



HANDBALL

MERCENARIES FIND IT 'HARD' TO WIN AGAINST STRONG QATAR

RIO DE JANEIRO: It was hard, according to Croatian back Marko Bagaric, but the Olympic dream can make people do strange things.

Bagaric's team beat his homeland Croatia 30-23 in a stunning opening to the Olympic handball tournament in Rio. His team is Qatar and he is one of 11 "mercenaries" in the oil and gas rich Gulf state's 14-man squad for the Games.

The hardest part for Bagaric came during the national anthems. After, it was a match like any other.

"I played with many of these players, and I lived with some of them in Croatia, in clubs," said the 30-year-old, who scored one goal in the victory.

"The worst feeling was during the national anthem. Ah, but what can I do? Qatar gave me the opportunity to play in the Olympic Games. It is the dream of any sportsman.

"For me it was hard, but after the game, I can relax." Croatia were amongst the favourites to win this tournament — only the old Soviet Union have a better men's Olympic handball record than the 1996 and 2004 champions.

But they were handed a hiding by last year's World Championship finalists.

Qatar have made great waves in the sport, becoming the first team outside of Europe to win a world medal.

But it has not been without controversy. The team is made up of five players from the Balkans, two Syrians, a Frenchman, a Spaniard, a Cuban and an Egyptian.

They even have a Spanish coach: Valero Rivera.

Qatar have spent millions on assembling this team, thanks in part to lax qualifying rules in handball. Unlike most sports, a player can change nationalities, such as Frenchman Bertrand Roine, a world champion with his own country just five years ago.

Players need wait only three years without representing one country before they can run out for another. Nations can also field an unlimited number of such players.

It means Qatar, ranked just 108 in the world, have arrived at the Olympics with a genuine chance of claiming the gold medal—which would be the country's first in any sport.

Some players from other teams have complained that Qatar are fielding a "world select" outfit, but Cuban back Rafael Capote doesn't see it that way.

"We're a team like any other. There's nothing special about us," he said.

Capote was amongst the nominees to be world player of the year last season.

He lost to Denmark's Mikkel Hansen—who plays for Qatari owned Paris Saint-Germain.

'BENDING THE RULES'

While Qatar's motley crew would certainly provide one of the stories of the Games if they won, for France coach Claude Onesta, they are setting a dangerous precedent and damaging the image of the sport. His side, the two-time reigning Olympic champions, only narrowly beat Qatar 25-22 in last year's world final.

"When you have temporary passports for a competition it's bending the rules," he complained following that match.

"I'm not blaming Qatar, who are playing by the rules, but it would be damaging to continue down this path." Even disgraced former FIFA head Sepp Blatter criticised Qatar over their mercenaries policy, before his head rolled amid accusations of corruption and an investigation into the awarding of the 2022 World Cup to Qatar and 2018 tournament to Russia.

Blatter said Qatar's recruitment policy was "absurd" but Roine denies rumours of huge financial incentives. "When I see in the press that we were paid millions to come here, it's wrong," he said. "In my case I got zero. It was more a sporting opportunity than a financial one."

That may be hard to swallow for many people who will be interested to see how Roine reacts during the national anthems on Tuesday when his new country face his old one. If it's anything like Bagaric, you could be forgiven for imagining him humming a different tune to himself. — AFP



RIO DE JANEIRO: Qatar's left back Rafael Capote (C) vies with Croatia's right back Marko Kopljar (L) during the men's preliminaries Group A handball match Croatia vs Qatar for the Rio 2016 Olympics Games at the Future Arena in Rio. — AFP



RIO DE JANEIRO: Long Qingquan, of China, celebrates a successful lift in the men's 56kg weightlifting competition at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. (Inset) Hidilyn Diaz, of the Philippines, wipes away tears after winning the silver medal in the women's 53kg weightlifting competition at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. — AP

LONG SETS WORLD RECORD IN WINNING WEIGHTLIFTING GOLD

PHILIPPINES WINS FIRST MEDAL IN 20 YEARS



WEIGHTLIFTING

RIO DE JANEIRO: Long Qingquan of China set a world record in winning Olympic gold in the men's weightlifting 53-kilogram category Sunday at the Rio de Janeiro Games. Long's total score of 307 kilograms set the record and was aided by a final 170-kilo lift in clean and jerk.

He was leading the competition after the snatch and all the way through clean and jerk until Om Yun-Chol of North Korea lifted 169 kilograms on his final attempt to tie Long for the lead. Long then came out for his final lift, raised his bar and celebrated the gold medal by pumping his fists in

the air. Om took silver with 303 kilograms and Sinphet Kruaithong of Thailand won bronze. In the women's 53-kilogram category, Hsu Shu-Ching of Taiwan won her first Olympic gold medal when Li Yajun of China failed to complete the clean and jerk. Li set an Olympic record in the first round snatch by lifting 101 kilograms to take the lead into the clean and jerk. She was the last lifter to compete in the second round, and needed to lift 126 kilos to win gold. Her high entry total on the start list made her a favorite for the gold, but she failed to medal. When Li didn't complete her score, the gold went to Hsu, who lifted 100 kilos in snatch and 112 in clean and jerk for an overall score of 212 kilos. Hsu is the reigning world champion and won silver four years ago at the London Games. But London gold medalist Zulfiya Chinshanlo

of Kazakhstan failed a doping retest and could have that medal revoked, which would make Hsu a double gold medalist.

"I am very happy and very excited," she said. Team doctor Lin Yin-Chou said Hsu was battling a strain in her thigh, and it was the "intelligence of our coaches" that pushed her to gold.

"We have been wanting this gold medal for some time and it is especially pleasing because she has had an injury that she has been carrying," Lin said.

Hidilyn Diaz sprung a major surprise in the Philippines by winning a weightlifting silver medal in Rio — the country's first Olympic medal for 20 years, officials said yesterday. Sports analysts in the Philippines had not expected the 1.54-metre (5ft 1/2in) tall Diaz to bag a medal at the 2016 Games after coming up empty in 2008 and 2012

games. "We had high hopes with other sports. So (Cruz's medal) is a surprise. A lot of people didn't expect she would take a medal," said Ronel Abrenica, executive-director of the Philippine Sports Commission.

But Abrenica said he noticed something from the 25-year-old, who became the first woman from the Philippines ever to win an Olympic medal. A tearful Hidilyn Diaz said, she was lifted in the 58kg class in the 2008 Beijing Games as a 17-year-old and impressed many in the field, but she failed on all her clean and jerk attempts in London. Diaz dropped down to the lighter class for Rio, which had just seven competitors. "I have tried so hard. I have stumbled many times," Diaz said. "I wanted to quit, but now all of my sacrifices have paid off." — Agencies

KIWIS AVOID UPSET AGAINST US TO REACH OLYMPIC SEMIFINALS



RUGBY

RIO DE JANEIRO: In back-to-back games, the US women were within range of upset wins over Australia and New Zealand, the two leading contenders for the first rugby sevens gold medal ever awarded at the Olympics.

By the end of an eventful Sunday, though, the semifinal pairings reflected the status quo in women's sevens with the top four teams in the world series vying for medals. World series winner Australia rebounded from a surprising 12-12 draw with the United States in the last game of the pool stage to trounce Spain 24-0 and set up a semifinal match against Canada, which rallied to beat France 15-5 in the quarterfinals.

Britain advanced 26-7 over Fiji and then watched as semifinal opponent New Zealand struggled to put away the Americans 5-0, the only points coming from a try by world series try-scoring leader Portia Woodman just before halftime.

"I told them that they were true Olympians. They represented USA really, really well," U.S. women's coach Richie Walker said of his squad. "We played the No. 1 and No. 2 nations in the world today but I saw no fear. We hung with the best in the world. We drew with the No. 1 and we just lost by five points to the No. 2."

The Americans lost 12-7 to Fiji in their opening game Saturday, adding to the pressure on them in the last Pool A match to beat Australia on Sunday. Winger Jessica Jevelet scored two tries to give the Americans a 12-5 lead going into the last minute, but Emma Tonegato reached over to score her second try of the match for the Aussies and Chloe Dalton converted after the full-time siren for a draw.

Jevelet was again in the thick of it

against New Zealand. The Americans had a scoring opportunity shut down with three minutes to go when Jevelet was tackled late as she attempted to chase a kick into the in-goal that could have leveled the game. Tylia Nathan-Wong was yellow carded and sent from the field, but the New Zealanders survived unscathed.

The US and New Zealand squads played practice matches against each other in Florida leading up to the Olympics, and the Americans obviously picked up some intel.

"They didn't play us this hard in Florida. It was a nice surprise, and hard," Woodman said. "We made it hard for ourselves, not playing to our strengths, getting a bit too ahead of ourselves, and wanting to score on the first phase when we needed to play three or four."

"But we're in medal contention, so (we're) excited." The Americans will have to settle for playing in classification matches for fifth-eighth places along with the other quarterfinal losers.

"It probably hurts right now because they're out of medal contention, but still we have something to fight for," Walker said. "We want to finish No. 5."

"That's the best day rugby-wise, not results-wise, that I've ever seen from the girls. So I'm really proud." Australia coach Tim Walsh said the Americans gave his team "the kick up the pants that we needed going into the quarterfinals," where Charlotte Caslick scored twice and Tonegato added another to each increase their tournament tallies to six, equal with Woodman.

The top three teams from the sevens world series appeared more vulnerable on Sunday than Britain, a team containing 11 members of the England team which placed fourth in the world series. The British won all three group games comfortably, including a 24-0 victory over Canada, and outscored Fiji four tries to one.

The Canadians entered as the likely bronze medalists, but now face Australia in

the semifinals - which doesn't entirely bother them. Canada beat the Australians to win the last stop on the world series last season and nudge ahead of England for third place.

"The Olympics are a whole new thing for us and we're still kind of getting used to that," Canada back Bianca Farella said. "I think it's an unconscious thing but tomorrow we start fresh." — AP



RIO DE JANEIRO: New Zealand's Portia Woodman, bottom, scores a try as USA's Lauren Doyle, right, watches during the women's rugby sevens quarter final match at the Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Sunday. — AP