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Sha'ban qualifies to her 2nd Olympics



Zeina Sha'ban (File photo)

By Aline Bannayan

AMMAN - Table tennis player Zeina Sha'ban qualified to her second Olympics over the weekend when she clinched the sole qualifying berth from the West Asia Zone.

Sha'ban beat Jordan's Siwar Abu Yumun and Syria's Suha Anous 4-0, before overcoming competition from Lebanon's top players Mariana Sahakian 4-1 and Lara Kejebashian 4-1, to qualify to this year's Beijing Olympics. Both Lebanese players had led their club, Homenetmen, to the 19th Arab Clubs Table Tennis Championship title which was held in Amman in November.

Kuwait's Ibrahim Hasan won the men's qualifier among 15 players including Jordan's Shawqi Diya and Mustafa Rida.

Players from Jordan, Syria and Lebanon competed in the women's qualifiers and Jordanian observers were sceptical

as to Sha'ban's ability to snatch the qualifying spot after not playing for the national team in the past two years when she was studying abroad.

Table tennis has been one the strongest sports for Jordan in the past. Sha'ban recorded the fifth time a Jordanian woman table tennis player qualified to the Games. Previously of Jordan's seven qualifiers in the Kingdom's history at the Olympic Games, five were women and four played table tennis.

Jacqueline Duqum was the first Jordanian woman to qualify to the Olympic Games when she won the West Asian Championship to advance to the Seoul Games in 1988. She was a role model and set the ball rolling for other stars in the game who qualified to the Olympics including Nadia Rashad (Barcelona 1992), Tatyana Najjar (Sydney 2000) and Sha'ban (Athens 2004).

Although it has been the women's team that put Jordan on the Arab and Asian table tennis maps, with Najjar and Sha'ban being crowned Arab champions, Sha'ban owes her success to her family who really worked on her. The international table tennis federation website and others specialising in the game have covered her career and she has received reviews praising her as a star to look out for.

Born in Amman on May 12, 1988, Sha'ban started gymnastics at the age of seven, table tennis at age of eight, competed in both until the age of 11 when she decided to concentrate her efforts on table tennis, saying goodbye to any possibility of a gymnastics career. She has been fully supported by her parents and has been able to practice at her home in Amman where she had her own personal coach. However, it was soon realised that she must travel abroad to improve, so since the age of 10 she has been a regular entrant in the Safirs International Junior Tournament in Örebro, Sweden, and travelled to Europe and China to improve her skills whilst competing on the ITTF World Junior Circuit, ITTF Pro Tour and at both the Liebherr World Individual Championships and World Team Championships. These competitions added to her reservoir of knowledge and raised her skills.

When she joined the national team, she was already a champion playing in Europe and elsewhere. In 2003, she was Asian Juniors runner-up, Arab Juniors champ, Arab Women's runner-up and was voted Jordan's top sports person. She also came in third at the 2004 Pan-Arab Games and was crowned Arab Cup champ in 2005.