

#253 - Rio Olympics - ①Refugee Olympic Team

For the first time in history, the Refugee Olympic Team (ROT) is competing in the Olympics at Rio de Janeiro. Last August, the swimmer Yusra Mardini fled Syria with her sister by boat. After the boat reached and left Turkey, the engine malfunctioned. She was forced to swim and push the boat for over 3.5 hours, crossing the Aegean sea to reach Lesbos, a Greek island.

James Chiengjiek, who ran in the Men's 400m race, had escaped fourteen years ago from a refugee camp in South Sudan. He remembers the time when his father died in the war and he was hiding every time a soldier would come to recruit child soldiers. He fled in order to save his own life. Yiech Biel of Men's 800m was living in a village in 2005 that was attacked during South Sudan's civil war. He hid in the bushes for three days eating whatever fruit or leaves he could find.

Popole Misenga, who competed in Judo men's 90kg event, fled from Congo and eventually sought political asylum in Brazil. In the Olympic press conference, he cried, reminiscing of his two brothers from whom he was separated. He is hoping that they are watching his performance in the Olympics.

To support these top-level athletes who have lost their training grounds in their respective countries, the International Olympic Committee established the refugee team at a cost of \$2 million. The team comprises of ten athletes, six men and four women. Five are from South Sudan, two from Syria, two from Congo, and one from Ethiopia. Since they no longer represent their home countries, the official Olympic anthem would be played in their medal ceremonies.

Worldwide, there are 65 million refugees. Had they all belonged to one country, they would comprise the twenty-first largest country in the world. Yusra Mardini expressed that she is fighting to represent hope for all refugees. Although these athletes comprise a tiny fraction of the world's refugees, I am sure that watching them work so hard in the spotlight is an encouraging sight for all refugees.

Seeing a photo of the refugee team standing in front of the famous statue of Christ in Corcovado, I thought of this verse:

“And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.”
1 Peter 5:10

Jesus invites all of us kindly: the sick, the tired, the hurt, those who have lost everything, and the “refugees of the soul” who have lost their place in society. Like the Refugee Olympic Team, we belong to a team, God's team. Together, we shall give hope to the world.

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