

The Fall Guys: Russian Paralympians Stuck on Road to Rio

Barred from Rio, Russia's Paralympic team still hope to make it to the Games by contesting the ban.

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Russia's Paralympic athletes didn't see it coming. "We thought they would punish those accused of doping and allow clean athletes to compete," says Alexei Ashapatov, two-time Paralympic track-and-field champion. "We didn't expect them to ban the entire team."

Ashapatov was in the middle of a training session when The Moscow Times called him for an interview. "We are all continuing to train," he said, "even though everyone is upset and worried by the decision."

By the time the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) announced their decision to ban

Russia's entire Paralympic team from the Rio Games, it had seemed that Russia's Olympic hardships were finally in the past. Its Olympic squad was already competing in Rio de Janeiro, having avoided being barred from the Games at the very last minute. Athletes were scoring their first medals, and doing their best to ignore some boos and jeers from spectators.

Yet on Aug. 7, IPC president Philip Craven stunned the world by announcing the whole Paralympic team would be banned from competing in Rio. In forthright comments, Craven said Russia's anti-doping system was "broken, corrupted and entirely compromised," with a "medals over morals" mentality.

The IPC based its decision on the same damning WADA report that their colleagues at the International Olympic Committee had studied. According to the report, Russian government had promoted a state-sponsored doping program for their athletes between 2011 and 2015. Twenty-seven samples relating to eight Paralympic sports were manipulated. The IPC also found evidence that samples were swapped during the 2014 Sochi Paralympics.

With a month until the opening of the 2016 Summer Paralympics, Russia's 267 athletes still have a chance to make it to Brazil. Government officials have already filed an appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sports (CAS) in Lausanne and are hoping the decision can be overturned in time.

But the odds seem stacked against them.

Hopes Not Yet Crushed

The decision has hit the athletes hard. "I'm in my forties, and every Olympiad could become my last," Ashapatov told The Moscow Times. "It hurts to think that all the effort we've put into training could go to waste."

Ashapatov, 43, started off as an amateur volleyball player. After losing his leg in a tragic accident in 2002, he took on track and field, as well as continuing to play volleyball and train in arm wrestling. During the 2008 Beijing Paralympics, he won two gold medals in discus throwing and shot put, breaking world records in both. He repeated his success four years later at the 2012 London Paralympics, when he once again set new world records in both disciplines.

According to Ashapatov, doping among Paralympic athletes is not widespread. "There have been several individual cases, but I have never come across or even heard of doping being a common thing in my entire career in Paralympic sport," he says.

Valentina Zahgot, a rower who participated in the 2008 Beijing Paralympics, echoes his sentiment. "It is absurd. We only take meds which are required for our conditions," she told The Moscow Times. "Our health issues are complicated as they are, and no one wants to worsen them by doping."

Zhagot, 53, was on the Soviet national team in 1980s. She almost entirely lost her sight after a car accident in 2002, and took up Paralympic rowing five years later. Zhagot took part in the Beijing Paralympics in 2008, but her team had little time to prepare and lost. Her next dream was competing in Rio. She had been training for the Games for several years now, but with the

ban in place, she's decided to take part in the World Championships instead.

"It was a big dream of mine, but the ship has sailed and it is what it is," she says with a chuckle. "It's hard enough for us as it is to overcome our disabilities each day and push ourselves to train."

For Paralympic athletes, preparing for major international events is a major ordeal, says Anna Afanasyeva, head of the Tochka Opory ("Foothold") foundation. Her group supports disabled athletes in St. Petersburg. "Imagine a person in a wheelchair getting out of their apartment and traveling to a stadium to train, which usually is not equipped for disabled people," Afanasyeva says. "Then imagine going abroad to compete and qualify for the Paralympics."

Cruelty or Justice?

Officials from the Russian Paralympic Committee (RPC) stress that the IPC has had no problems with Russian Paralympic athletes until it opened suspension proceedings on the heels of the latest WADA report. "Before, they had never complained about anything," Sergei Shilov, member of the executive board of the RPC, told The Moscow Times.

Shilov confirmed that the RPC has already filed a lawsuit to CAS and said he was confident international sports authorities would come around in the end. "We've already seen them trying to ban Russian athletes from Rio on bogus accusations — they failed. Hopefully, it will be the case with Paralympics, too," he said.

Sports lawyers believe the case will be a difficult one to win. "Defending individual athletes is one thing, but cases like this one are based on violating [Olympic] principles, and that makes them so much more difficult," said Mikhail Prokopets, a lawyer who has successfully defended several Olympic athletes in CAS ahead of the Rio Games.

As expected, Russian officialdom condemned the ban as cruel and unjust.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova called it "a betrayal of the very highest standards of human rights which govern the modern world."

Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko claimed that the allegations of doping were "groundless." Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich wrote on social media that "those who voted for this decision have no conscience and no honor."

Western experts see things differently, noting that IPC came to a decision that many expected would come from the International Olympic Committee weeks earlier.

It was "a tale of two major organizing bodies," wrote Richard Ings, the former head of the Australian Anti-Doping Agency.

"The same evidence, same country, same rules, same ethical and political arguments — bravo, IPC!"

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