

Paris Olympics: How boxer Nikhat Zareen's medal hopes got hit because of IOC, IBA war that left her unseeded

Nikhat Zareen's draw luck continues to follow her. After being unseeded at the 2023 World Championships and then the 2023 Asian Games, the Indian boxer was handed a tough draw due to being unseeded, despite a host of medals in this Olympic cycle.

India's best boxing medal hope at the 2024 Paris Olympics was drawn into a group of some of the best boxers in her weight category and will have to fight five highly competitive matches against a myriad of boxers all with a skill set that can test the 28-year-old — a story that has been repeated and rinsed in this Olympic cycle if you are Nikhat Zareen.

The Olympics are meant to be tough. Nikhat's teammate Amit Panghal would be the first person to tell her that. There are no free lunches here but as has been the case recently, the way that the International Olympic Committee has handled the seeding for the Paris Games has essentially put some of the topmost boxers of different countries in the same bracket.

What does Nikhat's bracket look like?

Terrible for her. The Nizamabad boxer gets a start against Germany's Maxi Karina Kloetzer in the



Round of 32. That bout is then followed by a showdown against Wu Yu, the top seeded boxer at the Paris Olympics 50 kg category and the 2023 World Championship gold medalist in the 52 kg category.

The advantage for Zareen will be that Wu's first Paris Olympics bout will be against her. A rusty start for the Chinese pugilist and suddenly all bets are off. The

trouble though is that even if Zareen is able to pull off a win here, she would next have to face Thailand's Chuthamat Raksat — a boxer that has forever troubled the Indian and beat her on the way to a silver medal at the Asian Games. If Raksat loses her bout, then Nikhat goes up against Uzbekistan's Sabina Bobokulova — a boxer she only recently lost 2-3 to at the Strandja

Memorial.

If Zareen is able to overcome the four matches in her bracket, chances are she will face Turkey's Tokyo Olympics silver medalist Bus Naz Cakiroglu — a boxer she recently beat 4-1. (X) If Zareen is able to overcome the four matches in her bracket, chances are she will face Turkey's Tokyo Olympics silver medalist Bus Naz Cakiroglu — a boxer

she recently beat 4-1. (X)

After that, the semi-final of her bracket could see her face Ingrid Valencia — a top Colombian boxer, Y Oyuntsetseg — the Asian Games bronze medalist, or Kazakh boxer Nazym Kyzaybay. And if Zareen is able to overcome the four matches in her bracket, chances are she will face Turkey's Tokyo Olympics silver medalist Bus Naz Cakiroglu — a boxer she recently beat 4-1.

Why are the draws skewed towards one bracket?

Due to the International Olympic Committee not recognising the International Boxing Association, both of the two World Championships won by Zareen in this Olympic cycle did not give her a top seeding in her category.

The Paris 2024 Boxing Unit (PBU) came up with a way to conduct seeding. A total of eight boxers per category would be given seeding, with the priority being given to the Continental qualifiers. All five champions from continental Games (Asian, European Games) would also receive a seeding. Additionally, the second-placed boxer from Asian, European and American continental events would also be seeded.

Boxers like Zareen and Nishant Dev thus missed out on receiving a seeding, which could have come with a direct entry into the Round of 16 and one lesser bout till the final.

What about the other Indian boxers?

The situation is quite dire for most. Amit Panghal, out of action for three years and making a comeback to the national team, is in the same bracket as Hsanboy Dumatov — the favourite to win the Men's 51kg event and Saken Bibossinov — another top boxer, who could have contended for gold had he not been clubbed into the same category as two former World Championship medalists.

Tokyo Olympics bronze medalist Lovlina Borgohain was seeded eighth and is scheduled to meet Li Qian in the quarter-finals should both boxers win their initial bouts. Li Qian beat Borgohain in Hangzhou but Borgohain had beaten Qian in New Delhi at the World Championships. Both boxers are multiple time World Championship winners and have Olympic medals to boot. Borgohain avoided Cindy Ngamba of the Refugee team — a favourite to win the Women's 75kg category in Paris.

Paris Olympics 2024 live streaming: When and where to watch Indian athletes on television and online



Scheduled from July 26 to August 11, the Paris Olympics will bring the entire world to a standstill as fans will either be flocking to Paris or get glued to their television sets. We will see athletes participate in 329 events across 32 sports, with four new additions.

For the first time in Olympic history, the opening ceremony won't start off in a stadium, but will begin from the river Seine, where an armada of boats will carry over 200 delegation of athletes along the river, through the city.

For India, the spotlight will be on the likes of Neeraj Chopra, PV Sindhu, Indian archers, men's hockey team. Neeraj is also the defending javelin throw champion. In Tokyo 2020, we saw India's biggest medal haul in a single edition. This time, they will be aiming to better that tally. In shooting, India saw plenty of drama for the Olympic quotas.

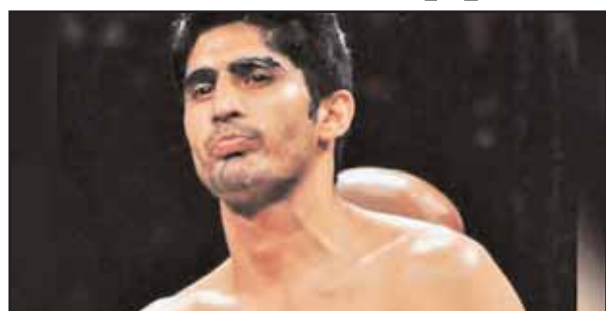
Trap shooter Bhowneesh Mendiratta grabbed India's first Paris 2024 quota at the 2022 ISSF World Championships, but did make it to the final team after the national trials. Prithviraj Tondaiman was given the quota in the category instead. India shooters secured a quota in every Olympic shooting category for the first time.

Renowned sports medicine expert Dr Dinshaw Pardiwala, who is the chief medical officer of the Indian contingent, also informed the media that athletes are in prime conditions for Paris Olympics. "All the athletes that are going for the Olympics are fit right now. Some athletes will have minor niggles here and there. I am not going to be discussing any specific injuries to any athlete that they've had in the past, but all of them who are there are there because they are going to be capable and they're gonna be fit enough."

When will the Paris Olympics 2024 begin?
The Paris Olympics have already begun on July 24, with the opening ceremony scheduled for July 26, 11:30 PM IST.

Where will the Paris Olympics 2024 take place?
The Paris Olympics will take place in Paris, with some events taking place in other cities in France.

Expect Women Boxers To Do Better Than Before In Paris Olympics: Vijender Singh



India's boxing medal hopes at the Paris Games will hinge on how its women pugilists perform, feels the country's lone Olympic medal-winning male boxer Vijender Singh, who expects the Nikhat Zareen-led squad to fetch at least two podium finishes. Zareen (50kg), Preeti Pawar (54kg), Jaismine Lamboria (57kg) and Tokyo bronze-winner Lovlina Borgohain (75kg) make up the Indian women's squad, while Amit Panghal (51kg) and debutant Nishant Dev (71kg) are the two male boxers to have qualified for Paris. In a free-wheeling interview to PTI editors at its headquarters, the 38-year-old Vijender, who won a bronze in the 2008 Beijing Games, said he expects the women to do well.

"I haven't really fol-

lowed the fortunes of the male boxers but whatever I have read about women boxers has been encouraging. The girls will do well, I hope we get one or two medals. It could be a silver or may be even a gold," Vijender, who is also a BJP leader, said.

"It might be that they (the women boxers) will change the colour of the medals," he added.

Besides Vijender, only two other Indian boxers — MC Mary Kom (London 2012) and Borgohain (Tokyo 2021) — have won bronze medals at the Olympics but none from the country has managed to reach the final and fight for gold.

The women boxers have done exceedingly well in the run-up to the Games with Zareen and Borgohain becoming world champions in 2023 and Pawar and

All Eyes On Nikhat Zareen, Lovlina Borgohain As Boxers Open Olympic Campaign



Lamoria picking up bronze medals at the Asian Games as well as the Commonwealth Games.

The men, on the other hand, have been largely underwhelming, barring Dev, who won a bronze medal at last year's world championship to qualify for the Paris Games.

"There are less male boxers this time. Earlier we used to have five to six but this time only two are going," Vijender, who is also India's first male world championship medalist, said.

The highest number of Indian male boxers to make the Olympic cut was seven, which happened in the 2012 edition. In the 2008 Games, a then record of five pugilists had travelled to the main event after a stunningly good qualifying campaign.

"I don't know why the standards have fallen, may be the boxers themselves would be better-placed to explain what's lacking," he said. The strapping six-footer from Haryana, who ended his amateur career as a three-time Olympian before turning professional in 2015, also spoke about the mental aspect of competing at an event like the Olympics.

The 28-year-old has an uphill task ahead as three of the top medal contenders in

the light-flyweight (50kg) division — China's Wu Yu, Thailand's Chuthamat Raksat and Uzbekistan's Sabina Bobokulova — are in her half.

Zareen opens her campaign against Germany's Maxi Kloetzer on Sunday, following which she will meet top-seeded Asian Games and reigning flyweight world champion Wu.

If Zareen crosses this hurdle, she may meet either eighth-seeded Asian Games silver medalist Raksat or Bobokulova.

Both boxers have defeated the Indian recently. While Raksat got the better of Zareen at the Asian Games last year, Bobokulova beat her at the Strandja Memorial final in February. But the tenacious Hyderabad would be up for the challenge and if she gets through two rounds, she would become a favourite for gold.

Paris Olympics: French athlete Sounkamba Sylla might miss opening ceremony because of hijab

France's 400-meter women's and mixed relay teams athlete Sounkamba Sylla claimed that she has been banned from the opening ceremony of the Paris Olympics 2024 on Friday because she wears a hijab.

"You are selected for the Olympics, organized in your country, but you can't participate in the opening ceremony because you wear a headscarf," the 26-year-old wrote in her social media post earlier in the week.

On Wednesday, David Lappartient, president of the French Olympic Committee, said that French Olympians are bound by the secular principles that apply to public sector workers in France, separating state and church, which includes a ban on hijabs.

Sylla's current situation is because France's minister of sport said athletes representing France would be prohibited from displaying religious symbols during sporting events which included headscarves last September.

"It's perhaps sometimes not understandable in other countries in the



world, but it's part of our DNA here in France," Lappartient said.

Lappartient said discussions are underway with Sylla to find a solution that adheres to the French Olympic team's secular requirements while also respecting the athlete's "legitimate wish that her beliefs are respected."

Thousands of athletes, including some who wear a hijab, are arriving for the Paris Olympics, placing an international spotlight on tensions in France over national identity and perceived discrimination against Muslims.

Foreign athletes are not affected by the secularism

rules and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) does not have rules against wearing religious head coverings.

Maria Hurtado, spokeswoman for the U.N. high commissioner for human rights, criticised the French government in September last year over its stance on the hijab for French athletes during the Olympic Games, saying that "no one should impose on a woman what she needs to wear, or not wear."

Le Parisien newspaper reported that Sylla might participate in the Olympics opening ceremony wearing a cap.

Vinesh Phogat at Paris Olympics: Who will be Indian wrestler's top challengers



Vinesh Phogat's road to Paris has not been an easy one.

In the past one and a half years, Vinesh Phogat had fought more bouts outside the mat. After accusing former Wrestling Federation of India chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh of sexual harassment, leading the protests against the BJP MP, sleeping in tents on footpaths, getting dragged on the streets of the Capital by the Delhi Police, returning national awards and fighting a battle in the courts.

In April earlier this year, the wrestler competed in her first international tournament since September 2022 and, without conceding a single point, secured a Paris Olympics quota place for India. Phogat needed less than six minutes to win her three bouts and get the job done.

Since Vinesh is not seeded, she won't know about her opponents until the day before her competition starts.

Vinesh has now secured her third straight Olympic quota, having featured in Rio Games (2016) and in Tokyo (2020). The Indian Express looks at her closest rivals standing in her way of a podium finish.

Yui Susaki is a four-time World Champion and is the reigning Olympic champion, who won the gold medal without conceding a point in Tokyo. Susaki has only lost three since 2015, all of them to compatriot Yuki Irie. Vinesh might face her in the opening round.

Vinesh can also be pitted against the two-time World silver medalist Otgonjargal Dolgorjav from Mongolia. The 22-year-old can trouble the Indian with her pace. Another potential first-round opponent for Vinesh could be Sarah Hildebrandt from the USA. Hildebrandt is competing in her second Olympics after winning bronze in the women's 50kg division in Tokyo. Since 2021, Hildebrandt has compiled a 31-4 record.

Rohan Bopanna's Last Dance With Unfancied N Sriram Balaji; Stiff Test Awaits In-Form Sumit Nagal

Rohan Bopanna, the oldest player in the Indian contingent at 44, might not have a strong partner he had in previous Olympics, but in N Sriram Balaji, the veteran tennis player has a comrade, who can punch above his weight in Paris when they compete in men's doubles event. India's first and only tennis medal in Olympics came back in 1996, when Leander Paes created history with a singles bronze at the Atlanta Games. India did not win an Olympic medal even when the legendary Paes and Mahesh Bhupathi competed together in Athens (2004) and Beijing (2008). Not even when Bopanna had Bhupathi as his partner in 2012 in London.

Not even when Paes and Bopanna played as a pair in 2016 and not even when Bopanna had Sania Mirza on the same side of the court in Rio Games in mixed doubles. These are the most successful names in Indian tennis, the only players to have won Grand Slam titles in the country's history. To expect Bopanna to deliver the goods with Balaji, who has barely started playing at the big stage, is implausible. Yet, they are



preparing in the best possible manner, given the limitations.

They competed as a team in Hamburg and skipped the Umag tournament in Croatia to give themselves a few practice hours at Roland Garros, a venue where Bopanna has some great memories.

At this very venue he had won his first Grand Slam when he triumphed in mixed doubles with Gabriela Dabrowski in 2017.

"It's the biggest arena for a clay court tournament, and representing India at Roland Garros is very, very special. Those memories help me every time I come here. It's a tournament where I have always done well because of those memories," said Bopanna.

with Mexican partner Miguel Reyes-Varelas is noteworthy.

An assessment of big-match temperament and potential is not possible in these two scenarios but Balaji has shown that he won't bow down to the big boys. His serve and athleticism are his biggest strengths, that nicely complement Bopanna's experience.

At 44, Bopanna's is nearing the end of his career. He has already retired from Davis Cup and these are probably his last few months on the ATP Tour. At an age when players usually settle nicely post retirement, Bopanna raked up the biggest wins of his career.

At 43, he became the oldest player to win a Grand Slam when he triumphed at the Australian Open with Matthew Ebden in 2023 and also achieved the number one status in ATP doubles rankings after that.

Can he end India's nearly three-decade long wait for a tennis Olympic medal and walk into the sunset in a befitting manner? Well, there are fairytale endings, and who knows, Bopanna too has one for him in store.

Satwik-Chirag at Paris Olympics: A look at three main rivals for India's star men's doubles pairing



Leading the talk of India's medal hopefuls at the Olympics, Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty are gearing up for their reboot in Paris, three years after bittersweet Tokyo.

Clubbed with mightier opponents, the Satwik-Chirag pair remained unflinching as they finished third. They fell short of the knockout on point difference behind a top two which included the then World No. 1 pair and eventual champions. While they could not overpower the top-seeded Indonesians Marcus Gideon and Kevin Sukamuljo, "SatChi" edged Chinese Taipei's Lee Yang and Wang Chi-lin who would eventually waltz to the title. With ever-improving fitness and glowing achievements, Satwik and Chirag head into the Games this time as the third-seeded pair and are duly placed among the favourites.

The French Open title win in early March at the Porte de la Chapelle, the badminton venue at the Games, will be a shot in the arm for the exuberant Indians. However, the road to gold may get ragged with tricky contenders breathing down their necks. Men's doubles field is littered with potential medal favourites as it is one of the most unpredictable badminton disciplines currently, but here's a look at three potential obstacles on their way.

Far from the draw in Tokyo, Chirag and Satwik will relish some breathing space in the group stage in Paris. The allowance is nominal as they will bump into Indonesia's Fajar Alfian and Muhammad Ardianto in the last match of Group C. Having suffered exits on fine margins, the Indians cannot take their initial group games against Frenchmen Ronan Labar-Lucas Corvee and world No. 31 Mark Lamsfuss