

A Swimmer's Journey From Afghanistan to Refugee Camps to the Paralympics

Abbas Karimi, who was born without arms, eventually made it to the U.S. and realized his dream of competing internationally.



By Motoko Rich

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TOKYO — The first time Abbas Karimi jumped into a pool, the water brought fresh relief from the heat of Kabul.

For Mr. Karimi, 24, who was born without arms, the pool also conferred a sense of freedom and protection. As he advanced quickly from flailing in a life jacket to winning races, he discovered a place where he could excel, and transcend the bullying he experienced.

Swimming also propelled Mr. Karimi, who is one of six athletes competing for the Refugee Paralympic Team in Tokyo, to flee Afghanistan when he was 16. After winning a national championship in his homeland, he yearned to train for international competition without the daily fears of war and terrorism.

“I needed to be somewhere I could be safe and keep training and be a Paralympic champion,” he said in an interview earlier this month on Zoom. “When I left Afghanistan, that was with me, that idea of what I’m going to be.”

Eight years after Mr. Karimi escaped Afghanistan, he led the parade of nations into the stadium at the Paralympics’ opening ceremony on Tuesday night as one of two flag bearers for the refugee team.

Because the chaos surrounding the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan prevented the country’s Paralympic delegation from flying to Tokyo, Mr. Karimi may be the only Afghan athlete to compete at the Games. Two Afghan Paralympians were part of a group of more than 50 athletes who were evacuated from Kabul and traveled to Australia this week, but organizers have not said whether they will compete in Tokyo.

Mr. Karimi is one of millions who fled the violence in Afghanistan long before the current crisis. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a total of 2.2 million registered Afghan refugees are in Iran and Pakistan alone.

In 2013, one of Mr. Karimi’s older brothers took him to Iran and connected him with a group that was traveling to Turkey. Over three days and nights, they hiked or stowed in trucks to pass over mountains on the way to the border.



Mr. Karimi bearing a flag during the opening ceremony on Tuesday. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Once in Turkey, Mr. Karimi moved between four different refugee camps, nearly one per year. He was determined to keep swimming, sometimes taking a bus twice a day, an hour each way, to a pool where he could train.

In Afghanistan, he had started swimming freestyle and breaststroke events, but his coaches in Turkey persuaded him to learn the dolphin kick so that he could swim the butterfly.

“It is one of the hardest strokes in swimming,” he said. “But the only way that I could swim faster and become a champion was butterfly.”

With international competition the goal, Mr. Karimi had begun posting on Facebook to seek support to reach the Paralympics. Not long after he arrived in Turkey, he connected with Mike Ives, a retired wrestling and football coach in Portland, Ore., who eventually mounted a letter-writing campaign that helped Mr. Karimi resettle as a refugee in the United States in 2016.

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Mr. Karimi lived with Mr. Ives in Portland and joined a U.S. Masters Swimming team, the Oregon Reign Masters. Dennis Baker, the head coach, instantly recognized Mr. Karimi’s talent, drive and self-reliance, marveling at how nimbly he got out of the pool without assistance. When Mr. Karimi competed in his first Oregon state masters championship, “he scored a ton of points for us,” Mr. Baker said.

In 2017, Mr. Karimi competed in the para swimming world championships in Mexico City for the refugee team and won a silver medal in the 50-meter butterfly. He and Mr. Ives flew straight to Geneva, where Mr. Karimi participated in a conference convened by the U.N. refugee agency's Global Refugee Youth Consultations.

Mr. Ives taught Mr. Karimi to drive; he passed his license test on his third try. And Mr. Karimi made friends with other Afghan refugees in Portland. They would cheer him on at practices and meets and watch action movies with him. (Bruce Lee is an idol.)



Mr. Karimi after practice on Tuesday. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

But swimming and his goals were never far from his mind. “He likes people who talk about their dreams,” said Najibullah Tajik, 20. “If you talk about something else that is just easy, he doesn’t like that. He wants action.”

At the 2019 world championships in London, Mr. Karimi placed sixth in the 50-meter butterfly. It was a tough year for him, as his father died in Kabul shortly after the meet. Mr. Karimi said his father had been his earliest fan, telling him, “‘You don’t have arms, but you became a swimmer and you are something now.’”

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here’s more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

When the pandemic hit last year, the pool where the Reign Masters practiced shut down. Mr. Karimi could not get in the water for nearly four months. Eager to keep training, he joined the team's assistant coach, Allen J. Larson, to search for open pools. At first, the only one they could find was an hour's drive away and had limited hours.

During a 10-day trip to Folsom, Calif., where they swam every day, Mr. Larson learned from his sister, who is also a swimmer, about a coach in Florida, where pools remained open. A couple of emails later, Mr. Karimi had an invitation to move to Fort Lauderdale to live and train with another masters coach, Marty Hendrick.

In Fort Lauderdale, Mr. Hendrick's team of coaches helped Mr. Karimi adjust his body position to speed up his dives off the starting block, as well as to refine his dolphin kick so that he could use it not only for the butterfly, but also for the backstroke. "What we discovered is Abbas's dolphin kick is significantly faster than his two-leg flutter kick," Mr. Hendrick said. "So his backstroke has been greatly improved."

After practice, Mr. Hendrick bans swim talk of more than 10 minutes, and the pair watch Marvel movies together, with Mr. Hendrick occasionally pressing pause to define a phrase in English for Mr. Karimi.

"I can picture him in a Marvel movie," Mr. Hendrick said. "He thinks he would be a great villain. I could see him as a superhero, kind of a mixture of Aquaman, Superman and Spider-Man, with all his abilities."

After a practice in Tokyo earlier this week, Mr. Hendrick said he wanted Mr. Karimi not just to think about his medal hopes, but also to enjoy the experience.

"He's already a champion," Mr. Hendrick said. "There are not enough awards for what he's done, but I wanted him to enjoy this, have fun with it."

The backdrop of news from Afghanistan is inevitably "very, very hard," Mr. Karimi said. Mr. Ives is also working to help bring one of Mr. Karimi's brothers, Asghar, to the United States from a refugee camp in Turkey.

One of Mr. Karimi's Portland friends, Saifullah Tajik, 21, Najibullah's brother, said he told Mr. Karimi that he should not focus on what's going on in his homeland while competing in Tokyo.

"You have been working hard for as long as I've known you, and there are so many things happening in Afghanistan," Mr. Tajik said he told his friend. "Just keep your mind clear and focused on your approach."

Mr. Karimi put it simply on Instagram. In a post showing him treading water and grinning in the pool at the Tokyo Aquatics Center, the caption read: "Dream came True."