have so many supporters: my coaches, my federation, my country, my sponsors, my friends, my teammates — and my President! My government have been great supporters. They like me and they trust me,” she says.

“But all of these people now, they look at me and they don’t see a child any more. I am [29] now. They are looking at me and know that if I think something, it’s true. If I say something, I believe it. There is trust. It’s easier now. We discuss things like friends with everyone. And that makes it easier to improve my performance.

“I am more in charge at this stage of my career. I am a more calm person. Before I was always so excited. So hyped. Shouting. Jumping. But now, actually, I turn to myself. I start to be my own trainer, my own advisor, my own President, my own fan. Inside motivation, it’s so important now. I

am inside my own mind.”

- *The new season starts with UIPM 2026 Pentathlon World Cup Cairo from April 8-12. Follow UIPM / World Pentathlon on your favourite social media and download the UIPM Central app for the latest news and results.*

By Joe Callaghan