



Symbols OF HOPE

This month, when the competitors of the 2016 Rio Olympics complete their opening ceremony laps of the Maracanã stadium, they will be joined by a small group walking without a national flag. **Chris Fitch** reports on the refugee athletes set to make history on the global sporting stage

In the water there is no difference if you are a refugee, a Syrian, or a German,' says Olympic swimmer Yusra Mardini. Friendly and confident, she faces the world's sporting media like a pro, as though she has been a famous name on the international swimming circuit for years. Instead, just one year earlier, this teenager was fleeing for her life, risking a dangerous journey across the Aegean Sea to escape the escalating violence back in her native Syria.

Halfway between the Turkish coast and their destination of Lesbos, Greece, the engine of the flimsy boat she was packed onto with 20 other people suddenly spluttered and died. 'There were people who didn't know how to swim,' recalls Mardini. With the boat completely stranded, and few other options available, she and her sister slid into the water and managed to push it the rest of the way to the island. 'It would

Ibrahim Al-Hussein carries the Olympic torch at the Eleonas refugee camp, Athens

have been shameful if the people on our boat had drowned,' she continues. 'I wasn't going to sit there and complain that I would drown.' Mardini's training schedule had faced unimaginable obstacles even before then. 'Sometimes we couldn't train because of the war,' she reveals. 'Or sometimes you had training, but there was a bomb in the swimming pool.'

Today, safe from her war-torn home and living in Germany, Mardini is joining nine other displaced athletes in what is being described as one of the most remarkable teams ever to compete in Olympic history.

HUMAN RECOGNITION

It has become a regular event, prior to both the Summer and Winter Olympic Games, for the UN to approve a resolution calling for observance of the Olympic Truce, a request for a worldwide 'cessation of hostilities' from seven days before the start of the Olympics until seven days after the end of the Paralympics. In late October last year, as it always does, the resolution - 'Building a peaceful and better world through sport and the Olympic ideal' - passed comfortably, supported by 180 out of 193 UN member states.

However, International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach, an Olympic gold medal-winning former fencing champion, had an extra announcement to make to the United Nations General Assembly in New York that day. 'The IOC is, together with the UNHCR, assisting refugees all over the world, by giving them activity, hope and self-confidence through sport,' he declared. 'At present, none of these athletes would have the chance to participate in the Olympic Games even if qualified from their sport's point of view, because, with their refugee status, they are left without a home country or a National Olympic Committee (NOC) to represent.'

Therefore, the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games will, for the first time, feature an official Refugee Olympic Team (ROT). 'Having no national team to belong to,' continued Bach, 'having no flag to march behind, having no national anthem to be played, these refugee athletes will be welcomed to the Olympic Games with the Olympic flag and with the Olympic anthem.' With the exceptions of the various unique circumstances which saw a handful of 'Independent Olympic Athletes' compete in the Olympic Games of 1992, 2000, and 2012, the 2016 Rio Games mark a unique moment. With the scarcely believable numbers of displaced people worldwide - now standing at more than 65 million - it signals a significant break from merely celebrating sporting prowess.

FIGHT FOR EVERYTHING

Mardini's previous life in war-torn Damascus is a world away from her new home in Berlin, where her talent has been recognised to the extent that she earned a recommendation from the German NOC for a slot in 'Team Refugee'. Now, she's packing for Rio, where she will compete in the women's 200-metre freestyle.

She will be joined in the Rio Olympic Aquatics Stadium by Rami Anis (pictured above), the 100-metre butterfly competitor who fled Aleppo to Ghent, Belgium, via Istanbul and the Greek island of Samos. But while it's these and other escapees from Syria who have led news headlines over the past year, ROT is made up of individuals from many different countries, victims of a wide variety of different conflicts.

Some refugee athletes didn't even need the Olympics to end up in Rio de Janeiro. Popole Misenga and Yolande Mabika first arrived in the iconic city from their native Democratic



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Republic of the Congo (DRC) more than two and a half years ago, to compete in the 2013 World Judo Championships. But after the tournament, instead of returning to their war-torn homeland and a conflict which has claimed an estimated 5.4 million lives, Mabika escaped from the team hotel and fled to Cinco Bocas, a favela in northern Rio which is home to the city's Congolese community. After getting a message to Misenga, she convinced him to also stay and together the pair applied first for asylum and then refugee status in Brazil with the help of the charity Caritas Internationalis.

As youngsters, both Misenga and Mabika were rescued from the country's violent towns and rainforest, and taken to the DRC capital Kinshasa, where they both took up judo at a centre for displaced children. 'We had to fight for everything,' says Mabika. 'For me, judo was a way of defending myself and surviving.' She explains how the pair and their fellow judokas were subjected to harsh punishments as part of their rigorous training, beaten and locked in cells when they lost.

This summer, their adopted home will welcome them as official refugee Olympians. 'The IOC is recognising us as human beings, and giving us an opportunity,' enthuses Misenga. 'It is my dream, and the dream of many Africans. I will be competing for all refugees. I want to win a medal and inspire refugees from all over the world.'

IOC REFUGEE PROGRAMMES

The refugee crisis and global displacement of people has become a central issue for the IOC, and Bach in particular, in recent years. It runs through everything connected to the upcoming Games in Rio, most visually through the existence of the ROT, but additionally with such iconic components as the Torch Relay, which this year saw Ibrahim Al-Hussein, another Syrian refugee swimmer, run the torch through the Eleonas refugee and migrant camp in Athens back in April.



Judoka Yolande Mabika, a refugee from DR Congo



Syrian swimmer
Yusra Mardini training
in Spandau, Berlin

Al-Hussein had his leg amputated after being hit by a bomb in 2012. He fled to Greece in 2014, where he was granted asylum and now resides. 'I am carrying the flame for myself, but also for Syrians, for refugees everywhere, for Greece, for sports,' he told reporters. 'I am sending this message to all migrating Syrians, but not only them or Iraqis or Afghans, anyone who has to migrate away from their country to go to Europe.'

From growing up on the banks of the Euphrates, which first launched his love of swimming, Al-Hussein now trains at a sports complex built for the 2004 Athens Olympics, and participates in a wheelchair basketball team. 'I wish that all wars would end and that everyone can go back to their homes in peace,' he says. 'My goal is to never give up, but to go on, to always go forward, and that I can achieve through sports.'

Bach has spent much of the past year travelling to refugee camps from Greece to Kenya, hearing stories from individuals and families whose lives have been devastated by war and violence. The IOC has also allocated \$2million for Olympic Solidarity, a fund aiming to 'organise assistance for all the National Olympic Committees, particularly those with the greatest needs, through multi-faceted programmes prioritising athlete development, training of coaches and sports administrators, and promoting the Olympic ideals.'

Olympic Solidarity contributes funding for aspiring athletes and provides equipment for many refugee camps, with the goal of encouraging sporting success as opposed to extremism. This funding has enabled everything from the creation of sports programmes in refugee camps in Austria, to encouraging the engagement of refugees in 16,000 clubs across Denmark, to teaming up with the Red Cross in Belgium to supply sports equipment to 30 refugee holding centres across the country.

Most, if not all, of the ROT athletes have been supported by the fund, and swimmer Yusra Mardini has spoken of the vital role it has played in getting her all the way to Rio. 'Olympic Solidarity

The ROT presence marks a significant moment, when the world's 65 million refugees gain a foothold of recognition on the international scene

is supporting me in a big way,' she said. 'Without its support, I'm not sure that I would be able to make it.'

RAISED AWARENESS

It would be a surprise if the ROT athletes were to make an appearance on the medal tables. But their mere presence marks a significant moment, when the world's 65 million refugees and other displaced people gain a foothold of recognition on the international scene.

'It is my hope that the Olympic Games Rio de Janeiro 2016 will become synonymous with the efforts of the international community to build a peaceful and better world for all through sport,' concluded Bach in his speech to the UN. 'This will be a symbol of hope for all the refugees in our world, and will make the world better aware of the magnitude of this crisis.'

Mardini echoes the thoughts of her teammates, that their presence at the Games is not about winning medals but instead about making a statement. 'My target is to be an inspiration for everyone,' she says. 'I want to represent all the refugees because I want to show everyone that, after the pain, after the storm, comes calm days. I want to inspire them to do something good in their lives. It's hard to arrive at your dreams - but it's not impossible.'

Running FREE

As the Rio Games draw nearer, **Harriet Constable** visits the makeshift Kenyan training camp playing home to the Refugee Olympic Team's track stars

Driving down the narrow, muddy, unkempt back roads of Ngong, a chaotic town about 40 minutes drive from central Nairobi, it's hard to believe I am headed toward a team of training Olympians. Yet, as I arrive at the destination: the church-run Anita Children's Home where the team now live, I am greeted by John Anzrah, a former 400m runner and Kenyan Olympic team coach, wearing a tracksuit and a large smile. He's here to train the world's first refugee running team for the Rio Olympics. Set up by the IOC and the Tegla Loroupe Peace Foundation - an organisation run by Kenyan athlete Tegla Loroupe to promote peace through sport - the team is made up of five refugees. Each fled war torn South Sudan, and had been living in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Northern Kenya until they decided to try out for the team on World Refugee Day last year.

'The runners arrived in September 2016,' Anzrah explains, 'so we've only had eight months to train them. Elite athletes have normally had four or five years to prepare.' But this isn't an exercise in winning medals. There is a more powerful message they hope will resonate by having a team of refugees competing: 'This is to show the world that refugees are people just like you and me. They can succeed!' Anzrah says.

It's been a tough regime for the team in the past few months, with early starts, strict diets and training programmes to adhere to. Team manager Jackson Pkemoi explains, 'It was a struggle at first. The team suffered muscle injuries as they weren't used to running so much.' Now, however, the story is quite different. 'These people have changed from refugees to athletes!'

I'm led into a scrappy classroom with a few overturned chairs to meet the five runners - James Nyak, Rose Nathike, Paul Amotun, Angelina Nadai and Paul Biel. They are seated in two lines and are dressed in pale blue branded jackets and matching jogging pants. On the wall in front of them, a bed sheet has been



tagged up, with 'Over the Rainbow' written on it in colourful felt tip pens. A little sleepily (I've woken them from their morning rest) they explain what the opportunity means to them. 'I didn't know how far I could come,' says Nadai, who had spent the past ten years of her life in the refugee camp. 'It is a dream.' Fellow runner Amotun continues, 'This is a great achievement. It gives us courage and we feel like other humans in life. Sometimes, refugees feel ashamed to be refugees, but we feel hope.'

Before long it's time to leave them to their naps: their afternoon training session is a couple of hours away and they need their down time. As I leave, I ask Amotun if the team feels a sense of responsibility to inspire others with their success. 'We have faced many challenges, and now we have a big task at the Olympics. This is not just about running, it is about interacting with the world, showing others the challenges refugees face and showing that you can change your life through sport.'