

Sports

Asher-Smith leads three British muses in bid for world athletics glory

DOHA: Sprinter Dina Asher-Smith will lead a trio of women with high hopes at the World Athletics Championships in Doha of heralding a new golden era for British track and field. Asher-Smith — who will compete in the individual 100 metres and 200m as well as the 4x100m relay — along with Laura Muir in the 1500m and heptathlete Katarina Johnson-Thompson carry more than just pressure to win medals.

British Athletics chiefs hope the talented trio can give a boost to the sport whose public profile has waned with the retirements of 2012 Olympic gold medalists Ennis-Hill and Greg Rutherford while Farah is focusing on the marathon and will not compete at these championships. Asher-Smith — who obtained a history degree while establishing herself on the track — was present back on ‘Super Saturday’ at the 2012 Olympics in London when Ennis-Hill in the heptathlon, Rutherford in the long jump and Farah in the 10,000 metres all won gold.

That night she was tasked with carrying the

kit for the competing athletes at the Olympic Stadium and their success — and especially Ennis-Hill’s — provided the drive to succeed herself. “I remember watching Jess Ennis-Hill win her final race and thinking how incredible it was that millions of people who did not even know her could become so proud of her in that one moment,” Asher-Smith told *The Stylist* magazine in 2016. “I was like, ‘I want to do that.’” Seven years later and Asher-Smith could be on the brink of just that in a global championships after becoming the undisputed queen of European sprinting last year with three gold medals.

The competition in Doha is of a different calibre, not least in the shape of Jamaican icon Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce and her compatriot, the double Olympic sprint champion from the 2016 Rio Games, Elaine Thompson.

However, Asher-Smith has more than held her own this season and gave Fraser-Pryce a good run for her money in the Anniversary Games in London. “We’ve planned it so we work backwards



BERLIN: In this file photo taken on August 11, 2018 Great Britain’s Dina Asher-Smith poses after the women’s 200m final race during the European Athletics Championships at the Olympic stadium in Berlin. — AFP

from the World Championships,” said Asher-Smith. “I’ll just keep training and working harder to make sure I’m in the best shape I can be.”

‘PLAY MIND GAMES’

Thompson-Johnson too has memories of

London 2012 having competed with Ennis-Hill in the heptathlon where she finished 13th. The 26-year-old Commonwealth Games champion’s duel with the formidable figure of Belgium’s Olympic, world and European champion Nafissatou Thiam should be one of the most memorable contests. The Briton will be encouraged by how close she ran Thiam in the seven-event discipline at last year’s European Championships. Her answer in how to finally beat the Belgian is not in the head but in the physical performance.

“Mind games is not my thing. I wouldn’t know how to get into other people’s heads,” she told the *Daily Mirror*. “Also that’s happened to me before in the past and it’s not a good way to try and win. “For me you’ve got to try and win with big performances. I would rather focus on myself and try and make me the best I can be rather than play mind games.” Muir comes to Doha as the 1500m European champion — the first Briton ever to hold that crown — and having won the Diamond League title twice, in 2016 and 2018. — AFP

Risks, benefits for boycott-hit Qatar at flagship athletics

DOHA: Qatar fires the starting gun for the World Athletics Championships today with an opportunity to showcase both its preparations for the 2022 football World Cup and how it is coping with a boycott by its neighbours, experts say.

But Doha also risks being “judged harshly” for missteps during the athletics showcase which could be held up by detractors as proof of its shortcomings. Since 2017 Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and their allies have enforced an economic boycott of Qatar, accusing it of supporting Iran and Islamist movements — charges it denies. They cut direct air, land and shipping routes, closed airspace to Qatari aircraft and restricted citizens from visiting.

Nonetheless Saudi will send three athletes, Egypt five, the UAE one, and Bahrain 21 to the event being held for the first time in the Middle East. Tobias Borck, an analyst at the Royal United Services Institute, said the Championships would give Qatar an opportunity to transcend the blockade, but might also highlight its isolation. “It’ll show Qatar’s good relations with the world, and its difficult relations in the region and especially with its neighbours,” he said. “Ticket sales seem to have been slow... but I’m not sure it’s directly related to the Gulf crisis.”

A western diplomat based in Doha described the Championships as “an opportunity for them to show the world they are not at all isolated”. “Rather, (they’re) quite eager and capable of playing host to the world. It will be a test of their preparedness for the World Cup,” she said. But the source warned Qatar would be “judged harshly for any missteps”. “So the pressure is on them to deliver this event in an efficient way for athletes and coaches — and an entertaining and hassle-free way for spec-

tators,” she said. “They will be closely watched!” Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper reported this week that free tickets would be distributed to labourers and children, bolstering crowds and offsetting the absence of regional spectators — claims the local organisers have denied.

‘OPEN FOR ALL’

International Association of Athletics Federations chief Sebastian Coe said last year he “fully expected a full contingent of federations” to attend. However, he did not comment on whether fans from boycotting countries would be in the stands.

“It’s very important that international sport consistently and continually makes the point that we have primacy over politics,” he said. But past events have highlighted the tensions and rivalries that plague the region.

The football Gulf Cup, meant to be hosted by Qatar beginning in December 2017, saw Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain withdraw, before rejoining after it was switched to Kuwait. Analyst James Dorsey said the biggest fallout may be for fans based in boycotting countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, who would face barriers to travelling to the marquee event.

“Should the boycott be maintained until the 2022 World Cup, it’s going to be a serious problem for those countries,” said Dorsey, a researcher at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies and the Middle East Institute in Singapore. The boycotting countries’ decision to send a handful of competitors “absolutely does not” represent a thawing of the diplomatic freeze, he told AFP. “Any country that boycotts an international tournament for which its athletes have qualified risks being suspended,” he said. He pointed to the Asian Cup in the UAE earlier this year when Qatar was permitted to play. But because of the ban on Qataris entering, the away side played with minimal support. The team nevertheless won the tournament. Chief organiser and IAAF vice-president Dahlan al-Hamad told AFP that Qatar’s “arms are open for all”. — AFP

No sweat for chilled athletes at Qatar worlds

DOHA: Athletes competing at the World Athletics Championships which kick off in Doha today will warm up on a field where daytime temperatures reach 38 degrees Celsius and humidity hovers around 50 percent. But they will then make their way 150 m through a unique cooling tunnel into the air-conditioned Khalifa stadium where the climate is maintained at a pleasant 23-25 degrees.

The sophisticated system is being held up by Qatari authorities as proof they will be able to keep 2022 football World Cup venues at comfortable temperatures, despite concerns over the impact of the Gulf climate. A computerized system will prepare athletes’ bodies for the differential by lowering the temperature in stages as they proceed through the brightly lit underground walkway into the 46,000-capacity venue.

“They will have a thermal journey,” said Sebastien Racinais, head of athlete health and performance research at Aspetar, the Gulf’s first specialized sports medicine hospital. “But the temperature will not be freezing in the stadium — it is actually not good to have too cold a temperature in the stadium. Heat is good for the sprinters, but it’s an additional stress for the endurance athletes.”

Racinais said that athletes would be readily able to adapt to the extremes of heat and humidity of Qatar’s Arabian desert climate if given time to acclimatize. “The human species is probably the animal species with the best heat adaptation capacity,” he said in his office overlooking the World Championship warm-up field. “After a few days of training in the heat, the athletes will undergo some heat adaptations.” One of them is an increase in

plasma which will expand blood volume so it can be sent both to the muscles and to the skin — for cooling purposes. Repeated exposure to the local climate would also allow athletes to increase their sweat rate “improving the efficiency of the cooling at the skin-level”, he added. Khalifa, the principal venue for the Championships, opened in 1976 and was entirely overhauled ahead of a relaunch in 2017. Its elaborate cooling system has been deployed during other high-profile athletics meetings including Diamond League events. “It is not strange that the world championships are held in summer or heat — but be assured that we care for the safety of players and crowds,” Qatar’s chief organizer for the Worlds, Dahlan Al-Hamad, told AFP. Organizers are understood to have disabled low-level vents in the stadium to eliminate any chance that air currents could affect events like the javelin.

HEAT IS THE NEW ALTITUDE

As well as adopting heat-combatting measures at the stadium, Doha organizers have dramatically altered the timing of the road races — staging them in the nighttime and shifting the marathon to midnight for the first time. “Before 2008 in Beijing (Olympics), everyone was saying it would be impossible to run a fast marathon because of heat — but at the end Samuel Wanjiru established a new Olympic record of two hours six minutes,” said Racinais. “We can expect it to be a bit slower — but not dramatically.”

While much attention has been paid to the issue of heat at the 2022 football World Cup, the conditions of Doha 2019 will be far more similar to those expected at the 2020 Summer Olympics in Japan. Aspetar has been collaborating with the International Olympic Committee ahead of the Tokyo Games, expected to be the hottest in history, on how best to manage heat and educate athletes. Some athletes will even ingest pill-sized thermometers to monitor the effects of Doha’s heat, with the data expected to be used to prepare for Tokyo, according to the IAAF. — AFP