CHASING THE DREAM

THANKS TO THE IOC’S OLYMPIC SOLIDARITY PROGRAMME, ATHLETES FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD ARE RECEIVING THE SUPPORT THEY NEED TO COMPETE AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES
**Olympic Solidarity**

With less than two years to go until the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio, athletes’ preparations are in full flow as they focus on preparing for the biggest sporting event on the planet. For many, their hopes of competing at the Games of the XXXI Olympiad – and potentially winning a medal – receive a huge boost from the support of Olympic Solidarity.

Ever since 1962, when the Committee for International Olympic Aid was formed to assist newly independent countries, the IOC has been working hand-in-hand with the National Olympic Committees (NOCs) to provide support to athletes around the world. In 1981, the Olympic Solidarity Commission was established, with a new strategy to assist the NOCs, and has been providing invaluable support over the past three decades. Through a variety of targeted programmes designed to meet the NOCs’ needs, Olympic Solidarity aims to help them develop and expand sports in their respective countries and territories.

Today, Olympic Solidarity manages a quadrennial plan, distributing funds generated from the NOCs’ share of the revenue from the broadcast rights from the Olympic Games. For the 2013-2016 plan, Olympic Solidarity is responsible for a global budget of USD 438 million, an increase of USD 127 million from the 2009-2012 budget. Seventy per cent of these funds are divided between two main programmes – World Programmes and Continental Programmes – while the remaining portion of the budget is allocated to Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC) programmes, Olympic Games subsidies and complementary programmes.

There are 17 World Programmes in all, separated into four sections to support athletes, coaches, NOC management and the promotion of Olympic values. The Continental Programmes managed by the five Continental Associations – for which the budget has increased by 30 per cent for the current quadrennial period – target the specific requirements of NOCs on each continent.

For those athletes and NOCs setting their sights on Rio 2016, the Olympic Scholarship programme provides significant assistance, with a total allocated budget of USD 22 million. Focusing in particular on those with the greatest need, the programme offers technical and financial support to a fixed number of elite athletes in their training and qualification preparations.

Zimbabwean swimmer and seven-time Olympic medallist Kirsty Coventry is one of many athletes who have benefited from a scholarship. “Coming from a small NOC that doesn’t have a lot of finance, our sports weren’t funded very well,” explains Coventry, who is a member of the IOC Athletes’ Commission. “As a swimmer and as an athlete, you have to travel to different competitions in order to refine your competition technique and how you handle different situations – it’s such a vital part. So the scholarship came in and helped with that and it was amazing. I could suddenly go to three or four different meets.”

The scholarships help athletes in many ways, from coaching and covering the travel costs for competitions, to medical and scientific support. These areas of support are aimed at helping the athletes achieve the programme’s primary objective: to qualify for the Olympic Games. “All those little things help take the pressure off an athlete and I was able to just focus on my goal of becoming an Olympic champion,” Coventry says.

Judging by the results of the Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games, Olympic Solidarity is achieving its goals. The Olympic Scholarship programme was introduced for the first time for a Winter Games at Vancouver in 2010. Four years later, a total...
A budget of USD 10 million was allocated for Sochi. Individual scholarships were awarded to 66 NOCs, seven NOCs received tailor-made grants with individual scholarships, while another four NOCs were also given tailor-made grants. Of the 440 athletes who benefited from the programme, 273 – or 62 per cent – qualified for Sochi. Many went on to flourish on the biggest stage: between them, the scholarship holders won 17 medals, including seven golds, while 51 athletes received diplomas for recording 4th-8th place finishes.

Two of those gold medallists were twin sisters Vita and Valja Semerenko, who were part of Ukraine’s victorious women’s biathlon 4x6km relay team. “It is hard to underestimate the contribution of the Olympic Solidarity programme,” says Valja. “The figures prove it. For most participants it gives a chance to be prepared in high quality conditions and show the highest possible performance in such a tough competition as the Olympic Games.”

“The Olympic Solidarity programmes are very flexible and favourable for their participants,” adds Vita. “There is no doubt that the Olympic Solidarity scholarship played a significant role [in our success] – both in financial and psychological terms.”

Austria’s Daniela Iraschko-Stolz helped make history in Sochi, when she competed in the first ever women’s ski jumping event to take place at the Winter Games. She won a silver medal and credits the Solidarity programme with playing a vital part in her success.

“It helped to improve my training quality in a period when it could have been crucial,” she said. “It helped to pay for hotels and trips during summer time and we were able to host more training camps. We also added another coach to our team who specifically took care of our jumping equipment like skis and suits.”

There was a similar success story at the 2nd Youth Olympic Games (YOG) in Nanjing. Offering both technical and financial assistance, the Solidarity programme for the YOG helped 116 NOCs identify young athletes, and assisted 108 NOCs with the organisation of qualification events.

Olympic Solidarity also awarded 361 preparation grants to promising qualified young athletes, including swimmer Marcelo Acosta from El Salvador. In the build-up to Nanjing, he used the grant to take part in a training programme in Florida and went on to win a silver medal in the men’s 400m freestyle event.

Two other silver medallists who made the most of their opportunities were Dulguun Bolormaa from Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan judoka Rotislav Dashkov. Despite only taking up wrestling in 2010, Bolormaa has emerged as one of the sport’s brightest young stars and won silver in the women’s freestyle -46kg event. Dashkov, meanwhile, was invited to take part in the International Judo Federation’s youth training camp in Switzerland, thanks to the Olympic Solidarity identification programme. Following this experience he went on to win silver in Nanjing.

Whether competing at youth level, in Summer or Winter Games, all these athletes benefited from the Olympic Solidarity support. And if the performances of this Nanjing trio, the Semerenko twins and Iraschko-Stolz are anything to go by, there should be plenty more positive results in Rio in 2016.