

# A Dream Come True

## Rana Hussein

Maha Barghouti is a name Jordanians will remember for the longest time. She was the first and only athlete to grant Jordan its first ever gold medal in an Olympic event in December 2000.

Barghouti's achievement during the Sydney Paralympics in the Wheelchair table tennis competition lifted Jordan's flag waving in Sydney's skies. "I always dreamt of being the one who will lift Jordan's name high in an Olympic event, and thank God my dream came true," Barghouti said.

The 40-year-old champ was also named the Arab Athlete of the Year in 2001 and received the Sharjah Excellence Award for the Handicapped. Barghouti paved her way to the Sydney gold medal by beating players representing Britain, Italy and the USA. In the final she defeated a French woman 21-14, 25-23 to secure the gold medal.

Her nationalism and devotion to her country did not go unrecognized. His Majesty King Abdullah bestowed the Al Hussein Medal of the First Order on Barghouti shortly after returning to Jordan with the gold medal.

The Jordanian champ received similar Royal recognition from HRH Prince Ra'ed Bin Zeid, who heads the Jordan Sports Federation for the Handicapped (JSFH).

In recalling her own experience in the athletic life, Barghouti said sports for those with special needs is not as easy as many think. "There are special equipment and certain set-ups that we need to abide by when we are practising and competing in addition to the need for proper transportation to and from practice," she explained.

Another obstacle athletes with special needs should overcome is the "shame culture," and wrongful beliefs by many families of their handicapped chil-

dren. "Most families feel ashamed that they have handicapped individuals. Others do not care to get their children involved in any activities or invest their money in building their athletic capabilities," she said.

That is why she said she was insisting on winning a gold medal in the Sydney Olympics. "My win was a message for people to get to know the handicapped sports and to encourage other families not to discriminate against their handicapped children and instead to support their youngsters to become involved in sports," she said.

Barghouti, who was dubbed by most local media as the Athlete of the Year in 2000, said she accomplished several international achievements since she began playing table tennis and athletics in 1986.

She clinched silver medal in the table tennis competition during the Special Olympics held in Holland in 1992.

But her greatest achievement was during the 1995 Berlin Special Olympics when she broke the world record in the 200 meter competition by scoring 32.26 seconds, which was .08 less than the old record. "I worked very hard for the 2000 Olympics and I was determined to win the gold medal and I did. "This proved that working hard will give good results for people who believe in themselves and what they are working for," Barghouti said.

In 2002, Jordanians voted Barghouti as Jordan's top sportsperson of the year.

During the award ceremony Barghouti said in an emotional speech: "I stand here tonight, though not on my feet, but by sheer determination, which has been the story of my life... The fight to spread awareness about special needs sports finally paid off... People are finally looking beyond our disability and meriting us on our athletic accomplishments."