

# The 2013 European Championships are just around the corner!

By Sara B. Dorrien – The Couch Gymnast

In the absence of a team competition, the all-around competition is the most anticipated this year. It is very likely to be a show-down between Romania's Larisa Iordache and Russia's Aliya Mustafina, and for both 2012 Olympians, the title of European Champion would carry redemptive weight.



For Mustafina, the past three European Championships have told very different stories: 2010 was her break-out year in senior level competition, and at the European Championship she very confidently led the her team to a gold medal finish and picked up silvers on uneven bars and beam in the event finals, establishing herself as “one to watch.” Fast forward one year to the 2011 European Championships (after sweeping the 2010 World Championships, including first place in the All-Around competition) where she was fully expected to take gold. However, a bad landing on an Amanar vault had her out of the competition after the first rotation and out of commission for months with an ACL tear. Fast forward one year to the 2012 European Championships, just a few months

shy of the Olympic Games, and still-not-quite-up-to-speed Mustafina failed to qualify for any event finals, putting her full recovery from injury and Olympic competitiveness into question. All things considered, adding a European title (whether in the All Around or an Event Final) to her World and Olympic ones would be a meaningful indeed; not only because it seems rather obvious but also because the competition itself has been a sad one for her the last couple of years.

For Iordache, the championship title would reaffirm what the last European Championships established: she is one of the top gymnasts in the world. The 2012 European Championships marked Larisa's major break-out senior level competition, and she nailed it. Coincidentally, she reflected the pattern of Mustafina in 2010, leading her team to a gold medal finish as a youngster and then picking up two medals in the event finals: a silver on balance beam behind teammate Catalina Ponor, and a gold on floor exercise. She was fully expected to be a major contender in the All-Around competition at the Olympics just a few months later, but a painful heel injury inhibited her performance. For weeks and even days leading up to the competition, it was questionable whether she would even participate. It goes without saying that an All-Around gold in the European Championships would go a long way in erasing the disappointment of not being part of the big story in London (at least in terms of expectations.)

It will be a tight competition between the two. While Mustafina will dominate on uneven bars (nowhere near the score that earned her gold on this event in London, but still very high in the current competitive field; she earned a 15.400 at the Russian Championships early in March) and Iordache will dominate on floor exercise (she earned at 14.425 at the Doha World Cup). Vault and balance beam are up for grabs.

The balance beam, especially, is where the title is likely to be decided. It is where both gymnasts have worked hard to satisfy the new code of points, and though the styles are decidedly different (Iordache is in in a typical Romanian "attack" mode on the beam whereas Mustafina is more graceful) they are both packed with difficulty. At the Doha World Cup, Iordache earned a 15.500 with a D score of 6.7, dazzling the crowd with back-to-back full twists. (Oh, you think one is hard? Watch me do two!) At the Russian Championships, Mustafina earned a 15.450 with a D score of 6.8, impressing the judges with a beautifully choreographed routine and new, interesting, combinations. Although she skipped her Arabian at the Stella Zakharova Cup, reducing her D score to a 6.5, we'll very likely see it at this competition.

The event finals will tell much of the same story, with Russia's and Romania's top gymnasts vying for the top spots. Some of the more interesting competitions may in fact come in the qualification round, when the athletes from those countries compete for the top two spots to represent their countries in the finals rounds. For example, besides Maria Paseka (who will not only easily qualify but probably win vault), any of the other Russian gymnasts could conceivably qualify for vault finals. At this point it's a question of who will go for the most difficulty, whether the coaches will be strategic about the vaults performed to give one athlete over another a better chance, etc.

Speaking of the vault final, as I just mentioned Olympic vault bronze-medalist Maria Paseka is likely to take gold here. She was awarded a 15.750 for her Amanar at the Russian Championships. No one else in the field is likely to perform an Amanar, so as long as she lands on her feet (and we've all seen that's never a guarantee) she should take the gold. Many had speculated about whether Romania's Sandra Izbasu would be performing at these championships, defending her 2012 European Championships vault title (and Olympic vault title). When it was confirmed that she would not be participating, she said that even if she had decided to go ahead with the competition, she wouldn't have performed on vault after taking a significant amount of time off.



So, it's Paseka's title to take. After her, it's anyone's game. Mustafina and Afansyeva have both posted in the low 15's recently, and Lordache is typically consistent if uninspiring with her mid to high 14's on double-Yurchenkos. Another gymnast to keep an eye on here is Switzerland's Giulia Steingruber, who grabbed gold on vault at the French International with a 13.433.

As long as top-form Aliya Mustafina shows up (she's been a little inconsistent in this early part of the season), the uneven bars title will be hers for the taking. As I mentioned before, her Olympic-sized routine isn't needed here, but she's still solidly ahead of the field, posting a 15.400 in the Russian Championship team competition.

The silver and bronze medals will probably be decided between Russia's Anastasia Grishina (though head coach Valentina Rodienenko has recently said some disparaging things about her preparedness, Romania's Larisa Iordache, and Great Britain's Ruby Harrold. Iordache's and Harrold's difficulty scores are comparable, so their battle is likely to come down to execution. Iordache was awarded a 14.525 with a 6.2 D score at Doha, while Harrold gave a very exciting and original performance, earning her a score of 14.5000 with a D score of 6.3 for a silver medal.

Grishina has a slightly less difficult routine and performs less consistently, but if she brings her A-game that day, she could surpass both Iordache and Harrold with higher execution. She won the UB title at the Cottbus Cup with a 14.375 and 6.1 D score, but posted a much higher 15.000 for her performances in both the All-Around and Event Finals at the Russian Championships earlier in March.

Side note: Although Viktoria Komova's absence is unfortunate, it's nice that it boosts Grishina's chances of medaling. Grishina is a very good bar-worker (she's the reigning European silver-medalist) but the two-gymnast-per-country rule always makes her qualification to this event in particular rather precarious. If Komova were present, it's likely that she would nab that other spot and Grishina would be sitting out.

Iordache and Mustafina will battle it out balance beam, meeting again on the apparatus that probably provided the most entertainment during their battle for gold in the All-Around final days before. (If you didn't catch it before, scroll up the page and take a look at their current routines: Both difficult. Very different feel.)

And again, if A-game Grishina shows up, she should contend for a medal here, along with Great Britain's Gabby Jupp (awarded a 14.405 at Doha), Romania's Diana Bulimar (awarded a 14.350 at Doha) and Italy's Carlotta Ferlito (awarded a 14.300 at the French International)

Finally, the floor exercise final will likely be a battle that defines which routines stack up the best in the new Code of Points. (At least until World's.)

The medals will most likely given to Russia's Ksenia Afansyeva, Romania's Larisa Iordache, and Romania's Diana Bulimar, with their distribution to be determined by what kind of day each gymnast is having at the end of a competition week.

While I could watch Ksenia do double lay-outs and whip backs all day and still be impressed, her need to stand for seconds in the corner of the mat, breathing deeply and gracefully flapping her arms up and down before a tumbling pass could hurt her with the 2013-2016 code. She seems to be meeting the challenge a bit better, but it remains to be seen how much the judges will deduct at the upcoming competition or at World's in October, if she's named to the team. You can check out her routine from the French International, where she took gold with a 14.633 here:

The acrobatic and energetic Romanians will fare better with the new “standing in corner of mat and breathing heavily” deduction (both Iordache and Bulimar have incredible endurance), but they should take a hit with artistry. The new Code of Points also calls for “creative choreography” and the routines of both Romanian gymnasts (especially Bulimar) leave room for deduction there. Iordache probably affords the only opportunity to see either of the new “H Difficulty” skills at this competition (a double-twisting double-back and a full twisting double layout), unless Anastasia Grishina decides to get risky.

What they decide to throw, and who will upset the current line-up by throwing things we didn't know they could throw, is soon to be seen!