

Kyrgyz Athlete Could Get Medal, Then Jail

July 24, 2012



Kyrgyz swimmer Dmitrii Aleksandrov, right, hanging a flag with his coach at London's Olympic Park on Sunday. **Jae C. Hong**

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan — One of Kyrgyzstan's best Olympic medal hopes will compete in London under threat of a possible jail term after being charged with assault in a case that has divided opinion at home.

Teenage wrestler Aisuluu Tynybekova, a contender in the women's freestyle at the 63 kg weight class, will appear in court next month to answer the charge following a fracas outside an ice cream stall in the capital of the Central Asian country.

At a hearing Friday, Judge Sania Branchayeva postponed the trial until Aug. 15 in order to allow Tynybekova to compete in London.

Her trainer guaranteed her return after the games, which run from July 27 to Aug. 12.

The charge carries a maximum jail term of five years.

The controversial case has split opinion in Kyrgyzstan, where some local media have accused the plaintiff of attempting to cash in on 19-year-old Tynybekova's fame.

With national pride at stake, Kyrgyzstan has promised a \$200,000 prize for any athlete who can bring home a gold medal from London. A silver medalist stands to win \$150,000 and a bronze medalist \$100,000, drawn from a special Olympic fund.

The often-volatile country, which has twice overthrown a president since 2005, has an economy that relies heavily on production from a single gold mine and money sent home from its hundreds of thousands of migrant workers.

"We know it won't be easy. There is a lot of competition. But we believe the flag of Kyrgyzstan will be raised above the Olympic podium," President Almazbek Atambayev told athletes in a pre-Olympics meeting this week.

But the plaintiff, Nurilya Kochkorbayeva, has denied that the case is motivated by money.

She rejected an out-of-court settlement and held a news conference on Thursday to publicly withdraw a separate civil case for damages worth about \$10,000.

"I want everything to be done according to the law. This is a criminal case. What have the Olympics got to do with it?" she told reporters during a break in Friday's hearing.

Tynybekova grew up in a remote mountain village before moving to study economics in Bishkek, where she was discovered by her coach wrestling in the university gym.

Kochkorbayeva is the mother of a 17-year-old girl who says she was assaulted by Tynybekova and her co-accused, Rozaliya Tilegenova. The accused both say they were provoked.

The incident occurred on April 3. Tynybekova's coach, Nurbek Izabekov, said the two accused were lining up in a crowded underpass to buy ice cream when they were confronted by a group of three teenage girls and two boys.

One of the girls barged into Tynybekova and shouted insults before following her from the underpass and pulling her hair, Izabekov said. The incident was over in a few seconds.

Izabekov added that the wrestling federation received a letter of complaint several days later, only after a local television channel aired a report on Tynybekova's Olympic preparations.

"She doesn't believe that she's guilty, simply that people are using this incident to blacken her name," Izabekov said.

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