Ukraine Women Claim Biathlon Olympic Gold Amid Upheaval at Home

By The Moscow Times

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Ukraine's biathlon women won their first Olympic gold in Sochi on Friday. **Evgeny Biyatov**

By Rick Maese

The four women joined hands and flung their arms in the air before taking four bows, like a theatrical company receiving a standing ovation. Their performance was one that, for the moment at least, seemed to transcend sport.

With the streets of Kiev still smouldering from a week of anti-government protests, the women of Ukraine's biathlon team maintained their focus, drew inspiration from well-wishers back home and on Friday managed to win gold at the Winter Olympics.

"It is the dream of a whole lifetime," said Vita Semerenko, 28, competing in her second Olympics for Ukraine. "Our dream and the dream of the whole of Ukraine has come true."

Ukraine has been marred by violent street protests in Kiev this week that have left dozens

dead and hundreds injured. The horrific images have drawn worldwide attention, but in Sochi, the violence has been particularly difficult to ignore for the country's Olympic athletes.

One skier, Bogdana Matsotska, and her father-coach, Oleg, left Sochi in protest of the crackdown on anti-government protesters, posting a note on Facebook criticizing President Viktor Yanukovych on Facebook. "He has violated the eternal rule of the Olympics — peace during the Games," the note said.

Just as the volatile situation in Ukraine inched its way toward a cautious resolution, the country's underdog biathlon team took the course at the picturesque Laura Cross-Country Ski and Biathlon Center, near a peak in the Western Caucasus mountains.

The team's anchor, Olena Pidhrushna, 27, said she had been inundated with messages of support in recent days and drew inspiration reading through her emails Friday morning before her team strapped on their skis and loaded their .22 caliber rifles.

Less than 90 minutes later, Pidhrushna and her teammates had surprised many in the field by winning Ukraine's first gold at a Winter Olympics since Oksana Baiul's in women's figure skating in 1994. They beat Russia, the reigning Olympic champion, which took silver.

"We are so happy that the people of Ukraine are happy back home and that something good happened for our country," she said.

Pidhrushna said the Ukrainian athletes had tried to avoid news reports from home in recent days, focusing their energies instead on their Olympic competition. Her husband, Oleksy Kayda, is a member of a right-wing opposition party in the Ukraine parliament, so the political unrest inevitably surfaced in conversations.

"He said he didn't know how to support me and improve my mood. . . . I can only thank him for trying to protect me from everything that is happening at home," Pidhrushna said. "We only know the minimum of what is happening there, and that is a good thing."

The team, which consists of twin sisters Valj and Vita Semerenko, Juliya Dzhyma and Pidhrushna, was not considered a gold medal favorite. Biathlon is a popular sport in parts of Europe, particularly in many of the former Soviet republics, and combines shooting and cross-country skiing. A form of it was contested in the 1924 Games, and it became a permanent part of the Olympic program in 1960.

The 4x6-kilometer relay requires all athletes to be at the top of their game — both on skis and taking aim at targets — and no one was better Friday than the Ukrainian women, who finished the race in 1:10:2.5 hours, more than 26 seconds ahead of Russia.

At the finish line, Pidhrushna collapsed face down after completing the final leg and was quickly swallowed whole by teammates and coaches. In the stands, Ukrainian flags flapped frantically, and the crowd's roar lasted for a minute.

A few minutes later, Valj Semerenko stood with her teammates on the top platform for the flower ceremony — the athletes will receive their golden neckware at a medals ceremony on Saturday — and couldn't stop the tears. The bottled-up emotions of several years of athletic training were only amplified by several days of uncertainty back home.

"I tried to calm down and was trying to hide it behind my skis," she said. "They were tears of happiness, not only mine but of the whole country, our team."

The win made waves from Sochi to Kiev. As Yanukovych and three Ukrainian opposition leaders signed a deal aimed at ending the crisis, the embattled president took a moment to recognize the country's first gold of these Olympics.

"It is a pleasure to note that each of you has demonstrated your skills, talent, power and will to win," Yanukovych said in a statement. "Together you have achieved a high result."

While Ukraine hadn't won Winter Olympic gold in two decades, Friday's win marked the second medal for the county in Sochi after Vita Semerenko took bronze in the women's 7.5-kilometer sprint. A total of 43 athletes were part of the Ukraine delegation scheduled to compete in Sochi.

The victorious biathlon team appeared at a news conference following the race, where Pidhrushna urged a room full of journalists, Olympic volunteers and race officials to hold a minute of silence in memory of those killed during the political unrest.

"We dedicate this victory to the whole of Ukraine," Pidhrushna said. "We concentrated on the race. We are professional athletes. Despite everything that's happening at home, we went out to the start line with the intent of performing as we are able to. We know what we had to do and how."

Sergei Bubka was also there. Bubka is one of Ukraine's most successful athletes, a longtime world record holder in pole vault and four-time Olympian who won gold at the 1988 Games. Now the head of Ukraine's Olympic Committee, Bubka has struggled to process what has unfolded back home.

"This is a message for a better future," he said. "What can be a better message for the people? We need this moment."

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