

Spain's Carolina Marin charts unique path to all-time greatness

By David McPherson

Madrid, Dec 10 (EFE).- Reflecting upon the legendary figures that populate today's sports universe, they almost invariably have sprung from fertile soil in their homelands.

While in many cases they elevated their countries to new heights, even superstar athletes from relatively small nations have built upon a tradition of excellence, with Switzerland's Roger Federer, Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo and Serbia's Novak Djokovic, for example, having exceeded the greatness of Martina Hingis, Luis Figo and Monica Seles.

One glaring exception is all-time great Spanish shuttler Carolina Marin.

What that 28-year-old native of the southern city of Huelva has achieved over the past seven and a half years is virtually unprecedented in world sport, considering that the Iberian nation had no international presence in badminton at all until she single-handedly put it on the map.

"Carolina Marin, I've always said she stands alone," long-time coach Fernando Rivas told Efe about a student who has captured an Olympic gold, a record three world championships and an unprecedented five European championships in women's singles—to date the only major badminton titles won by any Spanish male or female player.

"Not because Carolina Marin is Spanish, not because other Spaniards can't achieve results. She's unique in the entire world because no one has achieved what she's achieved."

But as singular and atypical as Marin is, her journey by no means has been a solitary one.

In the years since she relocated to Madrid and devoted herself entirely to her sport at the age of 14, she has come to be surrounded by a veritable army of professionals—coaches, physiotherapists, physical trainers, psychologists, psychoanalysts, all of them devoted to lifting this generational talent to even greater heights and more winner's trophies.

Nothing is left to chance in team Marin's single-minded quest.

"We use artificial intelligence. We use SIM learning. We're integrating the work of engineers in different fields in order to develop a system that's as automated as possible," said Rivas, a pioneering figure in his own right in Spain whose tactic-driven yet holistic approach has won him the respect of the badminton world.

In terms of big data, he stressed the importance of analyzing the range of different badminton plays that exist and determining which are most effective.

"Which are the ones that Carolina has the best results with? Which are the ones that Carolina has the best results with against player X?" Rivas said. "So this data is useful in modeling our training."

But as important as her hi-tech-driven, ultra-aggressive and rapid playing style is to her success, her ability to produce her best badminton on the biggest stages and the intimidating mental warfare—and piercing, celebratory screams—she brings to the court have been her defining characteristics.

Honed over more than a decade of work with specialists, Marin says the psychological aspect of her training is indispensable in good times and bad.

"A psychologist isn't there because you're crazy, because you're in bad shape. Rather, it's because I'm doing well but I want to be better," Marin said in an interview with Efe. "I've worked for many years on (my) anxiety, fear, on controlling my emotions, on-court issues. But there's always something I lose sight of, or there's something I need to remember. And that's what these people are for."

A curious aspect of team Marin's analysis and approach is that other top players typically are referred to generically as "opponents" or "players X," potential obstacles in her path to becoming the greatest of all time.

Indeed, the sense from within her camp is that Marin, who arguably has only lost one important match in the last seven years (to Japan's Nozomi Okuhara at the 2017 World Championships in Glasgow) only has history itself as a rival.

And more than any particular peer, her biggest challenges have been a pair of serious knee injuries: one that caused her to miss the 2019 World Championships in Basel, Switzerland, and a second that robbed her of a precious opportunity this year in Tokyo to win back-to-back Olympic gold medals.

"It's true this recovery (that began in June after surgery to repair a torn ACL and both menisci in her left knee) has been a lot tougher for me than the other one," Marin told Efe, referring to the crushing blow of missing the Tokyo Games.

"I had a very, very good start to the year. Of the five tournaments I played, I won four finals. So my form was very good. Mentally I was very good, very motivated, with confidence, which for me is the most important thing."

Indeed, she had appeared poised in 2021 to win not only the gold medal at the Summer Games but also a fourth World Championships title in front of her family and friends in Huelva and inside the pavilion—the Carolina Marin Sports Palace—that bears her name.

With the clock ticking down to Sunday's start of that event, Marin is slotted in the draw as the No. 4 seed but her participation is still in doubt.

While she says Huelva playing host to a major badminton event is a dream come true, her prime focus is on achieving a full recovery and going for the gold at the 2024 Paris Games, now just over two and a half years away. EFE

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