

Afghans Go for Gold

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After an eight year absence, Afghanistan will be sending both male and female competitors to the Olympics in Athens.

For the first time since 1996, Afghanistan will be sending athletes to the Olympics this year. Athletes will compete in the sports of boxing, wrestling, tae kwon do, and track and field events this summer in Athens.

Because they lack adequate facilities and equipment at home, the country's 16 athletes and coaches are currently training in Iran. Their expenses are being covered by the Asian Olympic Committee.

Abdul Sattar Liwal, Afghanistan's top Olympic official, said that just participating in the games will be a big step for the country, which lost its membership in the International Olympic Committee, IOC, in 1999, partly because of the Taleban's ban on the participation of women athletes.

The IOC voted to lift Afghanistan's suspension last summer.

Liwal cautioned Afghan sports fans not to expect their athletes to capture many medals at the August games.

"We have been isolated from the world all these years," said Liwal. "Professional sports people escaped or died, and those remaining lack the latest knowledge, so we should not be very hopeful to the outcome."

Liwal said Olympic-team members are chosen from athletes who have previously placed high in international competitions.

Basharmal Sultani, a 20-year-old boxer, has been involved in the sport for four years and has taken part in seven competitions. He has been placed third twice, including at the January bout in the Philippines which qualified him for the Olympics. He is now training in Iran and said he is looking forward to representing his country in Greece.

"I am having a good chance to practice in Iran, with good equipment," said Sultani, who competes in the 69 kilogram weight class. "I'm building up great strength. We have good trainers and a calm environment. These are the secrets of my success."

Najibullah Hussein, the technical and vocational deputy of the national boxing federation, said that by qualifying for the games, Sultani has already brought honour to Afghanistan.

There are four women among the Afghan athletes training in Iran: two competing in tae kwon do, and two in track and field.

They will be competing in front of mixed spectators, unlike back at home where there are all-female crowds. Liwal emphasised that women will adhere to "Islamic and Afghan rules and regulations" by wearing long trousers and long-sleeved tops during the competitions.

Former Olympic competitors are excited about the country's return to the games, but urged fans not to focus too much on this year's results. "Winning and losing is not important for us," said Pahlawan Jan Agha, 58, a former wrestler who represented his country at three Olympics between 1964 and 1972. "What is important is that Afghanistan has regained membership in the International Olympic Committee. We have a good future ahead of us."

However, many of the athletes and local Olympic officials have been disappointed by how little money the government has been able to spend on sports amid the many other claims on its resources. The Afghan Olympic Committee has been able to provide the athletes training in Iran with only clothing and other basic supplies.

Liwal said that the Italian government repaired the Olympic committee building, and "whatever [other] facilities we have today are left from [King] Zahir Shah's time," in the early 1970s.

Sultani had been disappointed by the lack of encouragement he feels he has received. "When I came home to Afghanistan [after qualifying for the Olympics in Manila], only my friends applauded for me," he said.

At least this time, officials don't appear too worried that their athletes will seek asylum in the host country, as they have often done at past sports events.

"During the past two years, several athletes have travelled abroad and came back - except for two boxers who went to Italy and didn't return," said Gul Mohammad, head of foreign relations at the national Olympic committee. And now, even those two "are repentant and have asked to come back to Afghanistan".

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