

Olympic Profiles: Mijaín, King of Flagbearers

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Shaking his hand is like bearing a pressing force, bearing that physical pain just for a few seconds, although his humble greeting and gentle personality actually prove otherwise. The same occurs when we hug each other, every time my 5'7 height is lost within such hugging, burning arms.

Yes, the arms of Mijaín López (August 20, 1982) are pure flame, or at least that is what his rivals on the mat believe. He is, indeed, an undefeatable 6'6, 130kg ebony giant.

Throughout his long and fruitful professional career, he has won three Olympic titles (Beijing 2008, London 2012 and Rio 2016); five world titles (2005-2007-2009-2010-2014), three silver medals (2006-2011 and 2015); five Pan American gold medals (2003-2007-2011-2015-2019); and two Central American Games titles (2014 and 2018). Some of the greatest wrestlers worldwide have lost against him in the last 20 years.

I can state categorically that no one other than Russian Aleksandr Karelin —known as the Russian Bear, a wrestler who went 13 years undefeated— has been involved in such a mighty act in either of the two wrestling styles.

Americans Rulon Gardner —Mijaín beat him with 21 years old in Santo Domingo in 2003— and Dremiel Byres, Russian Khasan Baroev, Estonian Heiki Nabi, and more recently, Turkish Ryza Kayaalp, bear witness of Mijaín's strength as all of them lost against him.

Reasons to be Impregnable

All the attention, when there is a little more than one year left for the beginnings of the Olympic Games, goes to Tokyo. Especially now that a survey carried out in recent days showed that a significant proportion of Tokyo's population rejects or hesitates about going forward with the celebrations of the sports event.

Here, as in other nations, athletes are doing their best to maintain their physical fitness to return to competitions in the best possible shape. At home, amid this pandemic, we are anxious to see our athletes challenging and overcoming obstacles in a sports event that will certainly become a pivotal moment not only for sports protocols, but also for regulatory issues in sports.

Mijaín is not immune from that reality. He works hard at home against a dangerous opponent named quarantine while sharing time with his wife and two children. The Cuban flag looks like printed in his broad shoulder. And that is the same flag he has proudly borne in every opening ceremony as if it were just a toothpick.

Mijaín's shape for Tokyo is a question mark to some. Some have questioned whether he could reign again at the age of 39, and thus

become one of the greatest athletes of all times, and the greatest wrestler ever.

Here is a list of reasons why I believe he can:

1. He is a nearly perfect wrestler, both technically and tactically. He is tough to be warned for passivity; not to mention how hard it is to unbalance him on the mat when he is on the four-point stance position.
1. When attacking, he combines strength and intensity in the neutral position and when he ties up his opponent on the mat, opponents' winning chances are zero.
1. He has managed to control his weight, which is paramount. His experience in the German Bundesliga has helped him a lot in this regard. The competitive system there make wrestlers check their weight twice a week.
1. He has been in the national team for 25 years now and he has not suffered any severe injury; hence his nickname the Ebony Giant. A propos, I remember that once, after winning the gold medal in London 2012, he told me:

“I must confess that despite my elbow surgery in 2010, my lack of competitions in the span of 2011-2012 as a result of my rehab treatment, and the urgency to stabilize my weight, I found London 2012 easier to win than Beijing 2008. The competition bracket was more comfortable (his performance proved him right as he scored 14 points against his opponents and received none). I won both titles in a similar way by taking profit of the four-point stance, unbalancing my opponent

to immediately taking a defensive stance. Unbalancing has always been my most effective technique.

I think Baroev has been my toughest rival. He was better than me tactically and he boasted an advanced technique both attacking and defending. Turkish Kayaalp is very strong and impulsive, which paired with his vigor, make them his best weapons...”

1. He treasures a very strong mindset forged over the years, especially every time he faced top wrestlers; not to mention the fact that everyone in Cuba and the rest of the world see you as the clear favorite to the title.
1. In case he chooses not to participate in any competition from now on and until the Olympic Games, no new wrestlers would come up in the elite. Therefore, Mijaín already knows his opponents very well, with Turkish Kayaalp topping that list. In Cuba, two-times medalists in world championships Oscar Pino and rising star Ángel Pacheco secure high-quality training sparring for him.

These are the reasons why we trust in Mijaín. Especially when we found that only five athletes have won four consecutive gold medals in Olympic Games (Danish Paul Elvstrom, London 1948 - Rome 1960, sailing)

Americans discus thrower Al Oerter (Melbourne 1956 - Mexico 1968); Carl Lewis (Los Angeles 1984 – Atlanta 1996, long jump); and Maikel Phelps (Athens 2004 – Rio 2016, swimming).

Japan’s female wrestler Kaori Icho (Athens 2004 – Rio 2016) is the last of this group of legends.

Thus, everything is ready. Mijaín —our perennial king of mats— will try hard to end his sports career by winning his four consecutive gold medal in Tokyo.

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