

Olympics-Women shuttlers change the script with fourth Games appearances

LONDON (Reuters) - Conventional wisdom dictates that the average retirement age for elite women players in the intense and physically demanding sport of badminton is well under 30 years old.

Five women shuttlers are set to turn that on its head, however, when they make their fourth Olympic appearances at the Paris Games, a feat never accomplished before.

Taiwan's Tai Tzu Ying, 30, Thailand's Ratchanok Intanon, 29, Belgium's Lianne Tan, 33, Hong Kong's Tse Ying Suet and Canada's Michelle Li, both 32, will compete for Olympic glory at Porte de La Chapelle Arena from July 27 to Aug. 5.

"These achievements get missed because they're women," said Nora Perry, twice world champion and a council member of the Badminton World Federation (BWF). "It's not taken as seriously. When men do something extraordinary, it's celebrated and comes out on front pages."

Women have had to fight tooth-and-nail to compete at the Olympics, and some sports and events were barred to them even as recently as the Tokyo Games. Badminton has done well in comparison on the gender equality front, with Indonesia's Susi Susanti beating South Korean shuttler Bang Soo-hyun to singles gold when it first became a medal sport at the Barcelona Games in 1992.

Four years later, in Atlanta, women shuttlers were pitted against men in mixed doubles matches, something tennis had yet to do at the time. The Paris Games will be the first to feature an equal number of men and women athletes, but even in badminton, the relationship between the federation and women shuttlers has not always been smooth sailing.

RULE CHANGE

Ahead of the 2012 London Olympics, officials at the BWF drew criticism after imposing a rule requiring women players to wear skirts to make the sport more "feminine" and "attractive" to fans and sponsors.

Predictably, the rule change sparked a massive outcry and the BWF hastily backtracked before the Games began. Of the veteran women shuttlers in Paris,

Tokyo silver medallist Tai has the best shot at a podium finish. Tai, who also competed at the Olympics in Rio in 2016 and London 2012, is fifth in the BWF's rankings of players who have qualified for Paris.

Ratchanok at number 12, is no slouch either, and two places above India's PV Sindhu, herself a twice Olympic medallist. The Thai came fifth in Tokyo, ninth in Rio and fifth in London. "To achieve that with that four-year gap each time and come out of it without a serious injury and compete at that highest, highest level is amazing," Perry said.

Badminton's combination of sprinting, lunging, jumping and split second directional changes, all executed on a hard playing surface, make the sport exceptionally tough on its athletes, with ankle, knee, back, wrist and shoulder injuries all commonplace.

Tan is Belgium's first female badminton Olympian and was 21 years old when she embarked on her Olympic journey in London. Since then, she has studied dentistry, got married and represented her country at the Rio and Tokyo Olympics.

Her brother Yuhan also represented Belgium at two Games, with the siblings introduced to the sport by their Indonesian father. "It's really special to see my name with the other four," said Tan, who will meet Tai and Intanon in the group stage.

"A lot has changed. I was very young and inexperienced," she added. "It was so special to go to my first Olympics together with my brother. I know more now -- what's important in life -- and I think that helps me enjoy the Games more and prepare better."