Alizada: The female Afghan cyclist competing on the Olympic refugee team

KABUL: Masomah Alizada is one of the 29 refugee athletes who will compete at the Tokyo Olympics this summer. She fled to France from Afghanistan after she and her cycling friends were threatened by the Taliban. Now, the 24-year-old wants to inspire other Afghan women to fight for their freedom.

"I don't know if I've realized it yet," says Cherry Communal told InfoMigrants when we reached him on the phone following the announcement that Masomah Alizada was among the 29 athletes headed to the Olympics in Tokyo.

Communal has been training Alizada for the past three years.

Alizada and her family, originally from Afghanistan, arrived in France as refugees in 2017.

They settled in the northern city of Lille.

The news comes as a huge reward for the athlete after several months of intensive training, including at the International Cycling Federation's training center in Switzerland. Now, she will be able to take a brief breather from her training schedule and return to Lille to take exams as part of her civil engineering studies.

Ahead of her journey to Tokyo and the 2021 Olympics will begin. She will first join the rest of the Olympic Refugee Team in Qatar, before they leave for Tokyo on July 23.

A message to Afghanistan's women

Since Alizada started preparing for the games, after she received an IOC Refugee Athlete Scholarship in 2019, she and her coach have become increasingly aware of the symbolic value of her Olympic participation.

"I want to show all the men who thought that cycling isn't a women's thing, that I have made it all the way through to the Olympics. And if I can do it, any woman who wants to be involved in cycling, they can do it, from any country, like Afghanistan.

It's quite simply a passion, it's our choice to wear any kind of clothing, whatever we feel comfortable in," she said in a video interview published as her participation in the Olympics was announced on Tuesday.

Cycling for freedom

Alizada and her family fled to France from their native Afghanistan after she and her cycling friends were threatened by the Taliban. "It was very difficult to go out cycling in sporting gear," she recalled.

"A lot of people felt it was wrong of us and stopped us to threaten and insult us, and threw stones at us."

According to Alizada, the violent reaction was most likely due to the fact the most people had never seen a woman on a bicycle before.

"They thought it was against our culture, and our religion, but that's not true. It's just that it was weird for them to see a woman on a bike for the first time."

Alizada, who is a practicing Muslim, wears a sports hijab under her helmet when she's cycling – a small detail of great symbolic meaning. "For me, the sport in itself is not the main thing here.

The most important thing is that women from her country and other countries in that region will be able to watch a woman who practices their religion riding a bicycle and that it's fine to do that," coach Communal told InfoMigrants in a March interview.

The visibility of women like Alizada has grown all the more important as the Taliban continue to gain ground in Afghanistan. "What will happen to Afghan women if they come to power?," asked coach Communal.

Being a role model for others has sometimes been hard for Alizada, but Communal says he encourages her as much as he can. "I tell her to always think about her father," he told InfoMigrants, pointing to the fact that Alizada's father always defended her and her sister's right to ride a bike when they were attacked for doing so in Afghanistan.

The Kabul Times

Ciro Immobile nets as Roberto Mancini's side start Euro 2020 in style

Italy kicked off Euro 2020 in style with a dominant 3-0 win over Turkey as Ciro Immobile and Lorenzo Insigne both scored in the Group A opener.

Roberto Mancini's side put on an emphatic showing after Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli had opened the tournament singing Italia '90 anthem Nessun Dorma on the pitch pre-match.

Turkey managed to frustrate their opponents for 45 minutes but faltered badly after the break as Merih Demiral put through on his net (53) following a tasty Domenico Berardi cross.

That opened the game up which suited Italy's aggressive and attack-minded style as Immobile (66) and Insigne (79) added further weight to Italy's margin of victory.

It was the first time in 39 European Championship matches that Italy had scored more than two goals in a game.

Mancini's side - who played with great energy off the ball - are now unbeaten in 28 internationals(W23 D5) since going down 1-0 to Portugal in Lisbon in the UEFA Nations League in 2018.

Postponed by a year, this tournament is the biggest sporting event since the coronavirus stopped the world in its tracks and the Italian government decided that the Stadio Olimpico could be filled to 25 per cent capacity, amounting to 15,948 spectators.

The fans witnessed a first half dominated territorially by Italy, who pinned Turkey back deep inside their half.

Senol Gunes' side conceded only three goals in qualifying and you could see why as they were expertly organised in restricting space for Italy's creative players. It took an Italian set piece to create the first big chance but Giorgio Chiellini's expert header was brilliantly tipped over the crossbar by Ugurcan Cakir.

That was one of 13 efforts on goal from Italy in the opening 45 minutes but most of their efforts lacked quality from outside the box with Lorenzo Insigne the most guilty party of firing wayward efforts at goal.

Burak Yilmaz cut an isolated figure in the Turkey attack, only registering seven touches of the ball in the opening half - six fewer touches than Italian goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma, who was a bystander at that end of the pitch.

Mancini kept his team playing at a great tempo after the break and the all-important opening goal, albeit with a helping hand from their opponents. Berardi skipped past his marker down the right and flashed an accurate and powerful ball into the six-yard box that was turned into his own net by the unfortunate Demiral.

Mancini's side went in search of a second goal and Cakir was forced into a sprawling low save to keep out Manuel Locatelli's shot.

Turkey were already beginning to look leggy and Italy struck their second goal on 66 minutes.

The impressive Leonardo Spinazzola's low shot was saved by Cakir and Immobile pounced quicker than his marker on the rebound for his 14th international goal.

Italy were still not finished. Cakir's poor clearance went straight to Berardi and his quick pass sent through Insigne, who curled a fantastic finish into the far corner.

The way the Italians pressed and flowed in the final third will have grabbed plenty of admirers but any team that likes to attack needs a secure base to work from. Chiellini is approaching his 37th birthday in August but he still reads the game like a master of his craft and isn't afraid to put his body on the line when it matters.

He was rarely called into action against such timid opposition but what impressed was his distribution from his centre-back role as he joined in with many attacks that allowed space for his teammates. And when Turkey did find a way through the backline in injury-time, the skipper was on hand to make a goal-saving challenge and celebrated like he scored the winning goal in the final. More performances like this and Italy might be heading in that direction.

Roberto Mancini said: "We played well. With it being the first match, it wasn't easy and we were against a good team. The crowd helped us, and it was crucial for us to move the ball quickly.

"In these games, you need everything. We had help from the crowd, we are happy and I think the team played really well.

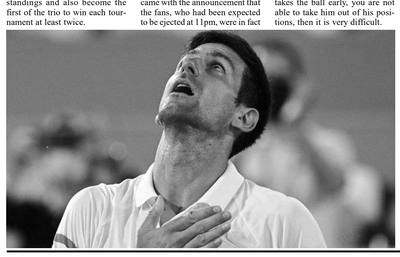
"It was decisive when we moved the ball quickly, managing to always free someone up for the pass. It was important to start well and it's satisfying for us, for the crowd and for all Italians.

"It was a wonderful evening and I hope there will be many more. Wembley? That's a long way away. There are six to go."

Senol Güneş said: "It was not our day. We started to lose the ball and couldn't get forward. Italy were better - we lost to the better team. This is a tournament. We have two more games. We will prepare ourselves for the Wales game first."

Turkey were only the third side since 1980 (when Opta began recording EUROs data) to fail to attempt a shot in the first half of a European Championships match, after Netherlands vs Italy in 2000 and Northern Ireland vs Poland in 2016.

French Open: Novak Djokovic inflicts just the third defeat on Rafael Nadal at Roland Garros with epic semi-final win



World No 1 Novak Djokovic inflicted just the third defeat of Rafael Nadal's French Open dominance to reach his sixth final at Roland Garros on a night of sporting drama.

Djokovic, who also defeated Nadal in the quarter-finals in 2015, sealed a remarkable 3-6 6-3 7-6 (7-4) victory against the 13-time champion in front of a football-style atmosphere on Court Philippe Chatrier.

Nadal had won all 13 of his previous semi-finals but, in a 58th match between the pair that was on a par with almost any that came before, Djokovic found the answers to the greatest challenge in sport to win an extraordinary match.

In the final on Sunday, Djokovic will take on Stefanos Tsitsipas - winner of a five-set contest with Alexander Zverev earlier on Friday - when he can climb to within one title of the Spaniard and Roger Federer at the top of the all-time men's Grand Slam standings and also become the first of the trio to win each tournament at least twice.

Nadal was given a long ovation as he made his exit from the court, leaving Djokovic to try to sum up what had just happened.

"The first thing I want to say is it was my privilege also to be on the court with Rafa in this incredible match," he said. "It is surely the best match I have played here in Paris. It's also the match with the best atmosphere, ambience and energy."

Nadal won the first five games of the match as he looked on course to repeat his drubbing of the Serb last October for the loss of seven games.

But Djokovic seized the momentum, winning the second set and then edging a quite unbelievable 93-minute third set in arguably one of the greatest tie-breaks of all time, having saved a set point.

The crowd of around 5,000 reached a crescendo towards the end of the third set as the Paris Covid-19 curfew loomed.

The biggest cheer of the night came with the announcement that the fans, who had been expected to be ejected at 11pm, were in fact being allowed to stay, meaning the magnificent contest could continue to be graced by a live audience.

However, there was no reprieve for the 35-year-old Nadal, who had won 105 of his previous 107 matches on the Parisian clay, as his seemingly inexhaustible resolve was finally broken.

After breaking for a 4-2 lead the end came quickly as he inflicted the first defeat on the great Spaniard at Roland Garros in six years. Djokovic later spoke about Nadal's dominance on the dirt, saying: "The amount of wins that he has made on this court is incredible. Each time you step on the court with him, you know that you have to kind of climb Mount Everest to win against this guy here." Nadal was left to rue a lack of precision at important moments. He said: "Probably it was not my best day out there. Even if I fought, I put a lot of effort, the position on the shots hasn't been that effective tonight. Against a player like him, that takes the ball early, you are not able to take him out of his positions, then it is very difficult.

NBA play-offs: Phoenix Suns go 3-0 up on Denver Nuggets to move closer to finals

The Phoenix Suns moved closer to the NBA's Western Conference final after going 3-0 up on the Denver Nuggets in their semi-final series.

Devin Booker scored 28 points while Chris Paul had 27 in the 116-102 win.

The Suns have won six consecutive play-off games and are one victory from reaching the conference final for the first time since 2009-10.

Elsewhere the Philadelphia 76ers moved 2-1 ahead in their Eastern Conference semi-final series.

Joel Embiid had 27 points, nine rebounds and eight assists as the visitors beat the Atlanta Hawks 127-111.

The Suns started strongly against the Nuggets in their game and were 21-8 ahead early on and 37-27 up after the first quarter.

The Nuggets brought it back to trail 59-55 at the break but their opponents dominated after that and will aim to secure a clean sweep in the series in Denver on Sunday.

Nikola Jokic had 32 points, 20 rebounds and 10 assists for the Nuggets on the night he received his NBA Most Valuable Player award.

In Atlanta, the 76ers put in a strong third-quarter performance to end the host's 13-game home winning streak.

Embiid and team-mate Ben Simmons each scored 11 points as they outscored the Hawks 34-19 ahead of the final quarter.

Tobias Harris' 22 points saw him hit the 20-point mark for the sixth straight game while Simmons finished with 18 points and seven assists. **bbc**

New Zealand take control of second Test against England after Devon Conway and Will Young fifties

New Zealand put themselves in a strong position in the second Test against England thanks to half-centuries from Devon Conway and Will Young.

After England were bowled out for 303, with Dan Lawrence left stranded on 81 not out, Conway (80) and Young (82) both made the most of some good fortune to help the Black Caps close the second day on 229-3, trailing by just 74.

Fresh from his double ton on debut at Lord's, Conway survived on 22 when the third umpire adjudged that his edge to Zak Crawley had been grounded, much to England's chagrin, while Young was dropped at slip with only seven to his name, and the pair went on share a stand of 122 for the second wicket.

Stuart Broad (2-22) broke the partnership with the second of his two wickets, taking him to 520 in Test cricket and above Courtney Walsh into sixth on the all-time list.

Young fell to what proved to be the last ball of the day from Lawrence (1-8) but, after his third-wicket stand of 92 with Ross Taylor (46no), New Zealand remain in a commanding position going into day three.

The day started with England hoping to get themselves up towards 300 with Lawrence the man expected to have to do most of the work.

Instead, Mark Wood came out firing and ended the first over of the day by drilling Trent Boult through extra cover for four, the first of six boundaries from the England No 9 in the opening five overs.

That flurry took the home side up to 288-7, but Matt Henry (3-78) ended Wood's fun on 41 as he uprooted his off stump, via the inside edge and when Broad (0) feathered Boult behind in the next, England were in danger of falling short of that 300 mark.

However, James Anderson (4), who came out to a standing ovation in his record-breaking 162nd Test match, held on for long enough to allow Lawrence to reach a career-best Test score with a couple of boundaries and enable England to nudge their way up to 303 before the No 11 was lbw to Boult (4-85).

New Zealand lost stand-in captain Tom Latham (6) early, the left-hander caught on the crease and plumb lbw as Broad attacked from around the wicket, but that proved to be the only damage they incurred before lunch.

That only told half the story, though, as England were left distinctly unimpressed after Broad found Conway's outside edge, only for the third umpire - after a soft signal of 'not out' on the field - to adjudge that the ball had been grounded before Crawley claimed the catch, despite replays suggesting the fielder got his fingers under it.

England's frustrations were added to soon after lunch when Young, on seven, edged Olly Stone to first slip, only for Joe Root to juggle and then drop a regulation chance.

It set the tone for an afternoon session in which the home side were made to toil, Conway making Test batting look like the simplest thing in the world in just his second match as he cruised to an 85-ball fifty and Young slowly accumulating as the stand reached three figures on a flat surface.