

A Tokyo Sequel to ‘Chariots of Fire’

A Saturday date for the Olympic marathon may keep Israel’s champ from running.

By Akiva Shapiro

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When the starting gun goes off at the Tokyo Olympics women’s marathon next summer, one elite runner may be sitting on the sidelines—not because of her running time, but because of her religious beliefs. Beatie Deutsch, Israel’s national champion marathon runner, can’t compete if the marathon is held, as scheduled, on the Jewish Sabbath.

Her path to the Olympic Games could have been scripted for Hollywood. Ms. Deutsch, 30, ran her first marathon in 2016, when she was a mother of four. A year later, she ran her second marathon while seven months pregnant. In 2018 Ms. Deutsch won a race for the first time and in 2019 she won the Israeli national marathon championships, with a finishing time of 2 hours, 42 minutes, 18 seconds—three minutes faster than the Olympic qualifying standard at the time. Along the way she has overcome severe anemia and dealt with celiac disease.

Earlier this year, now a mother of five, Ms. Deutsch set a personal record of 2 hours, 32 minutes, 30 seconds—a blazing pace of 5 minutes and 47 seconds per mile over the 26.2-mile course, and just short of Tokyo’s qualifying standard, which she expects to meet in the coming months.

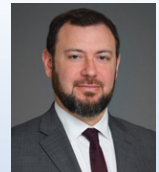
Ms. Deutsch is hard to miss on the track. In observance of Jewish law, she runs in a skirt that goes below her knees, sleeves that conceal her elbows, and a head scarf that covers her hair—the ensemble is a first for an elite marathoner. Ms. Deutsch doesn’t view her

dedication to running as separate from her faith. “Our role in the world is to take the raw material God has given us and to use it to the fullest,” she says. “I have a talent for running.”

If this sounds familiar, you may have seen “Chariots of Fire” (1981), a fictionalized portrayal of a real British sprinter, Eric Liddell, a Christian missionary who refused to run the 100-yard dash at the 1924 Paris Olympics because a qualifying heat was scheduled for a Sunday. In the film as in real life, the International Olympic Committee forced Liddell to choose between faith and sport, and he was by turns pilloried and praised for picking faith.

Fast-forward almost 100 years. When the 2020 Olympics schedule was announced, the women’s marathon was scheduled for a Sunday, in line with historical practice. Later, when the outdoor distance events were moved to the Japanese city of Sapporo and condensed into four days, the event was moved to a Saturday. Ms. Deutsch requested that it be rescheduled for a different day. After Covid-19 caused the Tokyo Olympics to be adjourned to 2021, Ms. Deutsch again requested that the women’s marathon be held on another day. So far her request has been denied. The IOC has rejected any consideration of an athlete’s religious observance and restrictions in scheduling its events.

The IOC should do better. Numerous considerations affect Olympic scheduling, so religious observance can’t be determinative in



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every instance. But the committee should take an athlete's faith-based restrictions into consideration and accommodate them when feasible. The Olympic charter lauds the practice of sport as a human right, to be guaranteed "without discrimination of any kind," including on the basis of religion. Finding a reasonable accommodation would make that promise real.

When the 2012 Summer Olympics in London coincided with Ramadan, the IOC made special arrangements for Muslim athletes—as it should have. As an IOC representative said at the time, "Every effort is being made to accommodate the needs of the Muslim athletes who will be participating in London." These included predawn and post-sunset meals at all competition venues. No athlete of any faith should be excluded because of religious requirements or observances.

If need be, Ms. Deutsch stands ready to act as a modern-day Eric Liddell and forgo her Olympic dream to observe

the Sabbath. As Liddel says in the film: "I won't run on the Sabbath. And that's final." But have we made no progress since 1924? Must we still force athletes to choose between their faith and their dreams?

Come next summer, I pray that Ms. Deutsch will be in Japan, standing at the starting line of the Olympic women's marathon, in her trademark long skirt, long sleeves and head covering. It would be a crowning achievement for a world-class athlete, but more so for the Olympics itself, on the long and winding path toward welcoming people of all backgrounds into its vision of humankind united by sport.

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