

Sports

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Athletes force a change in ban of Russians at Paralympics

BY EDDIE PELLIS
AP National Writer

Athletes around the world cheered when leaders of the Paralympics booted Russia from the Games. The move, in many eyes, marked the high point of a growing movement by the people who actually deliver the show to find a greater voice in the Olympic world.

"It is because of the athletes," said Ukrainian skeleton athlete Vladyslav Heraskevych, who has been living about 100 miles from Ukraine's capital of Kyiv, fearful of an attack by Russian troops who invaded the country earlier this week.

The tipping point to the rapid turn of events Thursday was "a very, very volatile environment" in the athletes village in Beijing at the Paralympics, according to the head of that organization.

The International Paralympic Committee was faced with the very real possibility that athletes might simply pick up and go home before their Games start Friday. To prevent that, it made an abrupt about-face and chose to ban the Russian

and Belarusian Paralympic teams that, previously, were being allowed to compete under a neutral flag.

"We did not think that entire delegations, or even teams within delegations, will withdraw, will boycott, will not participate," IPC president Andrew Parsons said.

Rob Koehler, the head of the advocacy group Global Athlete, called the moment "a clear message to every single athlete about how valuable and important their voices are for change."

Early in the week, a cadre of Ukrainian athletes aligned with Koehler's group to put out a statement condemning Russia's invasion and asking for an immediate ban of Russian and Belarusian athletes from the Olympics and Paralympics. The list of signers to this letter grew by the hour. It encompassed several hundred athletes, when adding the individuals who put their names on the letter to those who were members of the federations and athlete committees that signed on, as well.

It could have been more, but as the letter poignant-

ly stated, "it has been a challenge to speak with all athletes from Ukraine as they are seeking safety in bomb shelters."

The International Olympic Committee signaled that it heard the message. It urged all federations to prohibit athletes from those countries from competing. Many took heed of that advice — including ice skating, skiing, soccer, hockey, basketball and others.

But the Paralympics didn't do a ban, explaining it would never hold up in court because of the rulebook. The IOC, with the Olympics in the rearview mirror, also passed on a ban itself.

That decision cast a different light on a New York Times report that China had specifically asked Russia to hold off on any invasion until the Olympics were over. The countries are allies — their presidents held a summit the day after the opening ceremony and declared their strategic partnership had "no limits." It was no shock that China didn't want the start of a war to tarnish its massive sports spectacle.

But the Paralympics bring another 600-plus

athletes to Beijing to compete over 10 days of skiing, skating and sledging. It is one of the largest gathering of international athletes this side of the Olympics. The removal of Russia's flag, without the removal of the country's athletes was, Parsons said, the "harshest possible punishment we can hand down within our constitution and the current IPC rules."

Those rules, however, took a backseat to reality.

The Latvian and South Korean curling teams said they wouldn't take the ice against Russia for an early round match. Other athletes were considering leaving. The IPC could no longer ignore that possibility.

"It is abundantly clear that athletes forced this decision, not sport leaders," said Ali Jawad, a four-time Paralympian who is on the board of Global Athlete.

The thought of walking away is the most drastic possible option for athletes who spend their lives training for a day or two of glory at the biggest spectacle in sports. For decades, none have willingly made that choice.



Vladyslav Heraskevych, of Ukraine, waves after finishing the men's skeleton run 4 at the 2022 Winter Olympics on Feb. 11 in the Yanqing district of Beijing.

The thought of competing in China, with its record of human-rights abuses, was stomach-turning to many Olympians. But they all chose to go, in large part because they knew there was no groundswell that would follow them out the door. Boycotting by themselves, they said, would grab headlines for a day or two, but then the world would simply move on.

Athletes posed a bigger threat than that at the Paralympics. It was the latest, most striking show of power in a movement that has included victories in the fight over Olympic rules on marketing and demonstrations, a flap over women wearing bikini bottoms for beach handball, pay for women's soccer players and more.

"The list goes on and on, and it shows that when athletes say 'Things are changing, and they're

changing today,' that it really can happen," Koehler said.

Russia is likely to take this case to the Court of Arbitration for Sport. CAS, the IOC, World Athletics, the World Anti-Doping Agency and dozens more in this long "alphabet soup" of sports organizations have a long history of contorting the rulebooks of international sports to make them say whatever they want.

One example: While, before the war broke out, Russia remained largely eligible in most sports despite eight years of rule-breaking and cover-ups, it was still considered a rogue state in track and field.

It is also, for the time being, persona non grata at the Paralympics. The credit for that goes to a growing group of athletes who wouldn't accept any other option.

Queen for the day

Brawley Union High School wrestler Savannah Gomez (center) is shown here Thursday afternoon in the school's gym with City Councilman Ramon Castro (left) and Coach Ray Leon. Castro attended a student assembly to present Gomez a copy of a council proclamation declaring Thursday "Savannah Gomez Day" in the city of Brawley. Gomez, a junior, won the CIF State girls wrestling championship Saturday in the 137-pound division. She is ranked third nationally in her weight class and No. 25 overall on a pound-for-pound basis.

PHOTO TOM BODUS



Durant has 31 in return but Heat rally to beat Nets

BY BRIAN MAHONEY
AP Basketball Writer

NEW YORK — Kevin Durant's return couldn't stop the Brooklyn Nets' slide, as Bam Adebayo had 30 points, 11 rebounds and six assists to lead the Miami Heat to a 113-107 victory on Thursday night.

Tyler Herro added 27 points for the Eastern Conference-leading Heat, who bounced back from a tough loss in Milwaukee a night earlier with an impressive victory despite missing some of their top players.

Durant had 31 points in his first game since Jan. 15 and his return from a 21-game absence inspired the Nets to a 16-point lead. But Miami tightened up its defense in the second half and held off a late surge by the Nets.

Durant had a 3-point attempt from straightaway that would have given the

Nets the lead go in and out with 57 seconds left, and the Heat worked it inside to Adebayo on the ensuing possession for a 111-107 advantage with 35 seconds to go.

The Nets were 5-16 without Durant, tumbling all the way from second place in the Eastern Conference to eighth. Only the Knicks (3-16) and Rockets (3-15) had been worse since Jan. 16, according to the Elias Sports Bureau.

Brooklyn was still without Kyrie Irving and Ben Simmons on Thursday, so even Durant wasn't enough against the Eastern Conference leaders. Bruce Brown scored 21 points.

Caleb Martin added 22 points for Miami, and Max Strus had 21.

The Heat were without Jimmy Butler (left big toe), Kyle Lowry (personal reasons) and P.J. Tucker (left

knee) on the second night of a back-to-back. They fell 120-119 in Milwaukee, a game they lead by 14 point lead midway through the fourth quarter.

Durant missed 3-pointers on his first two shots, then made his final four of the first quarter for nine points and a 35-23 lead.

He still had those nine points with under 2 1/2 minutes remaining in the half, then converted a three-point play, knocked down a jumper and a 3-pointer for eight points in a minute as Brooklyn took a 67-60 lead to the break.

The Heat held them to 17 points and 6-for-28 shooting in the third quarter, taking an 88-84 lead to the fourth.

TIP-INS

Heat: Miami shot 51.9% from the field. ... Duncan Robinson missed all three shots but had seven assists.



Brooklyn Nets forward Kevin Durant (7) looks to pass the ball as Miami Heat center Bam Adebayo (13) defends during the first half of an NBA basketball game Thursday in New York. JOHN MINCHILLO/AP

Nets: The Nets announced in a statement that Joe Harris would have another surgery on his left ankle and miss the remain-

der of the season. Harris, who led the NBA in 3-point shooting percentage in two of the last three seasons, has been trying to return after

having surgery on the ankle Nov. 29. Brooklyn used its 36th different starting lineup, most in the NBA this season.