



WOROUD SAWALHA



her interview with Mosaic

WORLOUD SAWALHA

is a 20 year old runner and a sports major at Najah National University in Palestine. She is from Aseera Al Shamalia which is right outside of Nablus in the West Bank. She caught everyone's attention during the Olympics when she competed in her hijab for Palestine. Although Woroud didn't win, she won worldwide respect and made Palestinians and Muslim women very proud. 'Mosaic of Muslim Women' (read more about Mosaic on page 25) interviews her about the Olympics and her future goals.

Mosaic: When did you start competing/running professionally?

Woroud: 'I first started out when I was about 13 years old and I used to compete in nationwide competitions through my school. I used to run long distances like the 3k and 5k. When I graduated from high school, I had an average of 93% and I chose to major in sports in university. I joined the track team at my university and used to compete with them with the ultimate goal of competing internationally. After successfully winning many of the local and national track competitions, it was announced that I will be competing in the Olympics for Palestine.'

Mosaic: What was your training like in Palestine? What obstacles did you endure?

Woroud: "There was no place for me to train and no one to train me on the 800 meters, which was a new distance for me. I tried at first to train with my university team but it was on different distances and there was no one to focus on training me on my own. So after I train with the team, I used to go out to my father's land out in the village and train hard to improve my running times. Every week I used to go to the Olympic committee and ask them to help me with my situation and provide me with a trainer for my specific distance. Time was passing by so quickly and my situation was not changing. Until April came along and I was told that there would be a 3 month training camp in Qatar which I attended along with Bahaa Al Fara-the other Palestinian runner who is from Gaza- and

his trainer Majed Abu Marahel. However, I was very surprised when I got to Qatar that there was still no trainer assigned to me. So I started to train with Majed Abu Marahel as well. I used to train twice a day, in the mornings and evenings, in Qatar in order to take advantage of resources that I did not have available to me in Palestine."

Mosaic: How did your training change when you got to London?

Woroud: "In London I got to train on a track that was similar to the one that I would compete in and that was the best training I had. My best time when I was in Palestine was 3.54 min. I was also able to train in Turkey for a short while (while I was there for a competition in Istanbul) where my time improved to 2.51 min. With the training in Qatar my best time became 2.42 min. By the time I started training in London, I was able to take off another 13 seconds of my best time. I felt that that was when my journey really began to take off."

Mosaic: How did it feel to get chosen for the Olympics?

Woroud: "Even though this was a huge dream of mine, I honestly didn't expect for it to actually happen. I was a bit anxious because I felt the heavy responsibility that was on my shoulders to represent my country."



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Mosaic: You have so many factors that someone might use against you, like the fact that you are Palestinian and you run with your hijab. How do you keep up your motivation?

Woroud: "When I started running years ago, I was not wearing hijab. However, when I did start wearing hijab, I continued to compete. I did face some difficulties in the beginning but Alhamdulillah I am now more attached to it than I ever was. There was a time when I felt weakened by people's negative comments but when I was chosen for the Olympics I proved to everyone that a woman in hijab has the ability to reach the highest limits!"

Mosaic: What was your number one goal this Olympic games?

Woroud: "My goal for this Olympic games was achieved and it was for the new number from Palestine to carry my name. That was my goal for these games purely because this is only the beginning and I hope to use that number to compete in the next Olympics Inshallah. I will be working hard to improve myself so that I can compete against the best and win. Then it will be the Palestinian national anthem that the world will hear and the Palestinian flag will be raised above others."

Mosaic: What was it like when you arrived in London? Did anyone from your family go with you?

Woroud: "When I first saw London from the airplane, my eyes welled up with tears because I never imagined that one of these days I would get this opportunity. No one from my family was able to accompany me because it was not financially feasible for them. However, I have an uncle who lives in Canada that I haven't seen for four years who, upon hearing that I will be in the Olympics, booked his flight to London to cheer and support me. He also was in the audience during my competition."



Mosaic: What was your schedule like in London? Was it all training or did you get to do some sightseeing?

Woroud: "I pretty much stayed in the Olympic village and the training facilities the whole time until the day of my competition on August 8. After my competition, I had about four days to see the city. My uncle and I went to the London Bridge, London eye, and walked around the city. I also went with the rest of the Palestinian team to the Madame Tussauds wax museum."

Mosaic: Tell us about the opening ceremony. Where were you waiting and how did it feel to walk into the stadium?

Woroud: "It was a very very great day! Before we went out we were all waiting backstage in the stadium. We really enjoyed it and loved walking behind our flag, which was held by the judo fighter, Maher Abu Ramela. We got to see the torch being lit and raised."

Mosaic: Tell us about the day of your competition.

Woroud: "I went to the stadium and they started calling out for our group. My heart was beating so fast but I was able to calm myself down. We walked and were taken to the first room, which was a security search room. Then we were taken to another room to double check our names and other things like our numbers. Then they lined us up behind each other and we walked out of the stadium to the deafening roar of the large crowd."

Mosaic: What is the greatest memory you have of your time at the Olympics?

Woroud: "The greatest memory I have was during the closing ceremony when I got to carry the Palestinian flag and lead our group. I also really liked the pictures."

Mosaic: When did you meet the rest of the Palestinian team?

Woroud: "Unfortunately we are all from different areas and there were so many factors that made it difficult for us to meet, most specifically the Israeli occupation."

Mosaic: Were you all together all the time?

Woroud: "We used to go to most places together except for training and we all had different training schedules. We all watched each other's competitions. However, unfortunately at the time of my race, most of the team that was from Gaza had already gone home due to their fear that the bridge would be closed and they wouldn't be able to get back home."

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Mosaic: Obviously your parents were very proud of you. How often did you talk to them while you were in London? What was the greatest piece of advice they gave you?

Woroud: "Before I had to give up my phone to security the day of my race, my dad called me and told me, "My dear, don't be afraid and be confident in yourself. We have the whole village in our living room watching you and cheering you on." They always advise me to give my all and try my best to get results."

Mosaic: When you got back to Palestine, how was your reception?

Woroud: "I came home to open arms and hugs. My mother lifted me and twirled. All the neighbors were out on the streets to greet me. There were some people that had a hard time accepting the fact that I didn't win as they have been watching me win again and again in Palestine. But I do not blame them for they had no idea what I was competing against in terms of the other runners."

Mosaic: What are your future plans?

Woroud: "I have a dream that I will reach my goal of winning gold."

Mosaic: This Olympics games took place during Ramadan. What was it like fasting while training?

Woroud: "The days that I could fast in, I did fast. And the days that my training took all morning I used to eat. And on the morning of my race, I had some honey with dates."

Mosaic: When people think of Woroud Sawalha, what do you want people to remember the most?

Woroud: "Of course when I run, I am not running for myself because I represent my country and I want Allah to be pleased with me first and then other people second."

Mosaic: This is obviously a life changing opportunity. Did you feel that you changed? What was the greatest thing that you learned?

Woroud: "What changed the most was that people started to know who I was. This opportunity made me want to change the lives of girls who wear hijab and encourage them to take part in competitive sports. And I learned that impossible is not so hard to overcome after all."

Mosaic: Is there anything you would like to add?

Woroud: "I hope that I will still have access to the training camps for the next four years so that I can better compete for the gold and place Palestine on the Olympic map. And I am extremely happy and grateful when I hear that I have supporters all over the world." ■



MOSAIC

Recognizing Extraordinary Muslim Women

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Empowering women through Islam, not from Islam

Mosaic (<http://mosaicofmuslimwomen.wordpress.com/>) is a colorful artwork of Muslim women from all over the world who have extraordinary achievements. It is a platform in which to recognize the unrecognized, celebrate the accomplished, and bring together a wide diversity of women who exemplify the image of a Muslimah.

Our Mosaic would not be complete without the Muslim women of the past, starting from the time of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) and working through over 1400 years of Islam in order to show the empowerment and freedom Islam has brought to women. For 1400 years, Islam has enabled women to vote, inherit, keep their own last names, have careers and be equal to men. The situation of women in certain countries are the result of culture and government and not at all consequences of Islam, although some people might wrongly use the name of the religion to justify their actions.

Every week, we will feature a woman from the past and a woman from the present in order to paint a true picture in your mind about Muslim women.

You can contact me at Mosaic.REMW@gmail.com

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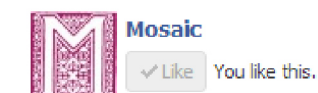
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