

Hend Zaza: Twelve-year-old Syrian makes history as youngest athlete at Tokyo Games

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One of the great parts about the Olympics is the stories of the athletes who have given so much to get there. Hend Zaza is one of those remarkable tales.

Hend is one of the youngest competitors at Tokyo Games. She qualified for table tennis competition in the Olympics by winning the West Asia qualifying tournament in 2020. She was only 11 years old then.

In the final of that tournament, Hend beat Mariana Sahakian, nearly four times her age, of Lebanon. Hend has now won Syrian national titles in all four categories in which she is eligible. That includes the senior title, having started playing at the age of 5.

"I have very rarely seen a player at this age play with such joy and train with such intensity as Zaza," said Eva Jeler. She is an experienced former national German table tennis coach.

Hend never walked to pick up the ball — she always ran. Jeler said the girl's skills "needed and still needs improvement." However "her determination, resilience and will to play and win are (almost) a guarantee for future success."

The First To Qualify For Olympics

The 12-year-old has lived much of her life in Syria, a country in the middle of an intense civil war. Unrest in Syria began more than 10 years ago during the Arab Spring of 2011. The aftermath displaced nearly 11 million people by March 2015, according to the Al-Jazeera news organization. Hend was born in the city of Hama. Her coach says the girl has been able to play in only two or three matches a year outside Syria since beginning her career due to the war.

It is thus remarkable that Hend was in line to become the fifth-youngest Olympian in history in 2020. The pandemic forced the postponement of the Tokyo Games to 2021.

She will be just the second Syrian to compete in table tennis at the Olympics, following Heba Allejji. Hend is, however, the first from her country to qualify for the competition via the typical route. Allejji was invited by the Tripartite Commission to the women's singles matches at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 2016.

Country Is Proud To Be In The Games

"This qualification tournament was really difficult for us, but we are really proud to be at the Olympic Games for the second time ever; this time, however, is completely different as we achieved it through the qualification procedures," explained Bassam Khalil. He is president of the Syrian Table Tennis Federation.

"The conflict in Syria in previous years prevented us from participating in many events," Khalil said. "But we tried our best to take part and keep table tennis in our country as active as we can."

Nimble hands and fast eyes should be helpful in a game of intense concentration and accuracy. Hend will certainly have the energy of youth on her side. Regardless of her result, Hend's very presence at the Tokyo Games is a victory for the sport. Her women's singles campaign began on the first weekend of the Olympics at the Tokyo Metropolitan Gymnasium.

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