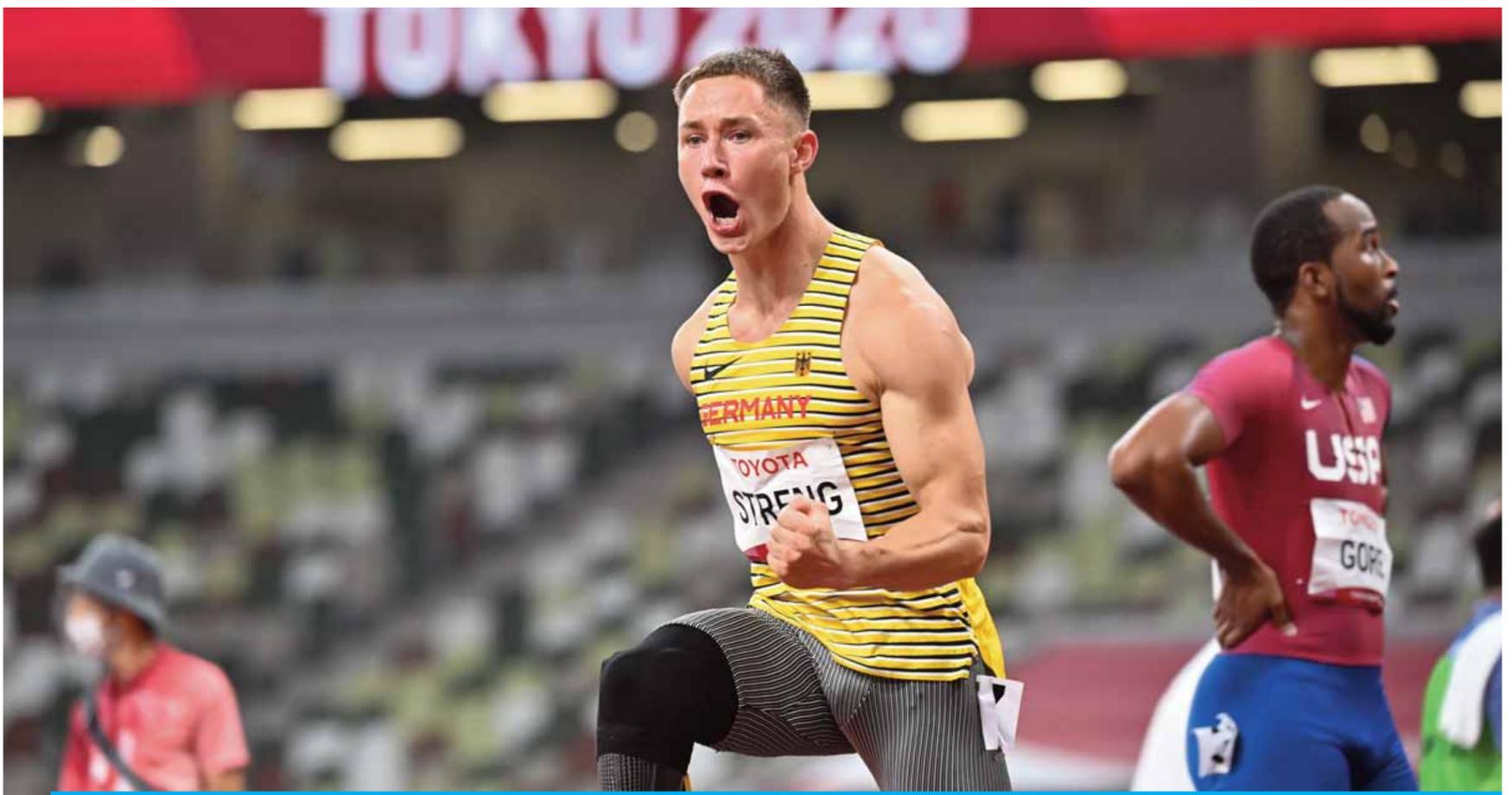


100m Paralympic track thriller as Streng unseats Peacock

Records tumble from track and pool in Tokyo



TOKYO: Germany's Felix Streng celebrates his victory in the men's 100m (T64) athletics final during the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games at the Olympic Stadium in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP

TOKYO: German sprinter Felix Streng stormed his way to Paralympic gold in the T64 100m in Tokyo yesterday, dethroning British rival Jonnie Peacock who ended up sharing the bronze after a photo finish. The track thriller saw Streng finish in 10.76 seconds, short of the Paralympic record he set just a day earlier in heats, but ahead of Costa Rica's Sherman Isidro Guity Guity, who took silver.

After several tense minutes, the decision came back: a shared bronze, with both Peacock and Germany's Johannes Flores coming in at precisely 10.78 seconds. The pair beamed as they received their flags to join the other medalists. "It felt amazing," Streng said afterwards of his win. "I'm so happy that I could execute a race and win in such a competitive field."

The race was one of the last on the sixth day of competition in Tokyo, with records again tumbling from the track to the pool. At Tokyo's Aquatics Centre, 16-year-old Jiang Yuyan won her first Paralympic gold in the S6 50m butterfly final, after smashing her own world record in the heats.

"This is my first Paralympic experience and in terms of my personal goals, it's a self-confidence boost," the teenager told AFP straight after her

winning swim. "Of course, it's very exciting. But most of all, I think it's the beginning of the next chapter of my life."

Jiang was nearly killed when she was run over by a truck as a three-year-old, but by 14 she was breaking world records and had earned the nickname "Flying Fish". She is the youngest member of China's Paralympic team, which continues to top the medal table-as it has at every Games since Athens 2004.

'An inspiration'

Earlier yesterday, International Paralympic Committee chief Andrew Parsons paid tribute to two Afghan athletes who escaped from Kabul after the country's fall to the Taliban this month. Zakia Khudadadi and Hossain Rasouli arrived in Tokyo over the weekend after a complex international effort that saw them evacuated to France where they rested and trained before flying to Japan.



IPC pays tribute to Afghan athletes

Parsons said yesterday that receiving the pair in Tokyo was "a moment I will remember for the rest of my life". "It was just incredible to feel that we had contributed in some way," he added. Sprinter Rasouli will take part in the men's T47 long jump today having arrived too late for his favored T47 100m. Khudadadi will compete in the women's -49kg K44 taekwondo on Thursday. Parsons said he hoped the pair would be able to "really focus on sport and forget for a few days at least what they left behind and the horror that they have been through in their home nation."

Yesterday also saw the medal ceremony for the winners of the women's swimming 4x100m - 34 points, which was delayed from Sunday after the US team lodged a protest over their disqualification.

The team thought they had come away with the silver, but the second spot was instead handed to Australia after judges disqualified the US side for

an illegal changeover. Their protest was denied by a referee and an appeal to a jury was also rejected.

Also stepping onto the podium yesterday was Francisca Mardones Sepulveda, who became the first Chilean woman ever to win a Paralympic medal in any sport. The 43-year-old shot putter won the F54 category and broke her own world record with a throw of 8.33 meters. The Chilean competed at the London and Rio Games in wheelchair tennis, but later switched to athletics, and is competing in shot put, discus and javelin in Tokyo.

"I want to be an inspiration for other girls that will start approaching the sport to become enthusiastic for it," she said after her win. "I will tell them to believe in their dreams and in themselves, thinking that whatever goal they have, they can achieve it."

In the Paralympic village, organizers said yesterday they would resume operation of a self-driving bus service that was suspended after a vehicle hit a visually impaired Japanese judoka. Toyota, which operates the vehicles, said safety improvements had been made, including making the buses' warning noise louder, and the system would begin running again from today. — AFP

Paralympic disability categories under fire over fairness

TOKYO: They're supposed to be about making paraspports fair, but the category system central to disabled sports and the Paralympics, which classifies athletes according to their impairment, is increasingly under fire. French swimmer Theo Curin, whose lower legs and hands were amputated after a bout of meningitis as a child, is sitting out the Tokyo Games over his unhappiness with the system and how athletes are assessed. "Overnight, two people who swim with both their hands appeared in my S5 category. You don't have to be very smart to understand that having two hands in swimming helps a lot," the 21-year-old said.

"There are a lot of flagrant inequalities that annoy me and are really ridiculous," he said. Ten types of impairment are accepted at the Paralympics, broadly covering physical, visual, and intellectual disabilities.

But within each impairment category there are a vast range of abilities, so athletes are further divided by class in a system designed to ensure people compete against others with approximately the same capabilities.

In swimming, for example, each class has a prefix — S for freestyle, butterfly and backstroke, SB for

breaststroke, and SM for individual medley — followed by a number. Physical impairments cover numbers 1-10, with the number lower the more severe the impairment. Vision impairments go from 11-13, while 14 indicates intellectual impairment.

The system is complicated and time-consuming, and some athletes feel it is failing. Curin was supposed to be in the pool at Tokyo's Aquatic Centre this year, as one of France's top para-athletes, with nearly 150,000 Instagram followers.

He made his Paralympic debut in Rio, aged 16, and just missed out on a spot on the podium. But instead of chasing a medal in Japan, he's making a film and preparing to swim across South America's Lake Titicaca.

"I decided to put aside Paralympic swimming so long as these problems with classification continue," he told AFP. "They've left me a bit disgusted with the Paralympic movement," the three-time World Championship medalist said.

'Incentive to cheat'

Curin is not the only one who feels the system is flawed, with particularly fierce debate surrounding classification in the pool. US swimming star Jessica Long, who won her 14th Paralympic gold on Saturday, has said "the incentive to cheat is huge" over the increasing fame and financial rewards enjoyed by successful para-athletes.

"I can't watch this sport that I love continue to get destroyed like this," she told Sports Illustrated last year. The International Paralympic Committee defends the system, asserting that "sporting

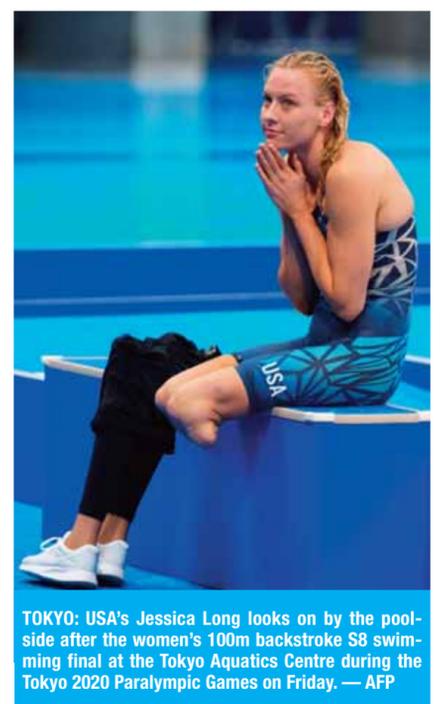
excellence determines which athlete or team is ultimately victorious".

"Disappointingly, what we have witnessed in recent years is a small number of athletes... struggling to come to terms with increased competition," it said. "Rather than embrace the improved competitive nature of their Para sport, they have instead questioned the classification of their competitors, despite the fact that international classifiers have found their rivals to be in the correct class."

But critics of the system point to what they say is the arbitrary and unscientific nature of the assessments involved. The exams are "done by eye and based on the feeling of the observers", French swimmer Claire Supiot told FranceInfo. She was reclassified earlier this year from S8 to S9, making "the road to the podium significantly harder".

There are also allegations of athletes trying to game the system, trying to be placed in a more severely impaired class to gain an advantage. In 2017, a former classifier told the Guardian newspaper on condition of anonymity about athletes taking hot or cold showers, rolling in the snow or bandaging their limbs to appear to have more limited ability during exams.

Curin went through two rounds of exams, the first of which — a medical examination — produced a provisional classification at the lower end of S4. But after a second round in which he was observed in the water, he was given a final class of S5. That, he said, penalizes him unfairly, "because I know how to properly work with my disability". — AFP



TOKYO: USA's Jessica Long looks on by the poolside after the women's 100m backstroke S8 swimming final at the Tokyo Aquatics Centre during the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games on Friday. — AFP