

Russian Paralympians' Last Call for Rio

Russian athletes attempt last-ditch appeal to the International Paralympic Committee for the right to compete.

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Alexei Obydyonov continues to train in the hope that IPC will repeal his Paralympic ban. **Alexei Obydyonov / VK**

Alexei Obydyonov, a two-time world champion in cycle racing, is visibly annoyed when asked about his chances participating in the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. “It doesn’t really depend on any of us,” he told The Moscow Times. “It is all in their hands now.”

Obydyonov, 40, is one of more than 100 athletes who have appealed to the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) to be allowed to compete in the upcoming Games.

In August the entire team was banned amid evidence of widespread state-sponsored doping

in Russian sport. The Russian Paralympic Committee (RPC) moved to contest the ban in the Court of Arbitration for Sports (CAS), but failed: The CAS upheld the ban. RPC unsuccessfully appealed the ruling in the Swiss Federal Court and 266 Paralympic athletes were left with little, if any, hope of competing in Rio.

But the athletes have refused to give up. After CAS announced its ruling, they filed individual applications to the IPC. They hope to follow in the footsteps of banned Russian athletes, who achieved a last-gasp reprieve ahead of August's Olympic Games.

There is no straightforward parallel to be made between the two situations, says sports lawyer Artyom Patsev, who is helping 34 Paralympic athletes file appeals. Unlike the International Olympic Committee, the IPC revealed neither the conditions on which individual applications could be approved, nor the criteria that applying athletes must meet.

“We were basically going in blind,” Patsev told The Moscow Times. “We looked at the experience of our Olympic athletes and at recent CAS practice. Our main goal was to show that these athletes have nothing to do with transgressions of the system.”

Patsev says the athletes he helped received confirmation from the IPC that the applications were being considered as early as Aug. 26. On Aug. 30, another 100 athletes were reported to have filed their applications with the help of the RPC.

By Aug. 31, some athletes had already received official confirmations that their appeals have been unsuccessful. Of the 34 athletes represented by Patsev, 12 received such letters, sports agent Andrei Mitkov told the allsportinfo.ru website. Earlier in the day lawyers had filed a class action to CAS, demanding that the 34 athletes be allowed to compete. In the suit, they also demanded the court expedite the ruling so that it would be announced in time for the Games.

At the time of publication, it remained unclear if any athletes would be allowed to compete. Top members of the RPC were unavailable for comment; the IPC didn't respond to a request for comment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has promised not to leave Paralympians without a chance to compete. “We will support you and organize special competitions for you to demonstrate your skills,” he said on Aug. 25. “Winners and runner-ups [of these competitions] will receive the same awards they would have received for winning the Paralympic Games.”

The 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio start on Sept. 7. The dates for Russia's alternative Games have yet to be announced.

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