



The African Challenge

IJF African Olympic Training Center - Algiers

In a few weeks time, the IJF African Olympic Training Center at Algiers will temporarily close its doors to make way for the London 2012 games. For nearly two years, over sixty athletes with a maximum of 40 at the same time, from 26 African countries, have come to the center under the direction of its sports manager, Gabriel Saptá. Ultimately, 10 judoka are qualified for the big summer rendezvous. The time has now come to analyze and learn from these two years of intensive activity.

A High Performance Perfume

Nestled in the heart of the forest of the small city of Sidi Fredj, a few hundred meters from the Mediterranean seashore, the small holiday resort, which was chosen to host the IJF Olympic training center, over the past months, has taken on a high performance perfume. Here one can train hard and with fervor. Bodies and minds are strained. But the atmosphere is relaxed. It can be easily noticed that the Olympic qualifications are over and that there is no more pressure to get results and points... at least until July and August.

All the athletes that are still present in May 2012 are now getting ready for the Olympics and are taking real pleasure in being together, sweating together, living together, with one single goal: to get to the British capital as fit as possible. The general opinion is that everything has not been easy and that the challenge was very tough, as is was highlighted by the center's director, Karim Noui: "It was difficult and complicated at the very beginning, because we did not know really where we were putting our feet, but the unwavering support of the IJF has been a great help. The financial and logistical support provided by the Algerian Government and by the Algerian Judo Federation, headed by Dr. Ali Bendjemaa, also allowed us to offer the best service possible to all countries"

Unwavering Commitment of Algeria

Gradually, the center which is funded by the IJF and the Algerian government (full board accommodation of the athletes, medical expenses, visa fees, airfare for the participation in international competitions, some travels from the country of origin of the athletes, bonuses...), with the strong support from the Algerian Judo Federation and various national federations whose athletes were present in Algiers, reached its cruising speed, and for the members, Sidi Fredj has become a second home.

A Real Challenge

This taste of challenge and the need to 'roll up your sleeves' is widely shared. Gabriel Saptá does not say the contrary. At the request of the IJF President, Marius Vizer, the sporting director has been present on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, just 40 km from Algiers, since the beginning of the adventure, and he can be considered as the pillar of the center and its orchestra conductor. Initially assisted by Dani Gheorghie, who accompanied him throughout the beginning of the whole story (Dani is now in South Africa), Gabriel Saptá could talk for hours about the life of the center. For two years



he has put his life on hold in Belgium, leaving behind his wife and children, and he has been living through all the stages of development: the arrival in a country where the tradition of judo is well established, but for which the challenge of managing a continental center was great, the choice of the location (three options were initially selected), the arrival of the first judoka in August 2010, the cultural shock that this represented for most athletes, who never or rarely before had left their homes, but also the general lack of high level judo experience for most of the judoka.

"During the first weeks we had only six countries present. But it was a start. So every day, several times a week, tirelessly, I called the federation presidents to explain to them the interest that they had in sending their best judoka to the center. I called again and again, to convince as many countries as possible so that they would make the necessary efforts to support the center. And it worked! 26 countries in Africa have finally responded to the call. This is good. We can do better in the future, but I'm happy because this is an important first step for the development of judo throughout the continent," recalls Gabriel, before adding, "we have really started from scratch in the first weeks. Athletes arrived here, often after lengthy air travel from home. They were uprooted, cut from their origins and they did not know what training to qualify for the Olympics meant. With all the staff, we started to teach them judo from the very beginning and today I am proud of the work that has been done."

The Doors of the Highest Judo Level

If you ask the 'coach', as everyone calls Gabriel here, how many medals his athletes could get in London, the answer is straightforward: "It will be hard, even though I know that some athletes from the center have great potential and are now able to give stiff competition to the world's best, as it was the case for 'Dédé' (Dieudonné DOLASSEM, -90 kg, Cameroon) at the World Championships in Paris last year, where he won several rounds before being defeated due to a small error. But there is still work to do, technical work of course but also physical work and mental preparation. We still have a few weeks in front of us."

Dieudonné does not say the contrary. He also points out that here, he has been learning to fight in the positive sense. He has been learning to build his judo, to attack, to take risks and to impose his rhythm. He gained confidence in himself, and is no longer afraid of his opponents, regardless of their origin. Now he believes that he is ready for great performance. To demonstrate that? His recent silver medal on the occasion of the Senior African Championships in Agadir.

It is obvious that the group of judoka, which has gathered at the center, has changed its state of mind. The doors of the highest Judo level are finally opened to the entire continent. For several generations, the best results were mainly obtained by judoka from northern African countries (Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria ...) that have a long tradition of judo competition. But now everyone agrees in saying that the installation of the center here greatly contributed to improve the level in Africa while creating a very good emulation for Algerian judo.

Exchanges with the Algerian national team take place regularly and many future national champions are part of the group managed by Gabriel Saptá. The young Nachida Zellouf is a perfect example. At 20 years old, she has her whole future ahead of her. 7th place at the World Junior Championships in



2009 in Paris, she went on to win the continental junior title in 2010 and also won the senior Arab championship in 2011. Perfectly integrated within the group, she continues to hone her arms and dreams of a continental title before setting her hopes even higher. Ziad Maafi, her club coach who also assists Gabriel Saptá on a daily basis in all administrative matters, is adamant: "This young lady has true potential and what she has been learning here while in contact with the other African nations, will help her in her sporting career but also in her professional life. She is currently studying to become a coach, she is as motivated as ever and in addition, the good results that she has gained, thanks to the center, have already helped her to progress socially. Through her efforts, she is now able to help her family. This is really great to observe."

It is also one of the keys to success of the Algiers' center: giving a new horizon to athletes whose lives in their home country or in their social environment are not always idyllic.

A Second Father

Carine, from Chad, who has qualified for the Olympics, understands that: "The coach has become our second daddy. He makes us suffer, that's for sure, yet it is useful, even necessary, because we can get nothing without working hard. But beyond suffering, beyond the difficulties, he is always present for us. He listens, is caring, considerate, so human!"

The true friendship relationships between the members of the group, over the months, have clearly become strong. Here, one does not show or proclaim his/her nationality, but everybody shares: the moments of pain and suffering as well as the moments of joy and happiness. Basile, from Chad, is not qualified for the Games - in addition, he is suffering from a knee problem. It is tough for him. Yet he is still present, smiling, his tall silhouette walking throughout the center and making himself available as a training partner. So when it comes to celebrating his birthday: "We're gonna set this place on fire!" says the whole group. "It's important to have a little fun anyway, to relax, because the following day you already know that you will suffer on the mat or on the beach during a physical preparation session," adds the group of girls. Then in the evening, after a long day of sweat and body aches, big chocolate cakes appear on the table and everybody celebrates with Basile, everybody laughs until they have stomach aches. Carine, Antonia and Audrey spent part of their afternoon free time making a typical African meal. They took the opportunity to remember all these months that just passed. Forward-looking, all three girls being qualified for the Games, they still have their minds full of images. Everything has not always been rosy, "When we arrived, everything was different: places, time, people, attitudes, training. But today we are really happy to have lived this extraordinary adventure".

The day ends in the coach's pavilion for a good party and great atmosphere. Fatigue seems forgotten, homesickness had disappeared, the volume of the music gets cranked up a notch and everyone enjoys the African rhythms. 11 p.m.: everyone in bed. "We are not here to have fun," says Gabriel Saptá while laughing, before adding more seriously: "I treat them as true professionals and they must understand that there is a time for everything: for work and for relaxation." Jokingly, all those who came to Sidi Fredj christened the place 'Guantanamo Fredj.' To illustrate that, Dédé specifies: "It is in pain that we can progress, at the end it makes us feel good but we need decompression times, it's important."



The Opening to the Rest of the World

The next morning, the little party of the past day is long gone, and everybody is again looking forward to London. Like every day for the last two years, muscle toning starts at 8:00 a.m. sharp. Every day, another judoka is appointed to wake-up all his/her teammates. Abs, buttocks, triceps, pushups... as an appetizer for breakfast. Then, based on the training program, the training will continue on the beach, at the gym or in the dojo.

Before arriving at the center, many judoka did not even know what a beach was, such as the Zambian athletes for example. They are still not sure that they like it today: "It's hard to work on the sand, it hurts all over, but it's still nice to train in this environment," say most of the young champions. When it came to the site selection for establishing the center, the location nearby the coast definitely played in favor of Sidi Fredj. This is a real treasure. "Other places might have offered more infrastructures, but to go running in the forest, or making good physical training sessions along the seashore has no price," says Gabriel Sapta.

Located a bit outside of Algiers, the center is ideally placed to effectively organize the preparation of the athletes. That's why, a few weeks ago, the Georgian team, led by Peter Seisenbacher, came here to face the African elite who are no longer ashamed of their level.

"In the future, we should open the access to the center even more to other delegations from around the world." This seems to be a real demand from everybody. The conditions to facilitate exchanges are reunited and will be even better with some adjustments.

As the weather is getting warmer these days on the coast of Algeria, the training sessions keep going. "Oh, it was difficult at first," recalls Dieudonné, "it was so cold." Basil confirms: "In my house in Chad, we have temperatures like 35, 40 or even 50 degrees year round, and here it was Siberia!"

"When we arrived, the roof had collapsed in the dojo and we had to redo everything. Unfortunately, there are still the pillars in the middle of the tatami but we are able to train properly nonetheless," explains the coach. Today's program will be two hours of standing judo: "We are still working really hard for a while, before focusing on quality before the Games. Athletes will participate in two tournaments, one in Spain and the other in Romania. Then gradually the center will be emptied of its occupants as we will approach the Games." Long undecided about his presence in London, the coach has confirmed that he will be present on the banks of the Thames in July and August. When the athletes learned it, they exploded with joy.

From the Idea to the Reality

Two years of adventure are now being completed. What was just an idea and a desire, expressed by the International Judo Federation (i.e. to develop a preparation center for African Olympic athletes on the African continent), through hard work and investment, has become a reality. Work is still necessary, adjustments must be made, but "We had to create a group, a group of athletes, which had to qualify for the Games. This is now done," said the President, Marius Vizer, before adding: "but what we also wanted to offer was technical and teaching knowledge to as many countries as possible, because tomorrow these African athletes, who will participate in London or who have



passed through the center, will return to their home country and in turn will be able to transmit what they have learned. Gabriel Saptá, with his knowledge of Africa and of High Performance Training, has done an exemplary job. It is also important to mention the support of the Algerian Judo Federation and the Algerian government, without which nothing would have been possible. Thank you to all of them."

In Sidi Fredj, athletes are not really worried about their distant future. They are currently focused on the Olympics. Yet many of them face the question of what will happen after. "What will I do? How to use everything I have learned here? Can I transmit it and how?..." These are some of the issues. Some have also professional plans and they would like to build their future based on the contacts that they have made during their stay in Algeria, to try to bring a dream to life, to transform an idea or a passion into an activity that would allow them to live and to help their families to live. The challenges are still numerous, but when you see those that have been fulfilled over the last two years, on the south coast of the Mediterranean Sea, everything is possible. Without a doubt, among the sixty judoka from 26 countries who have come to the center, many of them will have a role to play in the future.