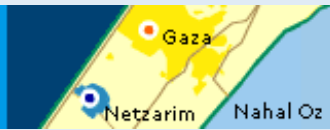


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Israeli tennis star may miss Olympics due to sponsors dispute

By Ellis Shuman August 3, 2004



Ranked 17th in the world among women tennis players and a winner of nine career WTA titles, Anna Smashnova-Pistolesi is one of Israel's best medal hopes at the upcoming Olympic Games.

"I deserve this chance to both serve and make my country proud," Israel's top tennis player Anna Smashnova-Pistolesi said, in a statement released by her management company, ITMS Sports, on Sunday. But a sponsorship row over whose clothes she should wear while on the Olympics court may keep her home from Athens.

"Being chosen to represent your country is special to every athlete," Smashnova-Pistolesi said. "I've worked very hard for this," she said, in a letter addressed to the Israel Tennis Association.

Smashnova-Pistolesi, currently ranked 17th in the world among women tennis players and a winner of nine career WTA titles, is one of Israel's best medal hopes at the upcoming Olympic Games in Greece, media sources reported.

"Unfortunately, there's a real possibility that Anna will not be able to play in Athens," Israel Olympic Committee chairman Zvi Varshaviak said last month.

If she attends the Games, Smashnova-Pistolesi would be required to wear the clothes of the team's sponsor - Speedo. The tennis player's regular clothing sponsor, Lotto, says it will allow her to wear the clothes of Speedo for all events in Athens expect her matches.

Speedo, however, insists Smashnova-Pistolesi should wear its clothes at all times.

Yediot Aharonot reported yesterday, however, that Speedo does not produce a line of clothing or shoes suitable for tennis players. Speedo's CEO Ilan Ben-Dror confirmed that the company was demanding that Smashnova-Pistolesi wear clothing provided by a subsidiary whose products are imported into Israel by Speedo.

"If Smashnova won't even wear Speedo products, why are they raising this argument at all?" an official at the Israel Tennis Association told the newspaper.

"I am disappointed and angry that Israel's Olympic Committee couldn't find a solution to Anna's problem," said Ian Froman, chairman of the Tennis Association. "Israel has very few athletes at


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her level and she has the potential to win a medal.

"We do not understand why Anna has been singled out," Froman said. "We feel that there is discrimination against her because she is a woman, or perhaps because she no longer lives in Israel after her marriage to an Italian. We feel that the Israel Olympic Committee has treated her like a second-class sportswoman," he said, quoted in Haaretz.

Froman appealed to Education, Culture and Sports Minister Limor Livnat to intervene in the sponsorship battle, in order to allow Smashnova-Pistolesi to participate in the Olympics on Israel's behalf.

ITMS Sports said in Sunday's statement it was still pushing for a solution despite the fact that the two companies had stopped corresponding directly, Reuters reported.

Smashnova-Pistolesi was born in 1976 in Minsk, Belarus. Her family has been living in Israel since 1990 and Anna plays for Israel in international competitions.



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