

Thursday's sun shone over Neitikoski as the 2026 Paddle Europe Freestyle Competition went on with competitors giving their best on the wave. The spectators have been rowed across the river to give them the best view of the feature; the judges and technical team having occupied the more-easily accessible side of the river. Volunteers are cycling around the forest paths and competitors are ready to cheer for their fellow kayakers – the first surfs can begin. This is the first major competition in any kayaking sport in Finland in this century, and the whole community is super excited to organize the event, kayakers from all over the country coming together to ensure a smoothly run competition.

Men's semi-finals were tight. Finland's Visa Rahkola won the preliminaries with three runs over 1000 points, the years spent on training this exact place definitely paying off. He said that this was a huge confidence boost but reminded all of us that tomorrow's semi-finals will again start from zero. The Current World Champion, France's Tom Dolle made it to finals on the second place, just 1,66 points behind Visa. The coach of the Finnish team and a big fan of the country Bartosz Czauderna of Poland kayaked himself to the third place, having been staying at the venue for over three weeks.

Ireland's David McLure – former European Champion who has experienced the Finnish Lapland's waves first hand – came in fourth place, followed by the current European Champion Tomasz Czaplicki on the fifth place. He was perhaps expected to score higher, but no places in the top 5 are appointed beforehand when the wave is filled with Europe's absolute best. Great Britain will be well represented in the semi-finals, as the next three places go to the country: Matthew Stephenson, the current C1 world champion who will compete tomorrow in both C1 and K1 categories; Gavin Barker, who came 10th in latest World's; and Alan Ward, who has trained a lot in the Hurley wave, which is very similar to Neitikoski. Germany's fresh National Champion Roman Glasman came in ninth place, and Spain's Joaquim Fontane i Maso, who has a long history of great competition success, made it into finals in tenth place. The men's limit for getting into semis was just under 2000 point of 2 combined runs, setting the bar high.

The junior men amazed their fellow kayakers and spectators again with their high-scoring runs and technical skills, all the finalists scoring over 1000 points for their two combined best runs. Germany's 16-year-old Lukas Ramsayer scored over 2200 points in his two best runs, which would have placed him 7th in the men's preliminaries – an incredible show of talent that puts him at the top of the list of expected gold medallists. Great Britain's Matt Cradock and Sam Worgan grabbed the second and third place, both delivering high-scoring runs and executing difficult tricks. France's Artur Genovese got the fourth place and Germany's Felix Ramsayer, the younger brother of Lukas, made it into finals in his first international competition, being the youngest athlete of the finalists.

The C1 women's category started straight from the semi-finals with 8 participants. Poland's Zofia Tula, the current Europe Vice Champion in both C1 and K1 category, took the first place with over 200 points of difference to the second place, which went to Lucia Hacker of

Germany. Another kayaker from Germany, Naya Daruwala, made it into finals in third place, UK's Otilie Burrill-Smith came in fourth and one more German kayaker, Sonja Regina Hacker was fifth. All these athletes will compete in both K1 and C1 categories tomorrow. We also saw some new C1 kayakers participating when Valerie Bertrand and Taru Terni made brave deutes of kayaking a very different boat.

Tomorrow will bring more C1 kayakers with men's semi-finals, and K1 junior women, women and men will compete in semi-finals.