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Transitioning from Olympian to Non-Olympian: Marica Perisic on the Road to Paris 2024

Being a woman in sports is no walk in the park. Being a woman in judo... now, that's a whole different dimension. Ever since childhood, she has faced looks of disapproval and a lack of understanding for her path. Judo, being a grueling, relentless, male-dominated discipline, wasn't something society imagined for a young girl. Luckily for her, Marica had flesh-and-blood proof of female excellence in judo - her mother, who has been involved in it for over two decades. The word *fighter* gets a whole new meaning when you're not just going up against your opponent, but the society armed with prejudice.

Against all odds, Marica quickly became Serbia's golden child with impressive stats: 1x Mediterranean champion, 2x Grand Prix champion, 1x Grand Slam champion (plus three bronze medals), and 1x European Championship gold medalist, with two bronze and one silver medal. A true warrior on and off the mat, Marica is the epitome of unwavering spirit; an athlete who turns defeats into lessons and doesn't let victories change her. Amid her chaotic preparations for the Paris 2024 Olympics, Marica was kind enough to share her insights on the qualification process and thoughts on the transition from Olympian to non-Olympian, including her personal plans.

Q: Is the preparation process for the Olympics any different than preparing for other tournaments, and if so, what is the main difference? Are there factors that make this process more challenging or complex?

A: As someone who has participated in the Olympics and has been competing on the international scene for over a decade, including Euro and World championships, Grand Slams, Grand Prix, Masters tournaments, and World Cups, I can confidently say that there is a difference. You may wonder why I've mentioned all of these competitions. Often, people find it hard to see past our kimonos and belts and understand that there's much more to judo than just tackling someone. 😊

The Olympic Games are something special, but not that special at the same time. It is hard to understand this statement, but I'll try simplifying it. In general, the Olympic Games cycle lasts for four years. In judo, during these four years, the competitors are collecting points for the World ranking list and the Olympic ranking list, which allows you to become the seeded/the leader of the group (of the first eight) in the competition, whereas the remaining competitors are categorized in groups (1-8/2-7/ 3-6/ 4-5 - and the group leaders meet in groups A, B, C, and D).

The competitors that remain go through a random, automated classification. Therefore, the ranking lists I mentioned are critical when qualifying for the OG since, in judo, you're basically gathering the points until June. For instance, the final selection for the Paris 2024

won't be determined until June, when only the first 18 contestants will qualify for the Games. There are also five continental norms that need to be fulfilled, but they're not as vital since they're a matter of luck and location.

The fact that only the first 18 contestants qualify for the games speaks in favor of how complex the process is and how important it is to stay consistent throughout the years until the very end of the qualification process, right before the Olympics. The top 18 athletes from all over the globe who make it to the Games represent the best that judo has to offer - and the competition is fierce. What's more, mental pressure is a huge factor, as this is something you've been preparing for for four years, and still, there's no guarantee that you'll win that day or even make it to the finals.

It's simply judo - a unique and challenging sport that is cruel and allows no mistakes, not even for a second. Therefore, the complexity of the qualification process is the striking difference between OG and the other tournaments I listed. In addition, the difference is felt in the preparation process, tactics, workouts, and conditions. The qualification is uncertain until the last moment, so judokas must always be prepared for everything. It is gruesome and calls for a great deal of physical and mental strength and ability throughout the entire process.

Q: Four years have passed since the Tokyo Olympics. Can you tell us how participating in the 2020 Games affected your career? How challenging is transitioning from an Olympic mindset back to "reality"?

A: Truth be told, it feels like it happened only a few months ago! My first Olympic experience mainly affected me on a personal level. I joined the Olympic community feeling like a kid, lost and excited at the same time. It is a world packed with elite, top-notch athletes, and I came back from it as a grown athlete who knows her future path. It was a unique experience as I went through something entirely new for me. The amount of dedication and exhaustion was something I had never felt before. To this day, I cannot clearly remember everything that occurred in my match during the second round of the Games, as it was so physically and mentally draining.

I gave it everything I had in me, but it wasn't enough that day. Many didn't expect that outcome, and everything that happened. However, no one was in my shoes, and they couldn't tell how much I was holding in. Overall, I would describe it as a unique experience and a huge life lesson that helped me reach the mental and physical state I'm in today.

Honestly, I realized that once you enter this process, it never stops. There are certain breaks once the cycles or important competitions end, but generally speaking, you're constantly present as a judoka. Our sport is quite similar to tennis time-wise since our season also lasts from January to December. There are occasional minor exceptions, where you get 7-10 days of rest, and then the cycle continues, so it's hard to catch a break.

Q: How hard is it to plan for the future and imagine what comes after your professional career in judo, having such a busy schedule? Does that part of your life seem far away, or is your future vision already set in stone?

A: Sometimes, it seems like time is moving in slow motion. However, currently, I feel that time is flying, with so many projects, events, competitions, preparations, and constant travel.

I'm constantly thinking about ideas and projects I'd like to bring to life after my professional judo days. My primary goal is to graduate from the faculty and start my master's studies after the Paris Olympics, which is an essential step in my plans for the future. It is safe to say I'm already thinking about what comes next, as I feel like it will arrive before I know it.

Q: We've witnessed many athletes being inspired to start their own businesses in addition to their sports careers, especially after the Games. Where do you see yourself professionally regarding future plans, and would that potential business involve coaching or a completely new direction?

A: I do believe I have a future in sports, but as of right now, I do not envision myself as a coach. I don't reject the idea entirely, as I can't be sure what the future will bring once my professional judo days are over. My biggest goal is to remain in the sports community and be involved in sports in any way, whether it be business, coaching, or anything sports-related. Judo will always be a part of me, but I can't say taking a different direction is impossible.

That being said, I've been involved in everything associated with sports all my life - including teams, environment, and mentality. My mother was a professional judoka for over 20 years, so judo has been my life from day one, and it will remain a massive part of my identity. Naturally, my biggest wish is to build a future involving judo in some shape or form.

Q: Marica personally vs. Marica professionally: Would you say that who you are in judo is similar to who you are with your loved ones? Are you one of those athletes who develop an alter ego, or is your fighter personality present in real life?

A: I don't like to talk about myself too much, so a question like this forces me to take a deep look into myself, which I appreciate because it reminds me of who I am and that my actions speak louder than words.

People in the training facilities, in attendance, or watching the broadcast can notice that I am passionate, dedicated, and determined when it comes to judo. It is sacred to me, and I nurture it. I've been fighting for it most of my life, and it isn't a secret. I laugh, cry, stress, enjoy, grieve, celebrate, and show every bit of it on the mat and in my private life.

My life hasn't been easy; I had to grow up early and didn't have the option to refuse to fight - it's always been grind, grind, grind. As the eldest sister of five children, I always carried the weight of the responsibility to be strong, fight, and keep everything under control. School, social life, sports - everything had to be balanced.

My life is a fight, personally and professionally, but I wouldn't change it for the world because I know it made me who I am as a person, athlete, sister, and daughter. The fire in me might burn brighter in my professional fights, but the people around me also recognize this fire and energy in my private life.

I am very emotional and learned there's no use in hiding it. I am not ashamed of it, and I believe that acknowledging and sharing our emotions with someone makes everything easier, at least by 1%. In summary, the Marica you see on the mat is indeed the Marica behind closed doors: full of energy, cordial, and active, but with a hint of tranquility, affection, casualness, and ease. When the battery starts running low, my loved ones are the ones who charge it, and in the end, it is all that matters.

Final Thoughts

It can be challenging for young athletes in the prime of their professional careers to think far ahead and even envision a glimpse of their future once professional sports are no longer an option. That being said, it is refreshing and motivating to hear an aspiring young judoka talk about future steps, especially when they're based on high education.

Nowadays, many entrepreneurs and business coaches swear by methods that don't involve traditional education. While there is nothing wrong with creating your own path that doesn't necessarily include attending a faculty or college, an academic degree can be an essential stepping stone to personal and professional growth.

Moreover, successful professional athletes like Marica develop essential entrepreneurial skills throughout their careers, including risk calculation, courage, determination, responsibility, and dedication. These qualities set a solid foundation for their future plans, whether sports-related or an entirely new niche. We're excited to see Marica shine on the Olympic stage this summer and can't wait to discover what the future holds for her!