

Sports

Rapinoe spurred by Olympic 2016 exit as US chase double

LOS ANGELES: The bitter memory of defeat is driving Megan Rapinoe and the United States women's football team as they chase an unprecedented double at the Olympics. Five years ago, the US women were bundled out of the Rio de Janeiro Olympics in the quarter-finals, losing to Sweden on penalties in an upset that shattered American hopes of a fourth consecutive gold medal. It marked the first time that the US has failed to reach the gold medal game since women's football was introduced at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

"It was terrible," Rapinoe said. "It felt like total failure. We didn't complete the task, we didn't play well and it was a particularly kind of gutting loss in a lot of ways. It was really sad. We had a lot of people in their first major championships, so that was tough to go out

as early as we did. I wouldn't say it left a bad taste in our mouth — it left a fire under people to never let that happen again. It gave a lot of us motivation. Everybody who was in Rio does not want that to be their last Olympic experience."

The ill-fated Rio campaign was a rare blemish on Rapinoe's dazzling record of success at international level. The 36-year-old midfielder is arguably the most recognizable member of an American women's team that has dominated international football for most of the past decade.

A key member of the US team that won the gold medal at the 2012 Olympics, Rapinoe was also a pillar of the squads that won back-to-back women's World Cups in 2015 and 2019. Since making her international debut in 2006, Rapinoe has accumulated 177 caps

with 59 goals and 69 assists.

She will spearhead a US team in Tokyo which is on a 44-game unbeaten streak, having not lost a game since a 3-1 defeat by France in January 2019. A gold medal in Tokyo would make the US women the first team to follow up a World Cup triumph with Olympic gold.

Pandemic's 'silver lining'

Rapinoe says the enforced break caused by the pandemic has benefited the US women in their quest for the double. "This was a nice silver lining of COVID and the pandemic — to have a year of rest," she said. "Some players played overseas, some players took more time for themselves, time that we never really get, to get our bodies right. I think of all the teams we probably have the most benefit because we would have been so tired after all the wildness of 2019."

The "wildness" of 2019 included her role in the US women's World Cup success, as well as a much-publicized spat with then US President Donald Trump. Rapinoe, who is openly gay, has forged a reputation as an unflinching advocate for social justice causes off the field, from demanding equal pay and conditions for her and team-mates to protesting against racial injustice.

"If there is a barrier in the way, I think I have to bust it down and extend beyond myself," Rapinoe says. "I have people listening to me, so I feel a responsibility to do what I can with what I have to try to make the world better in whatever way I'm able to."

Rapinoe is circumspect about her future playing career, stating repeatedly that she will reassess her options once the Olympics are done and dusted. Nevertheless, she has suggested she may attempt to prolong her career until the 2023 World Cup, when she will be 38. "I want to keep playing as long as I can," she said at the Forbes Power Women's Summit in December last year. "We have this short time in the span of our life to be an athlete. I think sometimes it feels long, like I've been doing this forever — but I don't really want to cut it short. It's an amazing job. Hopefully I can make it to Australia for a World Cup. That idea is pretty enticing, I feel like I'll still be clinging on for that one." — AFP



Allyson Felix

Golden girl Felix readies for Olympic swansong

LOS ANGELES: Whether she is straining every last sinew for the finish line or blazing a trail to ensure better treatment of female athletes everywhere, Allyson Felix has made a career out of fighting. The 35-year-old elder stateswoman of US track and field brings the curtain down on her 17-year Olympic career in Tokyo, ending an odyssey that began when she competed as a teenage prodigy at the 2004 Athens Games.

Felix's fifth and final Olympics will almost certainly see her become the most decorated female track and field athlete in the history of the Games. She is currently tied with Jamaican legend Merlene Ottey with nine medals, a dazzling haul that includes six golds and three silvers.

One more medal in Tokyo — virtually guaranteed given her place in the dominant US women's 4x400m relay squad — will see her pull clear of Ottey. If she wins two or more — another possibility given her likely place in the mixed gender 4x400 relay team — she will overtake Carl Lewis as the most decorated American track athlete in history.

It will be a fitting conclusion to the final phase of a career that has seen Felix become accustomed to battling through adversity, on and off the track. A chaotic, pandemic-disrupted build-up to Tokyo left Felix with nowhere to train at times last year, forcing her to perform improvised sprint workouts on the streets of her neighborhood in suburban Los Angeles.

She booked her place on the US team for Tokyo with a typically gutsy performance at the Olympic trials in Eugene, Oregon in June, digging deep to secure second place with a time of 50.02sec after lagging behind in fourth place heading into the home straight.

'I have to fight'

"I told myself before the race that when it comes down to it, I have to fight," Felix said after that performance. "That's been a theme of mine for the past couple years. I was just gonna give my all and leave it all on the track." In the final years of her career, Felix has emerged as a leading voice for the rights of women athletes. In 2019, she made headlines after denouncing long-time sponsors Nike over the company's maternity practices, calling for greater support for female athletes who take time off from the sport to have children. "If we have children, we risk pay cuts from our sponsors during pregnancy and afterward," Felix wrote in a New York Times editorial.

"It's one example of a sports industry where the rules are still mostly made for and by men," added Felix, who gave birth to daughter Camryn in November 18 after an emergency C-section. The effects of Felix's criticisms were striking. Nike swiftly changed its policy, vowing to ensure no female athlete is adversely impacted financially by pregnancy.

Felix meanwhile signed a new sponsorship deal with the Athleta leisurewear company, in a move she says redefines "what sponsorship looks like". Booking her place on the Tokyo team was made sweeter by the fact that daughter Camryn was on hand to greet her at the finish line. Felix says motherhood has been a driving force as she seeks to make the most of the final years of her career. "I wanted to really show her that, no matter what, you do things with character, integrity, and you don't give up." — AFP

'Rock bottom'

His aversion to vegetables and fondness for "Black Thunder" chocolate bars are also well known, but when it comes to competition, he is all business. "I just want to give a performance that I'm satisfied with," he said in June. "After that, it's up to the people watching to decide what they think."

Uchimura has struggled with injuries since the Rio Games, and had described his chances of appearing in Tokyo as "a fairytale" in 2019. But after taking radical action and dropping every event but the horizontal bar, he is now ready to make his dreams come true. "If it hadn't been for that, I don't think I would be here today," he said of his injury struggles. "I think people can come back stronger when they hit rock bottom."

Japan will have to do without him as they try to defend their team title in Tokyo, however. Uchimura recently described himself as "an ancient fossil" compared to newcomers such as 18-year-old Takeru Kitazono — winner of five gold medals at the 2018 Youth Olympics.

But the veteran is now ready to act as a big brother to the new generation. "I'm not competing in the team event, but I feel I have to use my experience in different ways," Uchimura said. "I think I can play a part beyond the actual competition."

After his last Olympics, Uchimura is likely to stick around for one final world championship in Japan this October. He has described himself as "the kind of person who doesn't dwell much on the past". But he did allow himself a moment of reflection after booking his place at Tokyo. "It's something I can't even take in myself," he said. "It's amazing, when you look at it objectively." — AFP



EAST HARTFORD: Megan Rapinoe of the United States is announced during the Send Off ceremony following the Send Off series match against Mexico at Rentschler Field on July 05, 2021 in East Hartford, Connecticut. - AFP

Reluctant star Dressel set to shine at Tokyo Olympics

LOS ANGELES: Thirteen world titles and a reputation as a worthy successor to Michael Phelps haven't made Caeleb Dressel any more comfortable with fame. But the US swim star will likely just have to get used to it at the Tokyo Olympics, where the 24-year-old could become just the fourth swimmer in history to win seven medals in a single Games. That's a list led, of course, by Phelps's dazzling eight golds in eight events at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. That eclipsed the record seven swimming golds won by Mark Spitz in Munich in 1972. American Matt Biondi won five golds, a silver and a bronze in Seoul in 1988.

Dressel has limbered up for a big Olympic splash with a record eight-medal tally — including six gold — at the 2019 World Championships — adding them to the seven he won at the 2017 worlds. Dressel is certainly interested in transferring that success to the Olympics, even if he's not enamored of the hoopla that surrounds the Games or concerned with cross-over stardom. "I don't very much care for the spotlight," Dressel said before the US trials — where he was impressed, if slightly bemused, that sponsor Toyota displayed a car emblazoned by a Texas artist with an approximation of his intricate tattoos.

Featured in GQ magazine's pre-Olympic coverage, widely touted by US Olympic broadcaster NBC as a face of the American team, Dressel is firmly focused on his job in the pool, a job that hasn't changed despite the one-year pandemic delay of the Tokyo Games.

With the sudden shut-down of competition in March of 2020, Dressel compensated by joining family members in hiking the Appalachian Trail, calling it a life-changing experience. "I feel like I learned a lot more about myself, my family and everything going on around me more on the trail than I did with the Olympic Games," he said. This year Dressel's personal horizons expanded again when he married fiancée Meghan Haala on Valentine's Day — although he let slip at a pre-trials press conference in June that he "never missed a practice for my wedding. I swam the morning of my wedding."

Day-in, day-out focus

Coach Gregg Troy was quick to point out that was Dressel's decision entirely. "He had the time off," Troy said. "He chose to do it himself." That's a reflection of how Dressel's focus in the pool has remained the same throughout the pandemic delay. "The only thing that's changed for me is instead of 2020 Games it's 2021," Dressel said. "Perspective hasn't changed. Same focus, day-in and day-out, looking for ways to get better, and I'm going to stick to that."

Dressel tackles three individual events in Tokyo — the 50m and 100m freestyle and the 100m butterfly. He's the two-time reigning world champion in all three and the 100m fly world record-holder. There's also a possible four relays on his card as he stands poised to cement an Olympic legacy that began when he earned two relay golds — as the leadoff swimmer in the 4x100m free and a heats swimmer in the medley relay — at the Rio de Janeiro Olympics, where he was sixth in the 100m free. While Phelps was tight-lipped during his career about any uncertainties that gnawed at him, Dressel is up-front about the emotional ups and downs he goes through during meets. After his historic performance at the 2019 worlds he told USA Today: "Part of me is very happy. Part of me wants to cry that I'm done with it. I've got pimples on my face from just the stress of the meet. I'm probably losing some hair." At the US trials in June, where his first final didn't come until the fifth day of the eight-day meeting, he admitted it was an agonizing wait. When he hits the water, none of that turmoil is evident, though Dressel himself says he still feels like the wide-eyed 15-year-old who contested his first US Olympics trials in 2012. — AFP

Biles tackling History, herself at Olympics

LOS ANGELES: Simone Biles heads into the Olympics bidding to crown the greatest gymnastics career in history with only herself to beat. The 24-year-old American superstar has not lost an all-around competition since 2013, an eight-year era of domination that has encompassed 19 world championship gold and four Olympic golds.

In Tokyo, Biles is poised to become the first woman in more than half a century to retain the all-around title, and could well end up equaling Soviet gymnast Larisa Latynina's record of nine Olympic gold medals. To do that, Biles will need to win four individual events — all-around, floor, vault and beam — while leading the United States to victory in the team competition. Few are betting against her. In fact, Biles has been in a league of her own for so long, she has recently taken to wearing a leotard decorated with silver rhinestones in the shape of a goat's head — a reference to her being regarded by many as the "G.O.A.T." — greatest of all-time. In other sports, that sort of confidence might risk being perceived as arrogance. Where Biles is concerned, it is more a matter of fact. Biles herself says the "G.O.A.T." design was meant to inspire others. "I just hope that kids growing up watching this don't or aren't ashamed of being good at whatever they do," she said in a recent interview. "I want kids to learn that, yes, it's okay to acknowledge that you're good or even great at something."

This year, Biles has underscored her greatness by becoming the first woman ever to pull off a Yurchenko double pike — a complex, gravity-defying vault that no other woman has attempted in competition.

Risk without reward?

Whether Biles — who already has four signature moves named after her — will attempt the move in

Gymnastics star Uchimura laser-focused for final Olympics

TOKYO: He's the Japanese gymnastics superstar with a sweet tooth heading to his fourth Olympics, but this summer promises to be a different experience for "King" Kohei Uchimura. The 32-year-old etched his name into Olympic history at the Rio Games in 2016, becoming the first male gymnast in 44 years to retain his all-around title.

He also led Japan to team gold in Brazil, cementing his place as one of his country's most revered athletes. His chocolate-loving, Pokemon Go-playing persona has also made him a favorite with Japanese fans, revealing a different side to the man considered one of the best gymnasts ever.

But persistent shoulder pain has forced Uchimura to adjust his sights on home turf at the Tokyo Olympics, which will certainly be his last. The gymnast, who took up the sport at the age of three, will forgo the defense of his all-around title to compete only on the horizontal bar.

His desire to win more Olympic gold remains as strong as ever though, and his rivals can expect nothing less than laser focus. "If I had given a perfect performance here, it would have been difficult to top that at the Olympics," he said after qualifying for the

Tokyo remains to be seen. The International Gymnastics Federation refuses to acknowledge the added difficulty of the move by giving it a start value that is broadly in line with less difficult vaults, meaning that as far Biles is concerned, there is additional risk without reward. A similar criticism has been leveled at the scoring for Biles' signature double-twisting, double-back beam dismount. Biles believes the scoring of the two moves is being kept artificially low in order to prevent her from running away with the competition. "They're both too low and they even know it," she told the New York Times earlier this year. "They don't want the field to be too far apart. And that's just something that's on them. That's not on me." The mere fact that Biles is returning to defend her title is unusual. At 24, she would be the oldest winner of the Olympic all-around crown since Vera Caslavka won the second of her two gold medals in 1968 at the age of 26 years and 171 days. Every winner of the title since 1976 has been a teenager.

Biles admits that last year's pandemic-induced postponement of the Olympics — and the thought of having to subject her body to another year of punishing workouts to maintain fitness — prompted thoughts of retirement. "I wanted to give up," Biles said earlier this year. "Once it was postponed it was, like, I've gone too far to give up now." Biles says she has also grown in confidence in recent years, often leading criticism of USA Gymnastics (USAG) and the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee over their handling of the Larry Nassar sexual abuse scandal.

In 2018, Biles revealed she was among the hundreds of gymnasts who was sexually abused by Nassar, the former Olympic team doctor who is now serving a life prison sentence for his crimes. Biles has since led calls for USAG and the USOPC to hold a wide-ranging investigation into the scandal.

When USAG tweeted a birthday message to Biles last year, she responded bluntly: "How about you amaze and do the right thing — have an independent investigation." Biles says that her position of prominence helps maintain pressure on USAG and the USOPC. "I'm still here, so it's not going to disappear," she told Glamour magazine recently. "We have power behind it." — AFP



RIO DE JANEIRO: This file photo taken on August 10, 2016 shows Japan's Kohei Uchimura celebrating after winning the men's individual all-around final in the artistic gymnastics at the Olympic Arena during the Rio 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. — AFP

Games at the All Japan Apparatus Championships in June. "It's better to have made some mistakes, to make you more determined to train for the Olympics."

Uchimura took up the sport as a toddler in his native Nagasaki at the encouragement of his parents — both former gymnasts. His iron determination and superhuman concentration soon brought him international success, and he won the first of his 10 world championship golds in 2009. But he also cuts a relaxed figure away from the mat, making headlines at the start of the Rio Games after racking up a 500,000 yen (\$4,500) phone bill playing Pokemon Go on his arrival in Brazil.