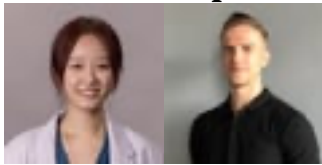


Profile | Paris Olympics: meet Max Maeder, the kite surfer on verge of Singapore's second gold ever

- The 17-year-old world champion has been involved in the sport since he was six, and is being compared to F1 superstar Max Verstappen



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Published: 8:30pm, 8 Aug 2024

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As Singaporean kitesurfer Maximilian Maeder gears up for the final of the men's kite event in sailing, Singapore stands on the cusp of potentially witnessing their first medal – possibly even a gold – at this Olympics.

At just 17 years old, Maeder has already cemented his status as a formidable force in the world of kitesurfing and has made a stunning Olympic debut by advancing all the way to the medal round.

The world champion has been dubbed the sport's Max Verstappen, who himself is a Formula One world champ. And Maeder, who is racing into Singaporean-legend status, describes his fast and furious sport of kite surfing, one of the Olympics newest additions, as Formula One meets chess.

This talented star, currently ranked No 1 in the world in Formula Kite men's, is on the cusp of writing his name in the history books as this biggest race of his life beckons.

Born in 2006 to a Singaporean mother, Maeder was introduced to kitesurfing by his Swiss father at the age of six at his parents' dive resort in Sulawesi, Indonesia.

Four years later, he took up kite-foiling – a more advanced form of the sport – and embarked on his first competitive pro race at the age of 11.

“Flying” on a foiling kiteboard can propel athletes to speeds of up to 80 kilometres per hour.

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Maeder's career took off in 2018, with rapid success at various tournaments. In 2021, he clinched the gold medal in Formula Kite at the Youth Sailing World Championships, further solidifying his dominance by winning the championship twice more.



Asian Games champion Max Maeder was introduced to kitesurfing by his father at the age of six. Photo: Reuters

His ascent continued in 2022 when he secured silver at the Formula Kite World Championships, missing the gold to his biggest rival, Slovenia's Toni Vodisek, who will also be his main competitor in the final of the Paris Olympics.

In 2023, Maeder reclaimed the top spot, winning gold at the World Championships, a title he retained this year. He also won Singapore's first gold medal at the delayed 2022 Asian Games, where he won the kite event.

"I'm so happy to compete here at the Asian Games for the first time, I mean, what an experience," he said post-race. "I was really supported by the team and I really felt the team spirit as well and I think that played a big part."

Despite being one of the world's best, he previously told Reuters he was just an "average teenager".

"Otherwise, I'm your average teenager: I like to listen to music, play video games and I enjoy chess, scroll social media, hanging out with friends, you name it ..." he added.

"I enjoy classical [music] and 'oldies but goodies'. I've been listening to the Bee Gees a lot lately."

Before heading to Paris, the teenager won gold at the 2024 Formula Kite European Championships in Mar Menor, Spain on March 24, carrying on from winning both the 2021 and 2022 editions.

"We can't really take this as performance indicators [for the Olympics] because there are certain things that are bound to change within the next couple of months," he told Straits Times.

"But of course I am very happy with how the winter training has gone, but I think it's a little bit early to say that this will show how the performance is gonna go towards the Olympics."

It was at the championships where his rival, Frenchman Axel Mazella, dubbed him the Verstappen of kite surfing because he won 18 of 20 races to make it to the final, a description Maeder enjoyed.

“Coming from the competitors and having so much respect and admiration, it really means a lot,” he said.

“I must say they definitely don’t make it easy and I’m giving anything and everything and it’s so fun to be out on the water with good athletes.”

After finishing second in the men’s kite opening series in Paris, Maeder advanced directly to the final alongside Vodisek, who topped the fleet.



Toni Vodisek of Slovenia is just one win away from winning the gold medal in Marseille. Photo: Xinhua

The competition format grants the top-ranked competitor in the opening series two wins, while the second-place finisher receives one win.

The first finalist to score three wins will secure the gold medal.

Thus, Vodisek is just one win away from the championship, while Maeder needs two more victories.

As the final approaches at 9.40pm HKT on Thursday, Maeder will face Vodisek and two other competitors emerging from the semi-finals, who will each need three wins to claim the title.

All eyes are on Maeder to see if he can bring home Singapore's first Olympic medal since swimmer Joseph Schooling's gold in the men's 100m butterfly in 2016.