

ONE MONTH TO GO: THE GOLDEN TRAIL WORLD SERIES SET TO LAUNCH ITS MOST COMPETITIVE SEASON YET

- An exceptional elite field is confirmed, with reigning champions Elhousine Elazzaoui and Madalina Florea back to defend their titles against former GTWS champions, world champions, Olympians and rising stars from 25+ nationalities.
- Competition reaches a new benchmark in 2026, with record pre-registration levels (Top 10 averages: 932 ITRA points men / 801 women), major sporting innovations, and record prize money.
- Zegama-Aizkorri opens the 2026 GTWS season on May 17, celebrating its 25th anniversary and kicking off an eight-race calendar culminating at the Muju Trail Grand Finale (October 24–25).

One month to go until the 2026 Golden Trail World Series (GTWS) gets underway. On May 17, the circuit lifts the curtain in one of the most iconic races in global trail running: **Zegama-Aizkorri** (Spain). [Celebrating its 25th anniversary](#), the season opener sets the tone for what is shaping up to be **one of the most competitive seasons in GTWS history**, bringing together a field of athletes that includes former GTWS champions, GTWS race winners, world champions, international circuits title-holders, Olympians, and winners of the sport's most prestigious events.

Throughout the season, more than **25 nationalities** will be represented across the seven races that form the road to the [Muju Trail Grand Finale](#) in South Korea (October 24–25). Pre-registration figures underline the extraordinary level of competition, with the average ITRA score reaching 932 points for the men's Top 10, while the women's Top 10 averages 801 points.

THE CHAMPIONS ARE BACK

All eyes will once again be on **Elhousine Elazzaoui** (Normal) and **Madalina Florea** (SCOTT). The reigning champions return in 2026 with a clear objective: to defend their respective titles. For Elazzaoui, the stakes are even higher as he targets a third consecutive overall crown.

Nicknamed “The Flying Berber”, Elazzaoui delivered a flawless season in 2025, claiming the overall title with a perfect score of 1,000 points out of 1,000. Another victory would see him become the most successful athlete in the nine-year history of the GTWS. As in previous years, his preparation took place during the winter in the Sahara Desert, where he works as a guide organizing travel experiences. The defending champion will open his 2026 campaign at Zegama-Aizkorri, a race he won last year.

For **Madalina Florea**, the GTWS proved to be a career-defining turning point. After 15 years competing at the highest level across track, road, and trail, the Romanian athlete became a full-time professional thanks to the series. The breakthrough was completed in 2025 when she claimed her first overall GTWS title, crowning one of the strongest and most consistent seasons of her career. Along the way, she secured victories at **Il Golfo dell Isola Trail** (Italy) and in the prologue of the **Ledro Sky Trentino Grand Finale** (Italy).

Florea has spent the early months of 2026 in Kenya, where she undertook a three-months training block. *“I've built consistency, learned from athletes from all over the world, and discovered*

new places, new people and new perspectives,” she wrote on social media shortly after leaving Africa – a mindset that could once again make her a formidable force in the season ahead.

FIERCE RIVALRIES

With the crown on the line, the reigning champions will face fierce opposition. A highly competitive field lines up in 2026, ready to challenge them for the title.

In the men’s field, the most significant threat to Elhousine Elazzaoui comes from **Run2gether On Trail** and its Kenyan trio of **Philemon Kiriago**, **Patrick Kipngeno**, and **Michael Selelo Saoli**. Their collective firepower was on full display at **Sierre-Zinal** in 2025, where they swept the podium. More broadly, last season was defined by a compelling Kenyan-Moroccan rivalry, with Elazzaoui, Kiriago, and Kipngeno claiming **eight of the nine race victories**.

For **Patrick Kipngeno**, the overall title remains the missing piece after finishing runner-up in 2023, 2024, and 2025. Last season, wins at **Kobe Trail** (Japan) and **Jinshanling Great Wall Trail Race** (China) kept the title fight alive until the final race, but Elazzaoui ultimately held firm. **Philemon Kiriago** has followed a similar trajectory, placing third overall for three consecutive seasons. The World Champion in classic mountain running added further highlights in 2025 with victories at **Il Golfo dell Isola** (Italy) and **Sierre-Zinal** (Switzerland).

Kenya’s challenge is further strengthened by **Timothy Kibett** (Salomon Milimani Runners), winner of the **Salomon Pitz Alpine Glacier Trail** (Austria), and **Paul Machoka** (Atletica Saluzzo), both aiming to step up their overall ambitions.

From North America, national champion **Christian Allen** (Nike ACG) and **Taylor Stack** (Brooks) lead the American response to African dominance. Both showed strong form in the second half of last season, with Stack securing a podium finish in Austria.

Europe also brings exceptional talent, led by Italy’s **Luca del Pero** (Scarpa), **Gianluca Ghiano** (Brooks), and **Davide Magnini** (New Balance), a versatile athlete capable of performing at the highest level in ski mountaineering during winter, and trail running in summer. They are joined by Spain’s **Alain Santamaría** (X-Bionic Integrity), Romania’s **Damian Bogdan** (Kailas Fuga), and Switzerland’s **Joey Hadorn** (Salomon), a former World Champion in orienteering.

Pre-registration figures underline just how high the bar has been set. The **Top 10 averages 932 ITRA points**, the **Top 20 sits at 920**, and the **Top 30 at 912** – a clear step up from 2025. Athletes once comfortably inside the global elite around the 900-point mark now find themselves fighting to enter the Top 30, highlighting the exceptional level of performance expected throughout the 2026 season.

A STRONGER WOMEN’S FIELD THAN EVER

Pre-registration data in the women’s field also points to a significant rise in competitive depth. The Top 10 now **averages 801 ITRA points**, with the Top 20 **at 785** and the Top 30 **at 775**. Compared to 2025, the Top 10 alone represents a 10-points increase, underlining both the rapid progression of elite women’s trail running and the growing competitiveness of the international scene.

Among the leading contenders set to challenge **Madalina Florea** are three former GTWS overall champions, multiple GTWS races winners and an Olympian.

Joyce Njeru (Normal) headlines the group of former overall winners. Crowned champion in 2024, she will be aiming to reclaim the title after an inconsistent 2025 campaign that nonetheless showed steady improvement as the season progressed. A true pioneer, Njeru was one of the first Kenyan athletes to transition from mountain to trail running and the first African woman to win the GTWS overall title. Raised helping on her family's farm and then a member of the Kenyan military, she turned professional through the GTWS, reshaping the trajectory of her career.

[Maude Mathys](#), overall winner in 2020 and 2021, made her GTWS debut in 2019 and remains one of the leading contenders for the championship. The Swiss athlete, a four-time winner of *Sierre-Zinal* and the current course record holder, has been one of the most dominant figures in the discipline over the past decade.

Sophia Laukli (Salomon), the 2023 overall winner, returns after a season focused on her Olympic ambitions in cross-country skiing, while **Nienke Brinkman** (Nike ACG) - GTWS champion in 2022 - also makes her comeback following a period dedicated to road marathons, where she secured a bronze medal at the European Championships (2:22:51) and overcome recent injury setbacks.

A strong group of athletes will also be chasing their first overall GTWS title, including **Sara Alonso** (ASICS), **Rosa Lara Feliu** (Brooks), **Caroline Kimutai** (Salomon Milimani Runners), **Anna Gibson** (Brooks), **Miao Yao** (Nike ACG), and **Fabiola Conti** (Kailas Fuga).

Sara Alonso already holds three GTWS race victories to her name: **Marathon du Mont Blanc** in 2022, followed by wins at **Kobe Trail** and **Zegama-Aizkorri** in 2025. Despite a season disrupted by injury, she finished second overall last year, reaffirming her status as one of the most consistent performers on the circuit. Meanwhile, **Caroline Kimutai** enjoyed a dream debut season, winning at the Great Wall of China in her first GTWS appearance before adding another victory at *Sierre-Zinal*.

Anna Gibson realised her Olympic dream last February by competing in the newly introduced ski mountaineering discipline. In 2025, the American claimed national titles in both vertical kilometer and short trail, finished third at the Vertical Kilometer World Championships, and closed the season with an impressive eighth place overall in the GTWS.

Miao Yao, widely regarded as Asia's leading trail talent, will also set her sights on the overall title while continuing her long-term progression towards ultra-distance racing.

ROOKIES READY TO SHINE

Among the new faces, the 2026 season will also shine a spotlight on a new generation of rookies ready to make an immediate impact. Spain's **Fabián Venero** (Salomon) and **Iu Net** (New Balance), alongside Italy's **Isacco Costa** (La Sportiva) already turned heads at the 2025 Grand Finale, finishing eighth, tenth, and eleventh respectively. All three secured Top 3 positions in the Open category, earning a Golden Ticket that grants them a place in the Elite field for 2026.

They are joined by Slovenia's **Lucija Krkoc**, who, while not a newcomer in age, makes her a debut on the GTWS circuit this season. In 2025 she announced herself in style with a fourth-place finish

at the GTWS Grand Finale, where she also claimed victory in the Open category. Czech athlete **Barbora Bukovan** (Salomon) completes the group, arriving after a Top 10 finish at the World Championships and a strong second place in the Open category at the Grand Finale. Like their male counterparts, both athletes have secured direct entry into the 2026 Elite category.

GUEST APPEARANCES TO WATCH

The 2026 season will also welcome a select group of guest athletes competing in specific races, adding an extra layer of competitiveness to the series. Among them is **Kilian Jornet** (NNormal), the only athlete to have competed in the inaugural GTWS edition in 2018 and who continues to take part in selected races today. He will return to Zegama-Aizkorri, where he has claimed **an outstanding 11 victories**, and to Sierrre-Zinal, where he has won on 10 occasions.

Tove Alexandersson (Salomon) will also make a standout appearance at Zegama-Aizkorri and Sierrre-Zinal. The 2025 Short Trail World Champion, is one of the most exceptional endurance athletes of her generation, boasting world titles across six different disciplines and an extraordinary 23 World Championships in orienteering.

The guest line-up is further strengthened by **Lauren Gregory** (Nike ACG), who finished third overall in 2025 after victories at **Tepec Trail** and the Grand Finale; **Andreu Blanes** (Salomon), winner of **Sierrre-Zinal** in 2022; and **Adrien Briffod** (ASICS), an Olympic and European triathlon medalist who made a strong impression with a fourth-place finish at **Sierrre-Zinal** 2025.

RAISING THE STAKES

Beyond the athletes themselves, the [GTWS will roll out a series of key innovations in 2026](#) aimed at further elevating the level of competition. **New uphill, downhill, and sprint segments** will award **bonus points** towards the overall standings, adding an **extra strategic dimension to racing** and sharpening the battle throughout each event.

In another landmark step, and for the first time in the history of the series, the GTWS will introduce a **Team Ranking**, calculated using the results of the top two men and top two women from each team at every race. **More than 15 international brands are set to compete in this inaugural classification, bringing a new layer of collective strategy into play.**

The stakes will also rise financially. **Prize money will increase by 45% compared to 2025, reaching a record total of €451,320**, with €30,000 awarded to the overall winners in both the men's and women's standings.

ONE MONTH TO GO: SEE YOU IN ZEGAMA!

On **May 17**, the legendary Zegama-Aizkorri mountain marathon will raise the curtains on the 2026 Golden Trail World Series. The iconic opener will be broadcast live across WBD platforms (**HBO Max, Eurosport, discovery+, TNT Sports**), and through an extensive global broadcast network, giving fans around the world front-row access to what promises to be one of the most competitive seasons in GTWS history.

For more information about the GTWS, visit: www.goldentrailseries.com
and join our [WhatsApp group for media](#).