

Spotlight



SAUDI ATHLETES 2024

OLYMPIC GAMES 2024

Aiming for gold and glory

The Saudi contingent's 10 members are among the Arab world's impressive lineup of medal hopefuls in Paris

Ali Khaled Abu Dhabi

As the clock ticked down, Olympic karate gold beckoned for Tarek Hamdi.

With only seconds left of the Men's kumite +75kg final at the Tokyo 2020 Games, the Saudi fighter held what looked to be an unassailable lead against Iranian opponent Sajjad Ganjzadeh. A historic first gold medal for the Kingdom at the Olympic Games was all but a formality.

Instead, Hamdi was agonizingly denied gold, receiving a penalty after he was judged to have knocked out Ganjzadeh with an illegal kick to the head. A heartbroken Hamdi had to be content with a still-remarkable silver medal. The then-22-year-old received a hero's welcome on his return home, his performance having set a new standard for Saudi athletes, many of whom are still finding their feet at this level of competition.

Others also performed with distinction without coming

as close Hamdi to glory.

Rower Hussein Alireza fought valiantly despite having sustained an injured rib only weeks before the Games, while his fellow Saudi flag-bearer at the opening ceremony in Tokyo — 100m runner Yasmeen Al-Dabbagh — became only the second Saudi female to participate in the track and field category, following Sarah Attar at London 2012.

Saudi Arabia's Under-23 footballers, led by coach Saad Al-Shehri, performed well in all three matches of a very tough group in Tokyo, but ultimately lost 2-1 to Cameroon, 3-2 to Germany, and 3-1 to the eventual gold medalists Brazil.

The Saudi showjumping team consists of Ramzy Al-Duhami, Abdullah Alsharbatly, Khaled Almohty and Abdulrahman Alrajhi, all of whom have a shot at glory between Aug. 1-6, first in the individual competition and then as a foursome in the team competition.

Special mention must go to 52-year-old Al-Duhami and

SIX ARAB ATHLETES TO LOOK OUT FOR

WOMEN

Sara Samir (Egypt)
Weightlifting



Kaylia Nemour (Algeria)
Artistic gymnastics



Dunya Aboutaleb (Saudi Arabia)
Taekwondo



MEN

Djamel Sedjati (Algeria)
Athletics



Ahmad Abu Al-Soud (Jordan)
Gymnastics



Ramzi Boukhiam (Morocco)
Surfing



41-year-old Alsharbatly, who, alongside Kamal Bahamdan and Prince Abdullah Al-Saud, won the bronze medal in the equestrian team jumping event at the 2012 Olympics in London. In Paris, Al-Dunami will be taking part in a remarkable sixth Olympic Games.

The Kingdom's swimming ambitions will rest on the shoulders of 17-year-old Mashael Al-Ayed — Saudi Arabia's first female Olympic swimmer — in the Women's 200m freestyle, and, in the Men's 100m freestyle, on Zaid Al-Sarraj, who, at 16, is the youngest member of the Saudi contingent this year.

Elsewhere, there will be hopes for further success from Arab athletes and teams. The football competition kicked off two days before Friday's official ceremony and the three Arab teams emerged with fine results. Morocco beat Argentina 2-1 in Group B, albeit in controversial circumstances, while Iraq managed to beat Ukraine 2-1 in the same group. Egypt, will not be disheartened by a 0-0 draw

with the Dominican Republic.

For Tunisia, the teenage swimmer Ahmed Hafnaoui, who struck gold in the Men's 400m freestyle competition in Tokyo, is back again, but sadly the country's tennis superstar Ons Jabeur has had to pull out of the Paris Games. Several North African stars will, however, once again have high hopes of glory. Heading the hopefuls is Algerian runner Djamel Sedjati, who is chasing gold after a stunning run of form in the build-up to Paris 2024, one that has raised the tantalizing possibility of breaking David Rudisha's 12-year-old world record in the 800 meters.

Ramzi Boukhiam, the first Moroccan or Arab surfer to qualify for the World Surf League's Championship Tour, will take part in his second successive Olympics, while his compatriot Fatima Ezzahra Gardadi will aim for a podium place when she runs the marathon on Aug. 11.

Meanwhile, 17-year-old Algerian gymnastics prodigy Kaylia Nemour will be hopeful

of a medal placing after a series of international podium finishes in recent years. Perhaps the highest-profile Arab athlete remains Qatar's Mutaz Barshim, who in Tokyo memorably decided to share high jump gold with his Italian rival and friend Gianmarco Tamberi amid unique scenes of celebration. With two silver medals from London 2012 and Rio 2016, he competes in Paris as one of the region's most decorated sportsmen.

Finally, many eyes will be on the 10-strong Palestinian contingent, who will take part in Paris with the specter of the war in Gaza hanging over them. "I'm going to the Olympics not just for myself, but for all of Palestine," 20-year-old boxer Waseem Abu Sal, who will be fighting in the 57kg category in Paris, told Arab News recently. "I'm fighting to show the world our dignity and to preserve our identity."

From North Africa through the Middle East and to the Gulf, Arab athletes at Paris 2024 will echo those sentiments.