‘We’re so proud of her’: Afghanistan’s gutsy female cyclists ready to cheer on Masomah Ali Zada

By: Lizzy Davies

hen Masomah Ali Zada makes her Olympic debut at the women’s cycling time trial this week, speeding her way around the 22km route with Mount Fuji in the background, it won’t just be her teammates in Japan cheering her on. In Kabul, where the 25-year-old joined the national squad as a teenager, a small but gutsy group of female cyclists will be glued to the television, willing her to do the best she can.

“I’m really, really proud of her and so are all of the team members, and we are really looking forward to watching her race and seeing her do great,” says Zahla Sarmat, assistant development director of the Afghan cycling federation’s women’s division. For her and her fellow riders, Ali Zada is a source of huge inspiration, even if her sporting success eventually led her to leave Afghanistan and claim asylum in France. She is competing in Tokyo as part of the Refugee Olympic Team.

“One of the really crucial things that she represents is women’s empowerment in Afghanistan because I’ve watched her go through so many struggles as a cyclist, just because she’s a woman,” says Sarmat, 21, who has ridden alongside Ali Zada at home and in competitions overseas.

“And to see her making it that far; it really makes me proud and kind of emotional as well.”

Ali Zada’s moment in the spotlight comes at a delicate time for her fellow cyclists in Afghanistan, where violence has escalated since US President Joe Biden announced that all US troops would be gone by 11 September. In fact, almost all of them have already pulled out, along with the British, and Taliban fighters have launched a series of major offensives, taking districts and important border crossings and encircling several provincial capitals.

The apparent inability of the Afghan army to keep the militants at bay has reportedly prompted US intelligence agencies to revise their estimate of how long it could take for the government to collapse: the current thinking is as little as six months after the departure of the last American troops. Such a scenario would spell disaster for women in Afghanistan, who live in fear of a return to Taliban rule. Even if it doesn’t come to pass, a continued rise in violence could be enough to force Ali Zada’s old teammates in Kabul off the road.

“I really pray for the country to be a safe place for a woman like us, especially [for us to be able] to ride bikes on the streets,” says Rukhsar Habibzai, captain of the women’s team. “But I’m quite sure that the Taliban groups, the [Islamic State] and all of them, will never allow women to even study, to work, to have a job. So how is it possible they will let us do biking? I’m quite sure that they will never allow us; they will just shoot us.” She lets out a grim half-laugh.

Habibzai, 24, fell in love with cycling aged nine, when, as a child growing up in the restive south-eastern province of Ghazni, she somehow managed to learn to ride and found “it gave me a very nice feeling that I am quite free, as if I have wings to fly, as if I have no fear on this earth.”

“It gave me, I can say, the food to my soul. Ever since then biking became a part of my life,” she says. The elders in her family, who moved to Kabul in 2012, were reluctant at first, out of concerns for her safety. Such fears are understandable: female cyclists face both verbal and physical harassment every time they go out. “The men, especially those who saw us for the very first time, they would throw stones at us, they would hit us [with] their cars,” recalls Habibzai.

“Local shopkeepers, beside the roads, would throw their vegetables [at] us; I’ve been hit by potatoes, by apples, and so many other things; whatever they had in their hands to throw at us. And they use very abusive words for us, very embarrassing. So, we would sometimes feel very ashamed of even being a girl.”

To try to avoid the hostility, many of the female riders have got used to going out in the early hours, from about 5am until 8am.

Sarmat has learned to her cost what can happen when she doesn’t. “There was one time that I was attacked,” she says. “It was Ramadan. And because we couldn’t go cycling during the day because everyone was fasting and it was really difficult to ride, especially with the hot weather, we used to go after the dinner, iftar. There was one night I went with one of my male teammates, and there were a couple of guys on the street ... and somebody just pulled me off the bike.”

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Sport Fishing Industry Says ‘Unrealistic’ Pollution Rules Will Put Fleets Out of Business

The California sports fishing industry said Monday that “technically infeasible” state pollution rules effective in 2023 could force many boat owners out of business.

“The sportfishing industry is committed to reducing engine emissions, however the Newsom administration has proposed harbor craft regulations that disproportionally impact family operations by mandating engine technology that has not been developed yet, or in other cases proven safe at sea,” said Ken Franke, president of the Sportfishing Association of California.

He said the California Air Resources Board will require boat engines to be equipped with expensive diesel particulate filters, which are used on farm equipment and trucks. The filters can create severe back pressure on engines, which can then can take hours to restart. By clicking subscribe, you agree to share your email address with Times of San Diego to receive a free newsletter with the latest local news delivered at 8 a.m. daily. You can opt out at any time via an unsubscribe link.

“Boat captains are concerned that under the best-case scenario passengers could be adrift at sea for hours as boat crews try to clear blocked exhaust systems,” said Franke. “No captain wants a boat full of passengers drifting aimlessly at sea.” The sportfishing association said the potential cost of new engines and boats is so significant that boat owners remaining in business will need to double the price of tickets, making offshore fishing and whale watching trips cost prohibitive.

“These regulations treat sportfishing boats unfairly and will sink businesses and coastal economies dependent on outdoor tourism for jobs and tax revenue,” said Jerry Sanders, president of the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce. “There has to be a more flexible and economically feasible solution that protects air quality without putting Californians out of business.” timesofsandiego

Tokyo 2020: Naomi Osaka out of Olympics after losing to Marketa Vondrousova

The 23-year-old had hoped to play a starring role in the Games on the court as well as off it but lighting the Olympic flame at the opening ceremony will be the high point.

Osaka had looked good in her first two matches, particularly against Viktorija Golubic on Monday, but former French Open finalist Vondrousova was a step up level and the young Czech produced an excellent performance under the roof at the Ariake Tennis Park to win 6-1 6-4.

Vondrousova mixed her trademark drop shots with big serves and powerful groundstrokes and defended brilliantly when Osaka got her game going in the second set.

The four-time Grand Slam champion did not move as well as she can, perhaps a legacy of the eight-week break she took for mental health reasons prior to this tournament.

Osaka had won 25 of her last 26 matches on hard courts, winning grand slams at the US Open and Australian Open and, particularly given the early defeat for Wimbledon champion Ashleigh Barty, the stage seemed set for her to claim arguably the biggest title of them all. But instead, it is 22-year-old Vondrousova who becomes the first player through to the quarter-finals, where she will take on either Paula Badosa of Spain or Argentina’s Nadia Podoroska.

Osaka, who had hoped to become the first Japanese tennis player to win Olympic gold, had no answer to Vondrousova in the first set.

She responded well at the start of the second with a break of serve but was quickly pegged back and, although she saved two match points at 5-4, another followed and Osaka sent a backhand wide.

Skysport

Wheelchair sports camp resumes for 37th year after pandemic pause

ALLENDALE, Mich. (WOOD) — As summer continues, many groups that couldn’t hold events last year are getting back to it. That’s the case for one West Michigan sports camp that, except for last year, has lasted decades.

Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital’s Wheelchair and Adaptive Sports program is back with another weeklong camp for young athletes.

“I was super excited when they told me I could come back,” said 17-year-old and 6-year camp participant Lillian Klingenberg.

The camp kicked off Monday and will last until Friday afternoon. It features a multitude of sports including basketball, handball and dodgeball.

Many volunteers are Grand Valley State University students, or in Chris Kelley’s case, a former student. He completed his undergraduate degree at GVSU. He says this camp is great for getting kids in a chair at a younger age as many wheelchair athletes don’t begin participating in sports until later in life.

“The sooner you can get them in a chair and get them the skillset they need to play the sports, the better it is for development and competition later on, and that just leads to more understanding,” Kelley said. “It just grows the sport overall when you can find juniors and develop them from a younger age.”

Kelley was born with osteogenesis imperfecta. The way he described it is that his bones break easily.

An undated courtesy photo of Chris Kelley (middle) as a child.

He hasn’t let that hinder his passion for sports, though. He’s a member of the U.S. collegiate tennis team and the wheelchair tennis team at the University of Michigan, which is also where he’s pursing his graduate degree.

An undated courtesy photo of Chris Kelley and the wheelchair tennis team at the University of Michigan.

“I’ve been able to travel around the world for tennis. I’ve been able to meet a ton of people. Now, I’m starting to get more into instruction, so having that development as a junior, I’ve been able to look around and see the opportunities these kids could have,” Kelley said.

Kelley says that now since his days as a junior are in the past, he’s looking forward to helping the younger participants unlock their potential.

As for Klingenberg, although her time as a participant may be ending, she’s excited to explore other ways to be involved.

“If I do get a chance to volunteer, I definitely will volunteer,” Klingenberg said.

Man Utd and Real Madrid agree £41m Varane transfer

Manchester United have agreed a deal to sign centre-back Raphael Varane from Real Madrid, Goal understands.

It is understood that the two clubs have reached an agreement of £41 million ($57m) for the defender and he is expected to complete his transfer after a medical.

Varane will become United’s second major signing of the summer following the arrival of Jadon Sancho, who United reached an agreement to sign earlier in the month for £73m ($101m).

What do we know?

There was progress made in negotiations between the two clubs over the weekend, with agreements reached on personal terms and a final agreement reached on a fee on Monday.

Goal understands the base fee is £34m ($47m) plus £7m ($9m) in add-ons, meaning United could shell out as much as £41m.

Real Madrid, meanwhile, will pay a solidarity payment of £1m to the defender’s former club Lens.

The deal is now subject to a medical, with Varane set to become United’s second signing of the summer upon its completion.

Why does Solskjaer want Varane?

The United manager has been targeting a right-sided centre-back to strengthen his back line and said after the pre-season friendly defeat to Queens Park Rangers at the weekend that they need to improve defensively.

Harry Maguire has been a rock at the back since arriving and it is likely Varane will partner the England international.

The 28-year-old only had one year left on his deal at Madrid and made it clear he was not interested in signing a new one as he was keen for a new challenge in Manchester. With that in mind, the Liga side have decided to cash in rather than lose him on a free transfer next summer.

What next for United?

Solskjaer is keen on signing a right-back, with discussions having taken place with Kieran Trippier, while a central midfielder is also on the shopping list. However, there is an acceptance that while there are funds, they are not unlimited - and it may not be possible to land all potential targets in the current window.

A deal for Sancho was wrapped up relatively early meaning United have five weeks left of the summer window to work on strengthening and finalising the squad for the new campaign.

Paul Pogba’s future is still up in the air, with club and player yet to agree terms over a new contract. Solskjaer said talks are ongoing with Pogba’s representatives but the club risk losing the midfielder on a free transfer next summer if he does not put pen to paper on a fresh deal.

Goal