

Sports

Judo legend Nomura hopes 'king' Riner can match Olympic hat-trick

TOKYO: France's Teddy Riner can cement his place as judo's "king" by winning his third Olympic gold in Tokyo — according to the only person ever to achieve the feat: Tadahiro Nomura. The retired Japanese judoka told AFP he would love to see Riner match his own triple tally at Tokyo's historic Nippon Budokan arena, and wants the French giant to "give a performance worthy" of his talents. Riner won his second Olympic title in 2016 in low-key fashion, beating Japan's Hisayoshi Harasawa in the +100kg final after a defensive display that drew boos from the Rio crowd. Nomura urged the French superstar to win with a touch more panache in Tokyo, even if it means Riner edging out his Japanese compatriot for the title again.

"It would be tough to see a Japanese fighter lose, but I'd also be happy to see Riner win the title," said Nomura, who won his first Olympic -60kg title at the 1996 Atlanta Games and defended it in Sydney and Athens. "My ideal would be for him not to be booed by the crowd, but to give a performance worthy of him as the king — to win his third title with strong judo."

Nomura said Riner will compete with "wounded pride" after his almost 10-year, 154-match unbeaten streak was ended by Japan's Kokoro Kageura in February 2020. That will make the French superstar "a scary prospect" for opponents in Tokyo, Nomura believes, and defeat may have helped refocus his mind.

"He has a different look in his eyes, and his body is different — he's sharp," Nomura said. "He wasn't in his best condition and he wasn't prepared, and he lost. He

knows that. It's wounded his pride and he'll be coming to win in Tokyo."

Knockout 'danger'

Nomura, still looking trim and toned under his sharp suit, has managed athletes and worked in the media since retiring at the age of 40 in 2015. He knows Riner well, having first met him on a trip to France in around 2007. He describes the French heavyweight as an "awesome athlete" who is "very kind and charming", and says Riner's 10 world championship titles make him "the king, definitely".

But Nomura remains the only athlete ever to win three Olympic judo gold medals — at least for now. And the Japanese legend knows first-hand how difficult it will be for Riner to match his achievement. Nomura says he expected Atlanta to be his first and last Olympics when he made his debut in 1996, but he grew in confidence as the competition progressed and ended up taking home the gold medal. He was at the top of his game in Sydney four years later, but the pressure that followed persuaded him to relocate to the United States in a bid to take the heat off. There, he rediscovered his love for judo, and decided to move back to Japan to aim for a third title in Athens.

"Many times, people said Nomura was finished, asked how long I was planning to cling on or told me I should retire," he said. "It was a question of if I believed in myself, and how serious I was about wanting it."

Nomura thinks Riner should already have won three Olympic gold medals, but points to his 2008 Beijing Games semi-final defeat to Uzbekistan's Abdullo Tangriev as "the danger of knockout competition". Instead, he thinks the "hallowed ground" of the Nippon Budokan, which hosted judo at the 1964 Tokyo Games, would be a fitting place for the Frenchman to finally complete his hat-trick. "Just going to that venue gives me a special feeling — I've only seen video footage of Olympic judo at the Budokan, so I'm really excited to see it with my own eyes," said Nomura. "Riner has said he's really looking forward to competing in Japan — the birthplace of judo. I'd love to see Harasawa against Riner in the final." — AFP



Rui Hachimura

NBA star, wrestling champ to carry Japan flag at Tokyo Olympics

TOKYO: NBA star Rui Hachimura will carry Japan's flag at the Tokyo Games, Japanese Olympic chiefs said yesterday — although fans might not be allowed into the stadium to watch the opening ceremony. The Washington Wizards forward will carry the flag along with twice-world-champion wrestler Yui Susaki at the July 23 opener for the pandemic-postponed Games.

But with concern growing again over rising coronavirus cases, organizers have said they may need to rethink attendance limits for Olympic events to reduce infection risks. Yesterday, Games chiefs said they would push back the announcement of results of a ticket lottery for oversubscribed events to Saturday — less than two weeks before the opening ceremony. The 23-year-old Hachimura, whose father is Beninese and mother is Japanese, said carrying his nation's flag was "a great honor".

"I'd love this to be an opportunity for kids and everyone else in Japan to watch me and my teammates playing at the Olympics, and take even more of an interest in basketball and sport as a whole," he said in a statement. In May, Hachimura hit out at racism on social media, saying he receives racist messages "almost every day".

Details of the opening ceremony have been kept under wraps, with local media reporting it will be half an hour longer to allow for COVID-19 countermeasures such as distancing. However it is still unclear how many seats, if any, will be filled at the national stadium. Organizers have set a limit of 10,000 domestic fans, or half of each venue's capacity. But Games president Seiko Hashimoto warned Friday that "having no spectators is an option".

No overseas spectators

Japan's coronavirus outbreak has not been as severe as in some countries, with around 14,800 deaths, but experts say another wave could stretch medical services as the Olympics begin. Media reports said Monday the government this week was likely to extend anti-virus measures in Tokyo and elsewhere, with a decision on Olympic fans to follow.

The current restrictions — which cap spectators at sports events to 5,000 — are due to end on Sunday but could now be in place during the Olympics, the reports said. No more tickets will be sold and spectators from overseas are barred. Olympic athletes have begun arriving in Tokyo, and on Sunday a Serbian rower tested positive for the virus at the airport. A member of the Ugandan team also tested positive for a second time, after being discharged following a period of isolation. On Sunday, a 53-year-old woman was arrested for spraying a runner in the nationwide torch relay with liquid from a water gun. The woman, who squirted the unspecified substance as the runner passed with the flame, said she was opposed to the Olympics being held. — AFP



TOKYO: This picture taken on June 25, 2021 shows Japanese judoka and Olympic gold medalist Tadahiro Nomura posing with gold medals from the 1996 Atlanta (left), 2000 Sydney (center) and 2004 Athens (right) games during a portrait session at AFP in Tokyo. — AFP

Osaka says preparing for Olympics, will do news conferences

TOKYO: Tennis star Naomi Osaka said yesterday she wants to be on top form at the Olympics and will take part in press conferences, after pulling out of several tournaments citing her struggles with depression and anxiety. The world number two told Japan's national broadcaster NHK she was getting ready to play on home turf at the pandemic-postponed Tokyo Games, after having withdrawn from Wimbledon and the French Open.

"I am preparing myself little by little so I can be at the top of my game for the Olympics," the 23-year-old wrote in a message published by the broadcaster. "Since getting the attention of the world, I've always had bouts of anxiety. This is especially the case in the lead up to big competitions."

Osaka set off a debate about mental health in June after abandoning her French Open campaign just one match in over a dispute on media duties. The Japanese player had said post-match news conferences were detrimental to her mental health and likened them to "kicking people when they're down".

She later revealed her battle with depression and anxiety in a post on social media, saying she wanted to take time away from the game to get better. In the message published by NHK, Osaka said she was "proud" to play for her country at the Games, adding that she would take part in news conferences while giving consideration to her mental health.

She was fined \$15,000 and threatened with disqualification from Roland Garros after refusing to honor mandatory media commitments. French Open organizers protested that they had treated her with "care and respect" after they were accused of being heavy-handed.

Osaka's agent said last month that she had withdrawn from Wimbledon to spend time with friends and family. But he added that she was "excited to play in front of her home fans" at Tokyo 2020, which begins on July 23. — AFP



LONDON: Tunisia's Ons Jabeur throws the ball to serve against Poland's Iga Swiatek during their women's singles match of the 2021 Wimbledon Championships in Wimbledon, southwest London yesterday. — AFP

History-making Jabeur beats Swiatek, will face Sabalenka in last-eight

LONDON: Ons Jabeur's historic Wimbledon campaign saw her reach the women's quarter-finals yesterday, beating Poland's 2020 French Open champion Iga Swiatek 5-7, 6-1, 6-1 in their fourth round match.

The 26-year-old is the first Tunisian woman to reach the last eight at Wimbledon and will face Belarus second seed Aryna Sabalenka who defeated Elena Rybakina 6-3, 4-6, 6-3. Sabalenka will be playing in her first Grand Slam quarter-final.

Jabeur showed great poise to stay in the match after she let slip a 5-4 lead and serving for the first set only for the Pole to reel off three games on the bounce. Swiatek, after a flat opening, had taken note of a young Polish fan holding up a board inscribed 'Jazda Iga' ('Come on Iga'). "It was a great match and I had to stay calm rather than get angry when I failed to close out the first set as getting angry would not have helped my cause," said Jabeur. "Today I decided to change my game a bit as everyone knows I am doing drop shots and being aggressive was key today." Jabeur never looked back once she had got over the loss of the first set. Her breaking her 20-year-old opponent in the first game of the second set set the tone for the rest of the encounter. — AFP



Kuwait hosts women's Paralympic championship

KUWAIT: The first local women's championship for Paralympic athletes was held in Kuwait recently under the patronage of Marzouq Al-Ghanem Committee for the Disabled. The championship included competitions in athletics, table tennis, and badminton and was

organized by the Paralympic Committee, Honorary Chairwoman of Kuwait Disabled Club Sheikha Sheikha Al-Sabah, Honorary Chairwoman of Irada club Sheikha Suhaila Al-Sabah, Deputy Chairman of the Paralympic Committee Faraj Marzouq and other dignitaries attended the closing ceremony.

Results of the tournament were as follows: Zainab Al-Khaldi won the gold medal in table tennis, meanwhile Malak Al-Enezi won the pioneers medal, Sarah Al-Salem won the gold medal in badminton, Basma Najem won the gold medal in shot put and the javelin throw, Latifah Al-Wazan won the gold medal in discus throw standing, and Sarah Al-Mutairi won the gold medal in the javelin throw standing.



KUWAIT: The Irada club's fencing team is getting ready for the Wheelchair Fencing World Cup, which takes place in Warsaw, Poland from July 7 to July 12.