

Lucy ready to Rock as Paris beckons

IRELAND SEVENS star Lucy Rock was battling injury as Olympics selection time was getting closer and closer.

There was rehab session after rehab session through March to mid-June and the chance to get a run on the Sevens circuit before season-end passed.

Then the phone lit up; it was the IRFU asking could Lucy come in and see them...

"It was face to face with David Nucifora (IRFU Performance Director) and Allan Temple-Jones (Sevens coach), two guys who I've known my whole career," says Rock, who admits her heart was in her boots.

"They told me I'd been selected. When you most think you are really up against it, whether it's going to happen or not, it was an amazing feeling. I'll remember that for the rest of my life."

David actually started the same time as I first got contracted, our two careers coinciding with each other from start to finish which is mad.

"I broke down in tears and so did the two guys and it was a really, really special moment. It's all I've ever wanted. It's all any of us have ever wanted."

"But then also you've got the other side where I had a lot of boxes to still tick and I still do. And all of us do. Yeah, just getting there and please God it will all go to plan."

The goal now is to put all that in the past and concentrate on Paris.

"I want to turn up there and find a way to own it. It's our Olympics. I won't ever get another one again."

I want it to be my Olympics and my Olympic journey, not me following Rhasidat Adeleke around the village

"So you've got heavy legs and then you've got to try and find a way to actually stick to a process."



IRELAND'S CALL: Lucy Rock and team-mates during the Team Ireland Paris 2024 team training for Rugby Sevens

AMBITIONS: Palestinian boxer Waseem Abu Sal training at a gym in Ramallah in the occupied West Bank last month



FOCUS: Palestinian boxer Waseem Abu Sal during a training session at a gym in Ramallah and (left) Palestinian swimmer Yazan Al Bawwab

We don't want pity, we're going to Games with dignity and pride

EVERY Olympic journey is different. Every dream unique.

For the seven members of the Palestinian team travelling to Paris, this year's Games is about more than medals.

It's about hope.

"We have many goals through our participation in the Olympics. The first one is to preserve the national identity of Palestinians," says Nader Jayousi, Palestine's Chef de Mission.

"We don't need anybody's pity. We don't need people to pity us. We need to show how much dignity we have as a nation," he says.

"That's why, in the middle of all this tragedy, we're sending our kids to training camps because we want them to be very well prepared and to show up to the ring or field of play with pride and dignity."

"Also we need to show that our technical level is getting better year by year. Even if we don't get medals in this Olympics, we are

PALESTINIAN TEAM WANT TO GIVE HOPE AGAINST TRAGIC BACKDROP OF GAZA WAR



David COUGHLAN EXCLUSIVE

coming for medals in the next Olympics."

It's Tuesday afternoon and Jayousi is in Ramallah, finalising plans for Palestine's Olympic team.

Weeks

Seven athletes will represent the state in Paris over the next few weeks: Omar Ismail (taekwondo), Yazan Al Bawwab and Valerie Tarazi (swimming), Fares Badawi (judo), Jorge Antonio Salhe (sneet shooting), Mohamad Edweedar (800m athletics)

and Waseem Abu Sal (boxing). Their participation comes against the backdrop of conflict in Gaza and tension and violence in the occupied West Bank.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas gunmen entered Israel from Gaza, killing around 1,200 people and taking more than 250 hostages.

Since then Israeli forces have killed more than 37,000 people in Gaza and reduced cities to rubble, leading to an overwhelming human catastrophe.

Palestine's Olympic football coach Hani Al-Masdar is among those killed and much of the state's sporting infrastructure has been destroyed.

"Over 300 from the sports movement have been killed," says Jayousi. "One of our best talents is Tamer Qaoud, he's a 1500m

runner. We have been trying to get him out of Gaza to a training camp in Algeria.

"Unfortunately, until now we couldn't and the kid is suffering inhuman conditions in Rafah."

Unsuitable

Paris-bound 800m runner Edweedar is based in Jericho and often trains on an unsuitable cement track.

There is a national standard track at Kadoorie University in Tulkarm, but movement between cities in the West Bank is challenging and dangerous with roadblocks and violence.

"It's been difficult, but it got more difficult recently. At any point there could be an incident in the West Bank, you can never guarantee your safety," he says.

Help

Jayousi stepped in again to help.



LEARNING HIS WAY: Nader Jayousi with a young Waseem Abu Sal who was just starting out

championships — he was a very promising kid."

Years later, when Jayousi took up his role with the Palestinian Olympic Committee, Harara became Abu Sal's coach.

But since October they have been unable to work together in person.

"They would have a video call in the morning and Ahmed would be coaching him in his strength and conditioning programme," says Jayousi.

"And I would do the boxing, technical work with him in the evening."

Finding suitable training partners is another challenge and Abu Sal often spars with fighters from vastly different weight categories.

"We don't have any sparring partners," says Jayousi.

"We don't have anybody on the level of Waseem. So we were kind of counting on the international training camps and competitions to give him the experience we want him to get."

"But after October it became very hard to send him with a shortage of funding."

Visas are another challenge for Palestinian athletes, but they managed to get Abu Sal to a training camp in Milan and to the Olympic qualifiers in Milan and Bangkok.

He lost to Georgian Artyush Gomtshyan in Milan and to Lee Cheng-wei of Taipei in Bangkok but was given a wildcard place in Paris as part of the universality quota system.

"Waseem is well-travelled, so it became easier for us to apply for a visa, but that's easier compared to other Palestinians — I don't compare it to the rest of the world," says Jayousi.

Facilitated

"For visas, it's still a headache for us, but it's 10 times harder for anyone from Gaza."

"But I've got to say the Paris 2024 organising committee and the French Consulate in Jerusalem were both greatly cooperative when it came to the visa of coach Ahmed Harara."

"They facilitated all of that and we finally got Ahmed out of Egypt to go to France."

Earlier this week Abu Sal and Harara were reunited at a training camp in Nancy.

The swimmers are currently in Nanterre, while taekwondo athlete Ismail has just completed a training camp in Kazakhstan.

They will all soon be making their way to Paris, where they will be joined by the rest of the team and a small number of coaches and support staff.

For Jayousi, it's now about giving hope to the Palestinian people.

"To be a role model to other Palestinians — I think we should focus on that now," he says.

"Put all the medals aside, it's about the kids who are completely losing hope of life, to make them see a Palestinian from their country, from their land, from their neighbourhood, from their city, to show them that he or she is representing them in the Olympics."

"I think it's extremely important to pass on that hope."



TENSION HIGH: Sonia O'Sullivan

Rivals' bust-up allowed Sonia in

David COUGHLAN

SONIA O'Sullivan has revealed an argument between her Ethiopian rivals in the 5000m final at the 2000 Sydney Olympics played a small role in her silver medal success.

Gete Wami, who would finish third, Ayelech Worku (fourth) and Werkesch Kidane (seventh) apparently came with a plan to run the Cobh woman out of the race.

But in the latest episode of the RTE Radio One series Chapters of Magnificence, O'Sullivan explains how it panned out very differently, to her advantage.

"I believe the Ethiopians had a plan, they were supposed to burn me off in the middle of the race," she says.

Race

"They had a bit of an argument in the race, so I suppose I was able to take advantage of that."

"It was a pretty loaded field and there was a lot of tension going into that final."

"The big thing for me was that I wanted to run well. Walk off the track happy."

"To feel like that, I didn't have to have a medal."

"I was fit and ready to run a good race. Maybe in hindsight, maybe I wasn't as determined to win, as focused as I had been in the past."

"Maybe that helped me as well. Barcelona '92 was a surprise, it was exciting, and then in '96 it was a huge disappointment — the expectation was beyond me."

"I felt for Sydney I just had to get a good result. I didn't want to be in the despond of the stadium again and lost."

"I knew I'd finished fourth before, so I thought, 'I'm a lot more experienced, I'm a better athlete than then. I just have to be smart and run the best race I can and just believe that I can do that.'"

Chapters of Magnificence: Tomorrow, 7.30pm on RTÉ Radio 1.