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POLICY BRIEF

Immigrant Athletes in the Summer 2004 Olympics

by Alicia Campi, Ph.D.*

Immigrants and the children of immigrants are prominent among the athletes representing the United States in the 2004 Olympics. The stories of these immigrant athletes offer a vivid glimpse of the immigrant experience in the United States.

In August 2004, when the Summer Olympic Games returned to Greece for only the second time in the modern era, U.S. athletes won 103 medals out of 301 medal events. Among the U.S. contingent of athletic stars were about 25 immigrants, many of them medalists. At least an equal number are first-generation children of immigrants. In addition, some of the U.S. Olympic coaches are immigrants, including the renowned gymnastic couple Bela and Martha Karolyi from Romania, Taekwondo coach Han Lee of South Korea, Water Polo coach Radko Rudic from Romania, and Women's Field Hockey coach Siv Jagday of India. Like all Olympians, the lives of these athletes are defined by sacrifice, hard work, and unrelenting determination. Their inspiring stories, however, are also a reminder of how the immigrant experience has enriched the United States.

Swimming

Lenny Krayzelburg, of Russian Jewish heritage, became a U.S. citizen in 1995 and went on to win Gold in two Olympics. His father, who owned a small coffee shop in Odessa (formerly in Russia, now in the Ukraine), immigrated to the United States in 1989 because "he wanted a better life for his family."¹ Lenny worked thirty hours a week at the West Hollywood Recreation Center while attending high school to help out with

family expenses. In Athens, he swam a leg of the 4 by 100 meter Men's Medley Relay, winning a Gold Medal. Previously, Lenny had been a triple gold medalist at the 2000 Atlanta Games (100 meter backstroke, 200 meter backstroke, and 400 meter medley relay). When he won his first gold medal for swimming in 2000 he said: "When I heard the Star Spangled Banner, I thought about everything I went through to get here. I just tried to savor the moment."²

Marathon

America's silver medalist in marathon at Athens, Meb Keflezighi, comes from an Eritrean immigrant family. Meb's father fled to Sudan without his wife and 11 children when war broke out in 1981. He worked for three years at several jobs simultaneously to earn enough money to move his wife and children to safety. Eventually, the family was reunited and then immigrated to San Diego when Meb was 12. Meb became a U.S. citizen in 1998. Meb's father, who drives a taxicab in California, has raised a family that sees education and hard work as the keys to success in the United States: one son is a Silicon Valley engineer, several children are studying for MBAs or advanced degrees, and one daughter is in medical school.

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Boxing

Born in Armenia, Vanes Martirosyan moved to the United States at age four and started boxing three years later. His father had been an amateur boxer and encouraged his son in the sport. “For all the time I have been boxing,” Vanes said, “my father has told me what a lucky boy I am to be growing up in the United States, where we have freedoms to do what we want and be what we want. He has told me since I can remember that there would be no greater honor for a sportsman such as me to win a gold medal to honor our country. The United States is our country now.”³ Vanes is a celebrity among the large Armenian community in his new hometown of Glendale, California. “You don’t see many Armenians come to the United States and make the Olympic team. My family is really happy because we finally have a way to thank this country,” Vanes said.⁴

Women’s Wrestling

Patricia Miranda, Bronze Medal winner in the 48 kilogram class of the Olympics’ newest sport, women’s wrestling, is the daughter of political refugees from Brazil. Discouraged from the sport by her father, she made a deal with him that she could continue to wrestle if she had a 4.0 grade point average. Because of her academic prowess, she entered Stanford University, only to be subject to sexist heckling while practicing on the men’s university wrestling team. Patricia, who will start Yale law school in the fall, specializing in international conflict resolution, has her own website on which she posts her “Daily Diary of the American Dream.” In her entry for August 23, 2004, the day she won the Bronze after a disappointing semi-final loss, she wrote: “But all this I am sure will melt away under the pride of seeing the American flag raised in the award ceremony, and the

great experience I was privileged to share in introducing the world to the sport of women’s Olympic wrestling.”⁵

Volleyball

Donald Suxho of the U.S. men’s volleyball team is an immigrant from communist Albania who is known for his ferocious serve. His father, a national volleyball star, introduced Donald to the sport. Donald immigrated to the United States in 1996, the week after a police officer came to his house looking for him to report for his obligatory military service or else go to jail. “Growing up I was completely sealed from the rest of the world. We had no idea how the other world lived, how they worked or what they were like.”⁶ A Philadelphia-born paternal grandmother, who had been trapped in Albania 40 years before, was able to sponsor his family’s move to Boston. Now his father is a hospital manager and coaches a volleyball club team called “Beantown,” and his mother teaches kindergarten. Donald became a naturalized citizen in 2001.

Table Tennis

The United States fielded a seven-member Table Tennis team in Athens. Although none won medals, the team was remarkable in that all but two members were born outside of the United States. Moreover, one of the two U.S.-born members, Whitney Ping, is the child of immigrants.

Whitney’s father was born in Cambodia and came to the United States as a 17-year-old student. Soon after he arrived, infamous communist leader Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge army took over Cambodia and instituted a deliberate policy of genocide which killed an estimated 1.5 million people, including Whitney’s paternal grandparents. Whitney’s mother, also from Cambodia, met her future husband in

Oregon, where Whitney was born the second of four daughters. The Cambodian American Community of Oregon held a fundraiser before the Olympics for Whitney and her table tennis partner. The President of the organization, also a victim of the Khmer Rouge, declared, “Who would have ever thought a piece of our flesh and blood could be competing in the Olympics? Thanks to Whitney Ping, we doubt no more.”⁷ Before going off to represent her country, Whitney told her hometown paper, “I’m really proud to wear USA on my back.”⁸

Two other table tennis team members were from the former Yugoslavia. Ilija Lupulesku competed for his native country in the Seoul, Atlanta, and Sydney Olympics, but in 1992 in Barcelona he marched under the Olympic flag due to sanctions imposed against the Yugoslav government for sponsoring ethnic violence. In 2002 Lupulesku became a U.S. citizen, and represented the United States for the first time in Athens. “I live in the US, my family is in Chicago, and I want to play. I enjoy living in the USA and representing them in the Olympic Games.”⁹

From 1992 to 1997 Ilija was married to Jasna Reed (then known as Jasna Fazlic), a 1988 table tennis bronze medalist for Yugoslavia who also is now on the U.S. team. Jasna became a citizen in 1999, graduated from a U.S. university with a degree in political science, and has worked as both a computer consultant and a high school social studies teacher. After winning the bronze medal in the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Jasna gave her medal to her grandmother in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The medal was lost four years later during a military raid by Serbian troops who ordered the grandmother and thousands of others out of their homes at gunpoint during Yugoslavia’s civil war. It is Jasna’s goal to someday replace that lost medal.

Two other team members, Khoa Nguyen and Tawny Banh, come from Vietnam. Khoa, one of seven children, fled Saigon at age 9 a few days before the country fell. The family left when Khoa’s father, an air traffic controller, faced the possibility of being sent to a ‘re-education camp.’ Two of his sisters were left behind, although they were reunited with the rest of the family several years later. Khoa and his family lived at first in a refugee camp in Texarkana, Arkansas, then in a house where Khoa’s father introduced him to table tennis in order “to forget the past.” Khoa’s training for Athens was sponsored by a company in California where he works as a medical software designer. One day at a pickup basketball game with the company’s CEO, Khoa talked about his ping-pong ambitions and his desire to practice in pre-Olympic tournaments in Europe. Then and there, his boss offered him three months of paid leave plus expenses to prepare for the 2004 games.

Tawny Banh’s family fled Vietnam in 1978 after the communists confiscated her father’s oil business. They spent a year in Malaysian camps before being relocated to the United States with the aid of sponsors in Savannah, Georgia. The family moved to California, where Tawny became a citizen when she was 18 years old. Tawny is now studying for a degree in business management and hopes one day to open her own small business. Her motto is: “One will definitely face many difficult obstacles in one’s career. Don’t let them overcome you, you overcome them! Believe in yourself, never give up and you will achieve!”¹⁰

The final immigrant table tennis team member is Gao Jun Chang, born in Dalian, China. Gao has been called the “face of American women’s table tennis” because she won the U.S. Nationals in singles and

doubles every year between 1996 and 2002. Introduced to the sport at age 5 by her father, who worked in a film-manufacturing plant, she had to stay in a sports school even when her parents moved to another city: “I have no choice to think in China. The parents control everything,” she told *The Los Angeles Times*. Although she won an Olympic silver medal in 1992 representing China, Gao moved to the United States in 1994 and became a citizen in 1997. She says she wanted to win a medal in the Games for her new country. “If I can win a medal, maybe more people will be interested in this sport (in the USA). It would mean more for

my new country. I have a medal, so to me it’s no big difference,” she said.¹¹

Conclusion

The stories of these athletes illustrate the diversity of the immigrant experience in the United States, even among the U.S. 2004 Summer Olympians. These immigrant athletes and their families often experienced hardship and suffering in coming to the United States. Once here, they pursued their Olympic dreams and became symbols of U.S. athletic excellence.

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Endnotes

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