

ZACK PIONTEK



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Meet 25 year-old Zack Piontek, a South African judoka heading for the Olympics in Rio.

When a young boy is asked what he or she wants to be when they grow up, there are always the usual range of predictable answers like 'doctor', 'fireman', 'policeman' or 'racing driver'.

Not in young Zack Piontek's case. His immediate response at the tender age of five was "I want to be an Olympian."

"A wise man once told me: 'To be the best you must train harder than the best'", said the muscular giant with a smile.

In April, Piontek had achieved his goal of qualifying to represent South Africa at the Olympic Games in Rio when he won a silver medal at the African Championship in Tunisia, accumulating enough ranking points to make the Olympic cut. Only the top 22 judokas in any category automatically qualify to compete in Rio.



Prior to that he had already steadily been accumulating world ranking points in the under-90kg weight class by winning the African Open title in Mauritius in 2013 and 2015, with a bronze in 2014.

In arguably his biggest accomplishment to date - in what is considered by most to be a fringe sport in South Africa - Piontek won gold at the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow in Scotland, beating Scotland's Mathew Purssey in that final.

The 2014 Commonwealth Games had been the first time in 12 years that judo was included in the Games' programme.

A bronze medal at the PanAm Open in Peru earlier this year and that silver in Tunis nudged him into the elite Olympic 22 by the closing date of 31 May.



It was a long journey for 25 year-old Piontek, who started his craft as a five year-old under the tutelage of his father. Having turned professional in 2009, he is presently under the watchful eyes of the 1992 Barcelona Olympian Nikola Filipov from Bulgaria, who coaches him at the Tuks High Performance Centre in Pretoria.

He had already shown great promise at the 2010 Commonwealth Championships in Singapore, where he won a gold medal as a junior and added two bronze medals in the senior categories.

Piontek rates self-discipline and prioritising as the major hallmarks of success he has developed under Filipov, but also combines it with the high levels of mental strength needed in a contact sport.

His coach underlined that mental strength and endurance and recalled how his charge fought through the pain barrier to taste success in Singapore six years ago.

He had broken his wrist bone on the first day of the tournament, but refused to quit and went on to haul in three medals (1 gold, 2 bronze).

"There was no way that I was going to quit. I had to make the most of the opportunity to compete against the world's best," recalled Piontek.

Piontek says there are very few Olympic-standard judokas in his weight class in South Africa, which is a slight training drawback and he more often than not ends up fighting smaller guys, where the focus is more directed towards technique and speed.

His international travels and participation in his quest to accumulate world ranking points he describes as something of a 'lone crusade' strewn with personal sacrifices and no guarantees of success.

He is particularly praiseworthy of the role the HPC has played in his development as an elite athlete.

In conjunction with the HPC, a cash-strapped Judo South Africa found in the Tuks HPC a very good ally and began a full time, sustainable judo programme.

It has certainly paid dividends and Zack Piontek is soon to accomplish his childhood dream of becoming an Olympian.

HIGHLIGHTS

Continental Championships -- 120

World Cups/Continental Open -- 302

European Cup Juniors -- 10

International Tournaments -- 100

28/04/2016 1st COMMONWEALTH CHAMPIONSHIPS PORT ELIZABETH CWC U90

08/04/2016 2nd AFRICAN CHAMPIONSHIPS TUNIS AFC U90

06/03/2016 3rd PAN AMERICAN OPEN LIMA WCUP U90

08/11/2015 1st AFRICAN OPEN PORT LOUIS WCUP U90

15/09/2015 3rd AFRICAN

Judo South Africa

Zack, Judo South Africa wishes you all of the best for the Olympics. May you go from strength to strength. You are making us proud!



(At the SASCO function prior to departing to Rio – Nikola Filipov (Coach), Temba Hlasho (JSA President), Zack Piontek)