



DUBAI: Egyptians Mohamed El-Shorbagy (left) and Ali Farag compete during the PSA Dubai Squash World Series Finals 2018 at Dubai Emirates Golf club. —AFP

Squash player's switch to UK shows Egypt's athlete exodus

Athletes feeling underpaid, under-equipped • Player called 'traitor and sellout'

CAIRO: Egyptian squash player Mohamed El-Shorbagy was called a traitor and a sellout when he announced this month he had joined the English national team. Yet the athlete is not the first Egyptian to compete under a foreign flag, with experts saying the choice illustrates a pervasive problem of athletes feeling underpaid and under-equipped.

"There is only football and a few team sports" that garner support, Hossam Hamed, former wrestler and coach of Egypt's national team, told AFP. Other athletes, particularly those in individual sports, have to deal with "obsolete regulations" and "minimal payments, even after medals and international victories". He says Egyptian athletes joining other national teams are "rebellious against a painful reality".

Explaining his choice, El-Shorbagy said "England gave me all the support I needed", in contrast to his home country, where "no one paid him any mind" for years. Currently world number 3, the Alexandria native is one of Egypt's most decorated squash players, spending 50 months as the world number one in a country that consistently dominates the sport on a global level. Five of the world's top 10 men athletes are Egyptian, in addition to el-Shorbagy, as well as the top three women athletes.

A way out of poverty

But the champion is far from the first to trade in the Egyptian flag, with a history of athletes in weightlifting, wrestling, equestrian, boxing and handball doing the same. In 2018, after butting heads with the Egyptian Wrestling Federation, wrestler Mahmoud Fawzy joined team USA following several Arab and

African gold medals. At the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, Fares Hassouna won one of Qatar's first gold medals in weightlifting. After social media backlash in Egypt, his father set the record straight.

Ibrahim Hassouna, himself an Egyptian weightlifting champion and former coach of the national team, explained that it was he who had left the country after his own clash with the federation, and had trained his son in Qatar since he was a child. In both sports, says Fathi Zariq, former treasurer of the Weightlifting Federation, "athletes usually come from poor families". In a country where two thirds of the population live below or just above the poverty line, sport can be a way out.

Weightlifters and wrestlers who start training in barebones youth centres in low-income neighborhoods, Zariq explained, "look to foreign nationalities in pursuit of money and better social status". "How can the reward for an Olympic gold medal be a million pounds (\$54,000), after all the years of training and preparation that have gone in?" In Egypt, where football reigns and Mohamed Salah wears the crown, other athletes are green with envy. "In football, some players earn up to a million dollars a year, without even having to win a competition," Zariq derided.

After retirement

Handball has seen a rare reversal of the trend, according to Yasser Labib, former captain of the national team and head of the handball team at Al-Ahly Club, which together with its rival Zamalek dominate the African Champions League. In the 1990s, he explained, they were haemorrhaging players, with Egyptian ath-

letes playing all over the world except in Egypt. "This is no longer the case," he told AFP. "Salaries have increased, contracts have become more professional, and players no longer want another nationality, but only to play in European leagues," while remaining on the Egyptian national team. The key, he told AFP, is to put an end to the parochial quarrels within federations, and increase funds dedicated to athletes. It is a tall order for the Egyptian government, currently caught between double-digit inflation and a crippling devaluation.

In 2019-2020, only \$21.3 million was earmarked by the government for all sports federations in a country with a 103-million-strong population, according to official figures. In contrast, the budget in a country like France clocks in at around a billion dollars. But experts say the solution can come from sponsors, though support needs to be sustained. All too often, Hamed says, sponsors see a player as "just a product they can profit off of for revenues or advertising, but as soon as he is injured, it's all over."

Amir Wagih, former squash champion and national team coach, thinks support needs to continue after athletes retire, including through "job offers". Squash players, as opposed to weightlifters and wrestlers, usually hail from higher-income communities, trained in elite neighbourhood sporting clubs and leveraging their victories into scholarship opportunities at top-tier American and European universities. Wagih says it is not money these athletes are pursuing in their foreign careers, but opportunities for "a better future after retirement" they would not have in their home country. —AFP

Bagnaia wins Dutch MotoGP after Quartararo crashes out

ASSEN: Italy's Francesco Bagnaia won the Dutch MotoGP on Sunday to reignite his title challenge after championship leader Fabio Quartararo crashed out of an incident-packed race. Frenchman Quartararo fell twice, flipping spectacularly over his handlebars in the second incident although he walked away afterwards, shaking his fists in anger at his error. Bagnaia, in contrast, stayed out of trouble on his Ducati to record his third victory of the season and a welcome full points score after failing to finish in the last two races.

"I am so happy after two difficult races," the Italian said. In a great day for Italian riders, Marco Bezzecchi on a Ducati for Valentino Rossi's VR46 team was second while Spanish rider Maverick Vinales rounded out the podium in the 11th race of the 20-season. Quartararo heads into the summer break with a 21-point lead over Aleix Espargaro, who was fourth on Sunday. The Frenchman fell on the fifth then on the 13th lap out of 26 in front of an enthusiastic crowd in the Netherlands.

Even if he quickly got back on his feet, he had to give up after this second accident. The Frenchman got off to a

Change of fortune

"I made a rookie's mistake. I attacked as it is was the last lap and the last bend," Quartararo said of his first fall, which he said had left something feeling "not right" with his bike. As soon as the race was over he apologized to Espargaro for forcing him off the track in the fifth lap. This was the first time since 1994 that Yamaha have failed to score a point at Assen. For Bagnaia, taking the chequered flag was a welcome change of fortune.

This was the fourth time in six races he had claimed pole, but he had failed to finish in three of his past four outings. He won his last two completed races - at Jerez and Mugello - but like Quartararo on Sunday was visibly angry last weekend after crashing out of the German MotoGP, where his French rival prevailed. Runner-up to Quartararo in the championship last year, he had looked poised to challenge for the title just a few weeks ago, but subsequently slipped to 91 points off the pace before this round of the season at the circuit known as the "Cathedral of Speed".

Ahead of the next race at Silverstone on August 7 the



SACHSENRING: Monster Energy Yamaha's French rider Fabio Quartararo (left) leads the pack through the first corner of the German MotoGP Grand Prix at the Sachsenring racing circuit on June 19, 2022. —AFP

25-year-old from Turin moved up from sixth to fourth, cutting the gap to Quartararo to 66 points. In third overall is Johann Zarco, who said he had suffered a "very difficult" day after trailing in 13th on his Ducati-Prima. "It was really hard maintaining my pace and little by little I slipped out of the fight," he said. "So I'm disappointed, obviously, but it's good to get another three points on the board and to see I'm still in third place in the standings. "But it's no fun to come in an exhausted 13th!" —AFP



EUGENE: Sydney McLaughlin competes in the Women's 400 Meter Hurdle Final setting a new world record with a time of 51.41 during the USATF Championships on June 25, 2022. —AFP

McLaughlin books Championships berth with a record victory

EUGENE: Sydney McLaughlin punched her ticket to the athletics World Championships with a world record 51.41sec victory in the 400m hurdles at the US trials on Saturday. McLaughlin shaved five-hundredths of a second off the world record of 51.46 she set in winning Tokyo Olympics gold last August 4, delivering a dominant performance at Eugene's Hayward Field that saw runner-up Britton Wilson cross the line more than a second back in 53.08sec. Shamier Little was third in 53.92. The trio will represent the United States on the same Hayward Field track in July—when reigning World Champion Dalilah Muhammad also aims to defend her title.

With a bye as champion Muhammad—who beat McLaughlin in Doha in 2019 but took silver behind her in Tokyo—received a waiver to skip the trials to recover from a hamstring injury. McLaughlin showed she didn't need her great rival to push her to new heights in this championship season, and sounded a warning for those coming to challenge her in Eugene, where she broke the world record for the first time last June. "Anytime I come here I can just feel something amazing's going to happen," McLaughlin said.

She said nothing compared the "awe" of breaking the world record for the first time—but that doesn't mean she won't be aiming to do it again next month. "This is just a great indicator of where we are," she said. "Hopefully we're going to go home and work on a few things and try to come back and improve on it." Her performance capped a day of 11 finals and a farewell to the US championships for Olympic great Allyson Felix — 21 years after she ran in her first. —AFP