

Sports

Greased lightning! Tongan pin-up makes 'crazy' Olympics return

Travelled to Brazil as a taekwondo fighter

WELLINGTON: Pita Taufatofua captured global attention as Tonga's oiled and topless flagbearer at the Rio Olympics, but he says things didn't get really weird until he decided to qualify for the Winter Games in Pyeongchang. The 34-year-old found himself strapping planks of wood to his feet to recreate the rigours of cross-country skiing in sweltering Australian heat.

He embarked on mad dashes through blizzards and across icy roads to reach qualification races on the ski-fields of Europe. Pre-dawn training sessions became the norm as Taufatofua—a self-proclaimed beach lover—struggled in the snow, a substance he had seen only once before.

"It was all just so new to me. I had no idea there was wet snow, dry snow, cold snow, hot snow," he told AFP. "And you need specialised skis for each of them. I had one pair and here I was giving myself less than a year to qualify for the Winter Olympics."

He admitted the bid to become a dual Olympian at times seemed "crazy". Taufatofua, Brisbane-born but fiercely proud of his Tongan heritage, was determined to reach Pyeongchang after his Summer Games experience in Rio in 2016. He travelled to Brazil as a taekwondo fighter, losing in the first round but not before making his mark at the opening ceremony. Bare-chested, torso dripping with oil and wearing only a traditional ta'ovala mat round his waist, Taufatofua became an online sensation as he enthusiastically waved the flag of his tiny Pacific nation.

Within hours, he racked up 45 million

mentions on Twitter and the normally staid Wall Street Journal hailed "perhaps the grandest entrance by any flag bearer in recent history". Appearances on US talk shows followed but Taufatofua said he was already looking for his next challenge.

'IT FEELS LIKE A MIRACLE'

There was much skepticism when he announced his Winter Games bid. A Norwegian Olympic champion said: "I think he looks better covered in oil than with skis on his feet". But Taufatofua said



Training in Australia was more difficult

athletes from what he terms "summer countries", including Mexico, Portugal and Colombia, rallied to support their fellow outsider.

"We would pool resources," he said. "We'd share skis and tips on technique. We'd sleep in a hostel with three beds together and just eat pasta and tuna because that was all we could afford." "We drove through blizzards for eight hours in Iceland trying to avoid avalanches and raced across Armenia and Georgia. "To us, that was the Olympic creed right there, it

was all about participation and people coming together."

Training in Australia was even more difficult. "We had to find ways to mimic skiing without having snow or skis, so I'd strap bits of wood to my feet and run on the sand," he said. "And there were the roller skis. They've got no brakes and are the worst things ever. I think the Devil invented them."

Chasing his dream full-time, Taufatofua relied on a funding website <https://goo.gl/7Kofnz> to help pay for his campaign. After a number of falls and equipment failures, he appeared set to miss out before dramatically clinching a place this month at the final qualifying round in Iceland.

"It feels like a miracle. It feels like a gold medal just to qualify," he said. With his place assured, Taufatofua does not expect to repeat his topless Rio exploits at Pyeongchang's opening ceremony, where temperatures will be well below freezing and hypothermia a real risk.

"My goal is just to participate," he said. "If that leads to other people trying something that everyone else says is impossible then it will be worth it." Bruno Banani was Tonga's first winter Olympian, appearing at the 2014 Games in Sochi where he finished 32nd out of 39 in the men's luge.

But he was by no means the first cross-climate athlete. The Jamaican bobsled team set the standard at the 1988 Calgary Olympics and were later immortalised in the film "Cool Runnings". — AFP



RIO DE JANEIRO: File photo taken on August 5, 2016, shows Tonga's flagbearer Pita Taufatofua leading his delegation during the opening ceremony of the Rio 2016 Olympic Games at the Maracana stadium in Rio de Janeiro. — AFP

Tournament of late Sheikh Abdullah Al-Mubarak begins today

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Tournament of the Late Sheikh Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah Cup starts today at Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Olympic Shooting Complex in the Olympic Skeet, Trap and double trap for men, women and juniors.

Secretary General of Arab and Kuwait Shooting Federations Obaid Al-Osaimi said Kuwait Shooting Sports Club is proud of organizing the tournament of Late Sheikh Abdullah

Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah annually, as it brings memories of one of Kuwait's men who gave a lot and had many contributions to Kuwait's development.

He said the late Sheikh was a leader that cared for the country's interests, and was committed to the security of Kuwait.

Al-Osaimi said the club brings back the good deeds of this generous personality, so that the young generation can take it as an example in their lives.

He said this tournament comes on the heels of HH the Amir Seventh International Shooting Grand Prix, that was held in Kuwait from 12/1 until 19/1, during which Kuwait shooters made unprecedented achievements as they competed with well established world champions.

Al-Osaimi concluded by thanking the family of late Sheikh Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah for their continued support of the shooting sport.

He also wished shooters all success during the tournament.

Ice hockey sisters face off for rival nations at Olympics

SEOUL: They were born thousands of kilometres apart but grew up together, skated together, and went to school together. When they take to the ice at the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, though, the Brandt sisters will once again represent different countries.

Marissa was given up for adoption soon after her birth in South Korea, one of hundreds of thousands of children who found new families overseas as the country—once known as the world's top baby exporter—underwent rapid industrialisation.

Aged just four months, Greg and Robin Brandt took her home to the frozen lakes of Minnesota. Months later Robin gave birth to her sister Hannah. Typically for their state, the girls grew up skating regularly, and now both

have won national ice hockey team places.

But while forward Hannah will play for the US at next month's Games, Seoul restored Marissa's South Korean citizenship as it sought recruits to bolster its side, and she will represent the country of her birth.

It is a family story that blends issues of identity, ethnicity and adoption against a backdrop of sporting rivalry. As a young Asian girl growing up in an American family, Marissa sought to ignore the colour of her skin, and sought to emulate blonde, pale Hannah. "I just wanted to fit in and not look different from my sister," Marissa told AFP.

NATIONAL PRIDE

Sport was one of the ways she did so, switching from figure skating to ice hockey to follow in Hannah's blade tracks. "We were always best friends and did everything together," said Hannah, 24. They played on the same teams—Marissa is a defender—until they went to different colleges.

And their trajectories moved even further apart when the Korea Ice Hockey Association started scouring through colleges across North America, looking for ethnic Korean players as it scrambled to create a team good

enough to avoid humiliation when it hosts the Olympics. South Korea has only 319 registered female hockey players of its own, according to an International Ice Hockey Federation survey last year. Marissa was identified as a likely prospect, and invited to try out for the side in 2015.

It was the first time she had returned to her birth country since her adoption, after years of distancing herself from its culture and language. "I was excited and curious but also nervous and didn't know what to expect," she said. Sailing into the squad, she received a South Korean passport the following year, and her jersey is emblazoned "Park Yoon-Jung", the name on her US adoption papers. "I chose to wear my Korean name on the back of my jersey because that was really my only tie to Korea," she said.

The past three years have been a journey of reconnection, and now Marissa loves to go out for Korean style beef barbecue bulgogi and meat dumplings, and cranking up K-pop music with her teammates in the locker room.

Now, she says, "I consider myself Korean-American. Whereas before I would only consider myself American. "I can finally say that I am proud to be Korean." — AFP

Korean skating back on thin ice ahead of Pyeongchang

SEOUL: Four years after the Korea Skating Union (KSU) was supposed to have cleaned up its act, allegations of favouritism and athlete mistreatment have again roiled South Korean sport just weeks ahead of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics.

Short track powerhouse South Korea has won 21 of the 48 gold medals awarded in the sport since it joined the Olympic programme in 1992 but stories of destructive rivalries, physical abuse and favouritism have long cast a shadow over the KSU. Public anger with the organisation boiled over in 2014 when Viktor Ahn, who won three gold medals for Korea at the 2006 Games, won three more for Russia in Sochi, raising questions about what drove him to turn his back on his homeland.

With then-President Park Geun-hye demanding answers and the Sports Ministry promising to "review the entire system," the KSU's vice chairman Jeon Myung-gyu, widely reported to be the most powerful figure in the short track set-up, stepped down.

The KSU has enjoyed a period of relative calm over the last few years but with the eyes of the world trained on Korea ahead of the Feb. 9-25 Winter Games, the

organisation has again blackened the host's sporting reputation.

A short track coach was banned from the sport for life last week after admitting to physically assaulting Shim Suk-hee, one of the country's top female skaters.

The KSU also came under fire after speed skater Noh Seon-yeong said she no longer wanted to compete for the national team due to favouritism in the selection process after an "administrative error" almost cost her a place at the Games. Coupled with the fact that the KSU welcomed its former vice chairman Jeon back to the organisation last year, the fresh controversies suggest the post-Sochi investigation has done little to foster long-lasting change in Korean skating.

'CHRONIC PROBLEMS'

A sports ministry official told Reuters the incident involving Shim, who won gold, silver and bronze medals in Sochi, showed the KSU had not truly reformed.

"The KSU released a statement after the Sochi Olympics saying it would undergo reform in order to fix internal chronic problems such as factionalism and unfairness in selecting athletes," said the official. "But the Shim case shows those chronic problems are still there," he added. "The problem seems to lie in the people who are running the federation, including the executive team."

The surprising absence of two Russian skaters from their Olympic contingent has since allowed speed skater Noh to regain her spot at Pyeongchang but she told local media she was tired of favouritism and bias at the KSU. — Reuters

Cool runnings too as Malaysia, Singapore take up Winter Olympics challenge

KUALA LUMPUR: In tropical Malaysia and Singapore, Winter Olympics medals are rarer than snowflakes—but a dedicated group of athletes are hoping to change that as they make their countries' debut Games appearances.

A Singaporean speed skater, as well as a figure skater and skier from Malaysia will compete in the Games, a huge achievement for countries better known for palm-fringed beaches and year-round heat than winter sports. It is the latest sign of an unlikely, yet growing, interest in ice and snow sports in a winterless, steamy region, where temperatures rarely drop below 20 degrees Celsius (68 Fahrenheit) in most places.

A major milestone for winter sports in the region came last year when they featured for the first time at the Southeast Asian Games in Malaysia, with ice hockey, figure skating and speed skating making their debuts. But it was not without problems—puddles formed on the hockey rink during matches, slowing down the puck and forcing marshalls with squeegees to dash onto the ice to mop up the water. Figure skater Julian Yee, who will represent Malaysia at next month's Games, is typical of athletes from the region who have had to overcome a lack of facilities, limited official support and public scepticism to pur-



KUALA LUMPUR: File photo taken by and released courtesy of photographer Annice Lynn to AFP yesterday shows Malaysian figure skater Julian Yee taking part in a practice session in Kuala Lumpur on August 25, 2017. — AFP

sue their dreams.

When growing up, the only places he could find to practise were a handful of small, crowded rinks in the shopping malls scattered around the capital Kuala Lumpur. Figure skating on the tiny rinks was "like trying to get an A380 (world's biggest airliner) to land on a very small runway", the 20-year-old told AFP. But he persevered and began training in the morning and evening when the rinks were less crowded. "I skated two times a day, six days—sometimes six-and-a-half days—a week," he said.

'ARE YOU MAD?'

There were no official programmes or funding for figure skating so Yee's parents had to spend huge amounts of their own money on his training. They also sent him to

train abroad during school holidays, in China and South Korea.

"People said: 'Are you mad? You're sacrificing all this money,'" his mother Irene Cheow told AFP. "We're looked at differently now." Yee's efforts paid off and he won gold at last year's Southeast Asian Games, and came eighth in the 2017 Asian Winter Games. His crowning glory was qualification for Pyeongchang, alongside Malaysian skier Jeffrey Webb. Speed skater Cheyenne Goh has faced similar challenges in neighbouring Singapore, where even a modest cold snap can set the population shivering. This month a freak monsoon surge sent the mercury plummeting to almost 21 degrees Celsius (70 Fahrenheit) — chilly by Singapore standards—sending people rushing to the shops to buy scarves and winter jackets. — AFP