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Ntrismpioti's waiting game yields double gold in Munich

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Karditsa is an easy-going city in the heart of the Greek mainland where the cafes and meze restaurants are full of locals sipping tsipouro and playing backgammon.

The newly-minted golden girl of Greek athletics can be found waiting tables in her family restaurant there, *Steki tis Kyra Giotas*. The 38-year-old double golden girl, that is.

Just like the strategy that took her to victory in the 35km and then the 20km race walks at the Munich 2022 European Athletics Championships, Antigoni Ntrismpioti's route to major championship gold has been one long waiting game.

Ntrismpioti has to fit in her training around her working hours at the family restaurant, often pounding the streets of Karditsa in the dark of the early morning hours. "I train sometimes before I start work and sometimes afterwards," she told European Athletics.

Such an unorthodox regime is a throwback to times when international athletes were obliged to perform 'blue collar' labour-intensive jobs before taking on the world. Jack Holden, the British marathon runner who won European gold in Brussels in 1950 at the age of 43, worked in an iron foundry, smashing pig iron with a sledgehammer in his lunch breaks to build up his strength.

Clearly, the regime has helped Ntrismpioti to develop the mental fortitude that has taken her to an international breakthrough this year at such an advanced age. Fourth in the inaugural women's 35km race walk at the World Athletics Championships in Eugene on 22 July, she lined up in Munich on the second day of the championships with gold firmly in her sights in the heart of Munich old town.

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It took her 24 kilometres, and almost two hours of toil, to pull ahead of Raquel Gonzalez, the Spaniard who had finished one place behind her in Eugene, after the pair worked in tandem to catch and pass long-time leader Viktoria Madarasz of Hungary, who hung on for a richly-deserved bronze medal.

She crossed the line in the sun-baked Odeonsplatz serenaded by Bouzouki music from the public address system in 2:47:00, more than two minutes ahead of Gonzalez.

It was the first international victory of a race walking career she started back in the mists of 2003, when she finished 16th in the U20 race at the European Race Walking Cup – and the first major championship gold for her country in race walking.

"I'm very happy to get my first major medal at 38," she said. "I worked really hard for it but that's why I came here. I came here for the gold. I thought from the start of the race that I was going to win but I had to be patient with the pace. I was confident that I could win the race.

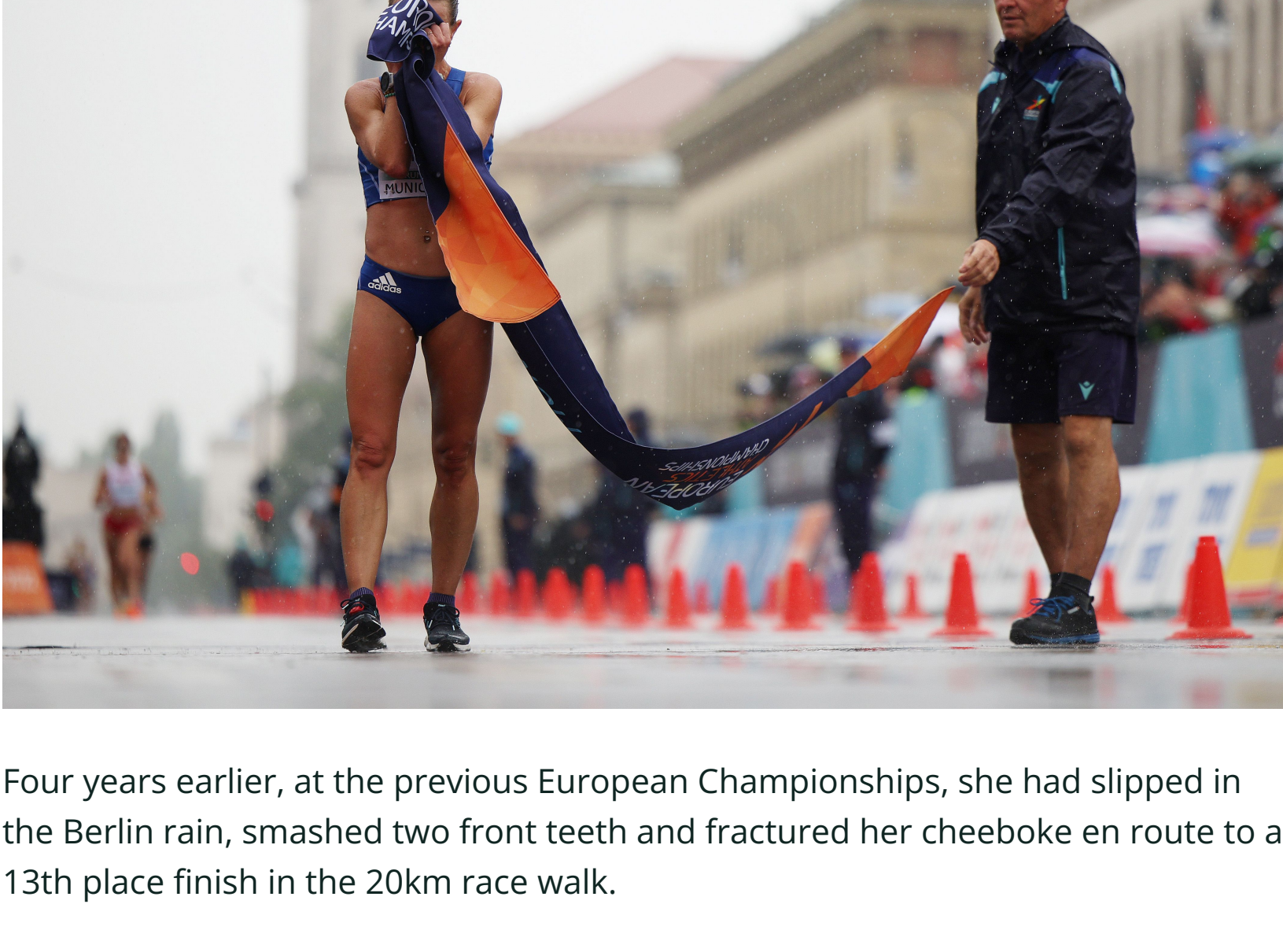
"My husband was out on the course on a scooter. I talked to him when I was chasing the Hungarian girl. I said, 'Don't worry. I have this.' It all came very good for me in the end."

It was the same story when it came to the 20km race walk four days later. On three occasions Ntrismpioti was dropped by her fresher rivals, falling back to 12th place at one point. Three times she clawed her way back.

She did so, in the pouring rain, smiling, waving to the crowds, chatting to a family friend on a scooter, who was relaying every step of the action via FaceTime to her husband, who had been obliged to return home on work duty after the 35km race.

She coolly glanced around at her rivals, checking and assessing each one of them. She had the assured look of a class athlete who knew she was in control.

Thus it proved, as Ntrismpioti kicked clear of Poland's double world silver medallist Katarzyna Zdziebło with three kilometres remaining, winning by 17 seconds in 1:29:03, a personal best.



Four years earlier, at the previous European Championships, she had slipped in the Berlin rain, smashed two front teeth and fractured her cheekbone en route to a 13th place finish in the 20km race walk.

"It's unbelievable," she said. "It was only in the last quarter of the race that I thought I could be in the medals, but not definitely winning. Before that, I was just trying to assess the form of the other girls, trying to work out in what place I might finish. I didn't think this would happen."

It was purely by chance that anything happened at all for Greece's double golden girl as a race walker.

She was playing tennis at school when the PE teacher saw her hurrying to catch the ball, noting how fast she walked. The teacher, Thanasis Deligiannis, also happened to be a race walker and coach.

He suggested that Ntrismpioti should try the event. She resisted until she saw some race walkers in action at her local track.

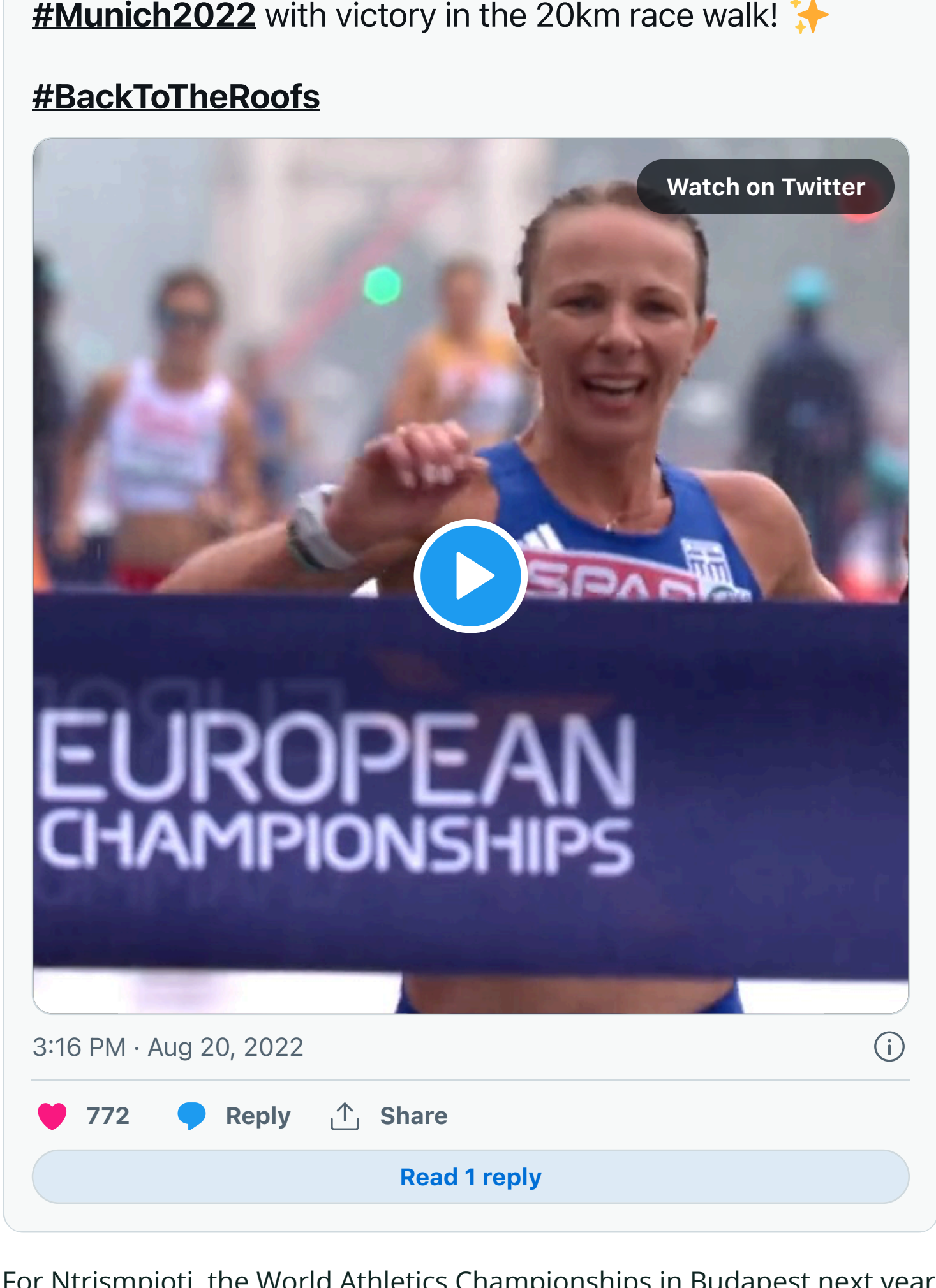
With Deligiannis guiding her, she swiftly reached national level, and then junior international status. She did have an eight-year break after finishing third in the Greek 20km championship race in 2004, concentrating on her studies and getting married.

She returned, initially for fun, in 2012, narrowly missing the Olympic qualifying standard for the 20km event and finishing an encouraging tenth place in the 20km World Athletics Race Walking challenge event.

Still, progress was slow for Ntrismpioti at the 20km distance through the next eight years, her 13th place finish in Berlin and her 15th place finish at the 2016 Olympic Games proving to be her best finishes in major events.

It was after the coronavirus lockdown that Ntrismpioti started to make significant progress, taking eighth place in the Olympic 20km race in Sapporo last year.

"I changed coaches after Doha [at the 2019 World Athletics Championships] and since then all of the work I have been doing with Athanasios Deliyannis has come good," she said. "I am really proud that I have won two international gold medals for my country. I hope it's the start of many more medals for Greek race walking."



For Ntrismpioti, the World Athletics Championships in Budapest next year will present the chance to claim a global at the 35km distance to which she is clearly well suited. Then, in 2024, she will get a shot at Olympic glory, after defending her European crown in Rome at the age of 40.

In the meantime, however, she has a little catching up to do on the work front.

"For my preparation to come to Munich for the European Championships, I was given time off working for three months," Ntrismpioti confessed. "My family stayed back in Karditsa and filled in for me.

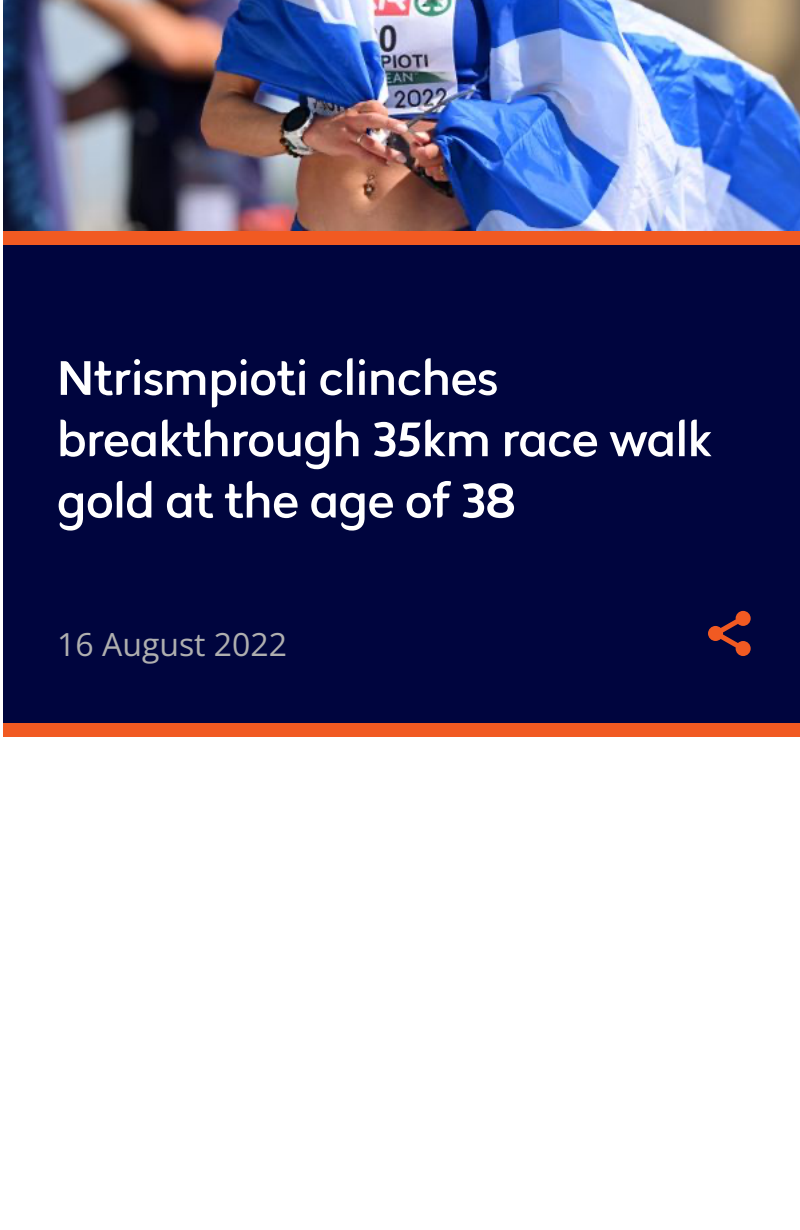
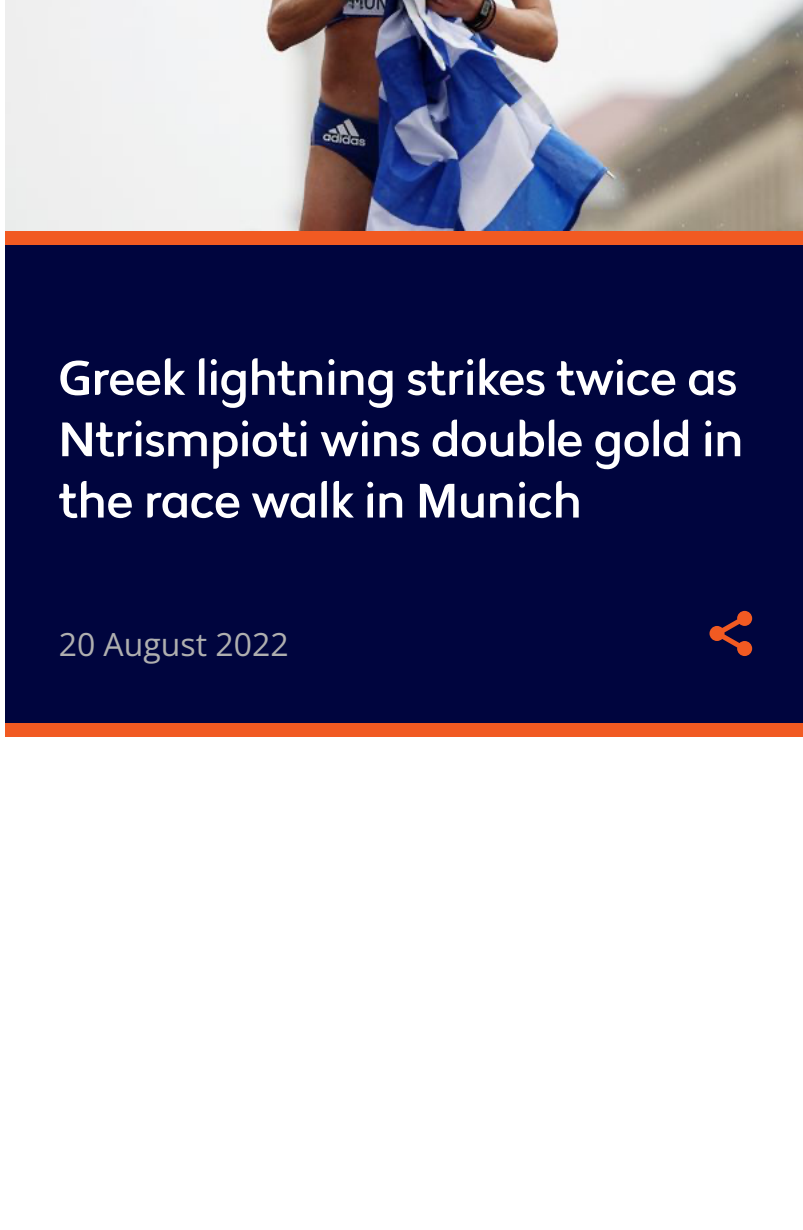
"I'm very grateful to them for that but now I have no holiday. I need to go back and work at our restaurant for the rest of the summer."



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