Afghan boxer dreams of Olympic gold

KABUL: Afghanistan has competed in just 14 Summer Olympic Games, during which the country has notched up two bronze medals, both for Taekwondo. Rahmani knows the track record does not look good, and the odds are against the Afghan boxer, but he doesn't care.

"My goal in taking part in the Tokyo Olympics is to win a gold medal," he said. Ramesh will be competing in the flyweight category.

It's been a long and hard journey for this boxer, who at the tender age of eight became a motorbike mechanic apprentice. He might still be a mechanic today had he not turned on the television eight years ago and seen American boxer, Mike Tyson, in the ring.

"Tyson has been my hero ever since, and I was motivated back then to aim for a goal, that was seeing myself in the Olympic Games."

Ramesh is currently Afghanistan's flyweight boxing champion, an amazing feat considering that training gear and facilities were, and remain, almost nonexistent.

The sport is at the bottom of the ladder when it comes to priorities in the country, crippled by decades of war and again at a crossroads as U.S. forces plan a complete withdrawal.

"We have difficulties in finding training partners for our athletes as we don't have training camps, which makes everything difficult," noted Ramesh's coach, Nesar Ahmad Qarizadah.

Qarizadah said capable Afghan athletes often cannot go to competitions simply because there is no budget.

"It comes down to economic issues," he added.

Now that Ramesh has been given the green light to compete in the Tokyo Games he worries the journey may be delayed or canceled and that there may be a sporting ban in place when the Games resume. During the Taliban rule from the mid to late 1990s sport was completely banned and any potential peace deal with the group could see the ban re-introduced.

"I'm 100 percent concerned because it will be a huge waste of effort and what we've been doing so far," Ramesh said.

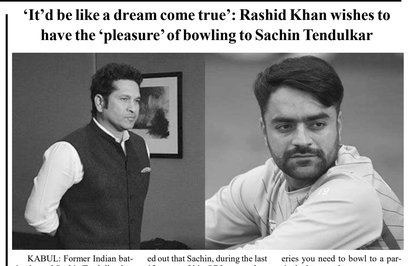
The sports center where Ramesh trains is heavily fortified with armed security against an attack.

Coach Qarizadah confessed that he hopes the Taliban are serious when they talk about compromise.

"I hope the ongoing peace process will give a positive outcome, one that would help us be optimistic about a peaceful country where athletes could carry on with a normal and peaceful life."

The Kabul Times

'It'd be like a dream come true': Rashid Khan wishes to have the 'pleasure' of bowling to Sachin Tendulkar



KABUL: Former Indian batting legend Sachin Tendulkar has been a source of inspiration for numerous cricketers of the present generation. Those who got to share the field with Tendulkar, often call themselves the privileged ones. And the ones who missed that chance, still wish to have that opportunity. The present-day batters admire Sachin's picture-perfect drives while the bowlers wish to bowl against him. Afghanistan's Rashid Khan is one such youngster he dreams of bowling to the Master Blaster Sachin Tendulkar one day.

The Afghan spin sensation spoke about his wish in a recent conversation with Cricwick on Youtube. The interviewer pointed out that Sachin, during the last 13 years of his ODI career, lost his wicket to leg-spinner just once.

In reply, Rashid said: "That is why I want to bowl to him because he hardly used to get out to leg-spin. More than getting him out, it would be a huge pleasure to bowl to someone like Sachin Tendulkar. Getting him out or not out is a different thing, just bowling to him would be like a dream come true."

The leg-spinner said that he had a chance to bowl a few deliveries to former Pakistan captain Inzamam-ul-Haq and added that bowling to legendary batsmen is a 'huge moment'.

"Definitely, as a spinner, you have an idea of the kind of deliveries you need to bowl to a particular batsman because everyone doesn't play the ball the same way. Every batsman plays my leg-spin differently. So, I would need to study really hard how and where to bowl to him. Still, it would be a huge pleasure bowling to him. In 2015, I bowled a few balls to Inzamam-ul-Haq and troubled him a bit. Bowling to legends is a huge moment."

Rashid is currently quarantining in Abu Dhabi before he could join his PSL team Lahore Qalandars for the remainder of the 2021 season. He has opted to put his County contract with Sussex on hold in order to participate in the PSL.

The Kabul Times

Azerbaijan GP: Lewis Hamilton blows race chance with error after mistakenly hitting 'magic' switch

Lewis Hamilton locked up at Turn One and runs off track during the restart.

Lewis Hamilton says flicking a "magic" button on his Mercedes car caused him to blow his chance of an Azerbaijan GP victory, with the world champion inadvertently "switching the brakes off" and missing the first corner just as it appeared he had passed Sergio Perez at the restart.

Hamilton looked to have lucked in at Baku after championship and race leader Max Verstappen crashed out, and - second on the grid for the post-red flag restart - he then got the jump on Perez off the line.

But, in dramatic scenes on an extraordinary afternoon, Hamilton then locked up into Turn One and ran onto the escape road, dropping him way down the order and out of the points.

On team radio, a devastated Hamilton asked his Mercedes team: "Did I leave the magic on? I could have sworn I turned that off."

Lewis Hamilton has explained why he locked up and ran wide at the first corner after the restart, apologising to his Mercedes team.

He then told Sky F1 after the race that he mistakenly pressed the 'magic' button just when it appeared a victory was within his reach.

"On the restart, I think when Checo [Perez] moved over towards me I clipped a switch and it basically switches the brakes off so I just went straight," said Hamilton.

"I had no idea that I'd even touched it."

The 'magic' switch is essentially designed to heat the front tyres on the car before a race start by changing the brake balance. Hamilton likely turned it off before the start before hitting it again by accident.

"He touched a button and the brake balance changed," explained Mercedes boss Toto Wolff. "The brake balance went forward and basically the car doesn't stop."

The mistake means Verstappen retains his four-point championship lead, while Red Bull have stretched their advantage over Mercedes in the constructors' standings as Valtteri Bottas also finished outside the top 10.

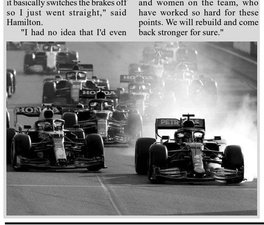
Hamilton said he was "very sorry" to his Mercedes team for the error, having got them in contention despite Red Bull appearing to have a faster package around the Baku street circuit.

"Naturally, it's quite a humbling experience to be honest," added Hamilton to Sky F1's Rachel Brookes.

Anthony Davidson was at the SkyPad to analyse all the best action from a dramatic day at Baku after Sergio Perez won race ahead of Vettel and Gasly.

"We've worked so hard this weekend to come back out of the top 10 and it was looking so good. I put everything on the line, I fought as hard as I could today.

"It's very hard to take. Mostly I'm just very sorry to the men and women on the team, who have worked so hard for these points. We will rebuild and come back stronger for sure."



French Open: Three-time champion Serena Williams stunned in straight sets by Elena Rybakina

Three-time champion Serena Williams was stunned by 21st seed Elena Rybakina in the last 16 at Roland Garros, as the American's bid for a record-equalling 24th Grand Slam singles title was curtailed in straight sets.

Williams was one of just three top-10 players left in the women's draw, although the wait to equal Margaret Court's record haul continues after her latest bid culminated in a 77-minute defeat on Court Philippe Chatrier.

Rybakina - featuring in her first last-16 encounter at a major tournament - outclassed the seventh seed to complete an impressive 6-3 7-5 victory, which guarantees a new Grand Slam finalist from the bottom half of the draw.

The 21-year-old was touted as a dangerous opponent, and she exhibited the form that catapulted her to four WTA singles finals and a Top 20 ranking early in 2020; producing a nerveless display to secure the biggest win of her career.

The talented youngster from Kazakhstan registered four double faults in the opening set, but Williams struggled to penetrate the first serve, and Rybakina converted both break points afforded to her to seal the set 6-3.

The world No 21 tightened her grip on the contest with an early break in the second, but Williams responded emphatically, conjuring up four consecutive winners; sparking a sequence of nine straight points.

"I am so happy with my match, it was amazing. Of course I was nervous; I was not serving that well in the game before, but I am happy that I managed to control them in the end."

Rybakina refused to relent however, regaining the initiative with another break to lead 4-3, which prompted the 23-time Grand Slam champion to throw her arms up in sheer exasperation at her opponent's baseline brilliance.

Williams prolonged the drama by attacking the Kazakh's second serve to level the set, although Rybakina continued to probe; unleashing a series of blistering groundstrokes to move to the cusp of victory with a break to love in the 11th game.

The 39-year-old displayed glimpses of her destructive best early in set two, yet she was largely nullified by Rybakina, who recorded 21 winners to advance to the last eight without relinquishing a set.

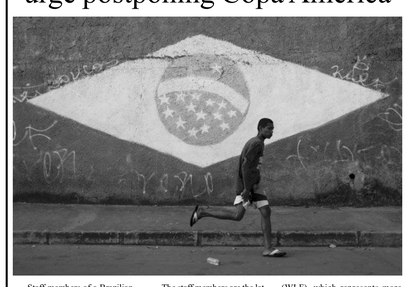
Rybakina will now play her doubles partner Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova, who advanced to the quarter-finals for the first time in a decade after coming from behind to defeat 15th seed Victoria Azarenka.

"It's really incredible I'm still playing tennis 10 years later," admitted Pavlyuchenkova. "It's a surprise for me to be here. I fought for each ball and each point and played very well."

Earlier in the day, Spain's Paula Badosa extended her winning streak on clay to nine matches after closing out a hard-fought 6-4 3-6 6-2 victory over 2019 finalist Marketa Vondrousova on Court Suzanne Lenglen.

Badosa, who claimed her maiden title in Belgrade a fortnight ago, dominated proceedings from the baseline to seal a spot in her maiden Grand Slam quarter-final.

Brazil COVID inquiry staffers urge postponing Copa America



Staff members of a Brazilian Senate inquiry into the country's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic have called for the upcoming Copa America football tournament to be postponed, citing low vaccination rates and the risks of spreading the virus.

In a letter to the country's football team on Sunday, the Senate commission staffers said only 10.77 percent of the population had received first doses of coronavirus vaccines as of Friday across Brazil.

The Senate commission in late April launched its investigation into far-right President Jair Bolsonaro's handling of the pandemic, which has killed more than 472,000 people across the South American nation, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

"Brazil does not offer sanitary security for holding an international tournament of this magnitude. In addition to transmitting a false sense of security and normality, opposite to the reality that Brazilians are living, it would encourage agglomerations of people and set a bad example," the staffers said in their letter.

"We are not against Copa America in Brazil or anywhere else. But we believe the tournament can wait until the country is ready to host it."

The staff members are the latest to raise concerns about plans to hold the international tournament in Brazil, as vaccination rates remain low and public health experts have warned about a potential new wave of infections.

Brazil was unexpectedly chosen last week to host the Copa America by the South American Football Confederation, CONMEBOL, after Colombia was forced to withdraw because of ongoing social unrest while co-host Argentina was ruled out amid soaring coronavirus infection rates.

Bolsonaro, a COVID-19 sceptic who has rejected calls to enact public health measures such as lockdowns to stem the spread of the virus, said "as far as it is up to me, and all the ministers, including the health minister, it is all decided".

But questions continue to swirl about whether the tournament will go ahead, with some players and coaches raising concerns.

On Wednesday, Argentina's coach Lionel Scaloni said: "Brazil is not the best place", while Chile's Uruguayan coach Martin Lasarte described the decision to play the tournament in Brazil as "a huge, giant risk".

The World Leagues Forum (WLF), which represents more than 40 professional leagues and their clubs, also said in an open letter to FIFA and the South American Football Confederation (CONMEBOL) on Saturday that South American players should be allowed to opt out of playing in the tournament.

Nevertheless, Argentina said on Sunday that it would participate in the tournament, which is due to be held from June 13 to July 10.

Argentina "confirms its participation in the Copa America, as is reflected by its sportsmanship throughout history", the country's football association (AFA) said in a statement.

AFA added that it would provide all the "necessary tools to guarantee the specific care" needed to meet health protocols during the Copa.

Meanwhile, Brazilian media reports said this week that the country's players do not want to play in a hastily arranged tournament while they are busy playing to qualify for next year's World Cup.

The captain of the Brazilian team Carlos Casemiro said the squad would make a statement on Tuesday about whether or not they wish to compete in Copa America. **aljazeera**