

Shaherkani First Saudi Woman To Compete

By: [Mitch Goldich, NBC Olympics](#) UPDATED: Aug 3, 1:18p ET

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Wojdan Shaherkani loses in 82 seconds to Melissa Mojica of Puerto Rico in the opening round of the women's heavyweight (78+ kg, 172+ lbs) category.

Flip through the photo galleries after every Olympic judo match, and they eventually begin to look the same. One fighter wears blue, the other wears white, and each has a black belt. Aside from the name on the back and the flag over the heart, the uniform—or gi—is, quite frankly, uniform.

That was, until this morning, when one fighter's uniform finally ended a weeklong swirl of controversy and media coverage.

Wojdan Shaherkani arrived at the judo mat a little differently on Friday, sporting a black head covering as she stepped onto the tatami. After a week of controversy and hand-wringing—first declaring she would fight without a hijab, then saying she would withdraw if not allowed to wear one—Shaherkani finally made history this morning, as the first Saudi Arabian woman ever to participate in the Olympic Games.

Her head covering was not the same traditional Islamic headscarf she wore as cameras found her landing in Heathrow Airport, or parading around in the Opening Ceremony. But it was apparently enough of a compromise to adhere to regulations of both the Islamic community and judo's governing bodies.

The bout lasted just 1:12, as Puerto Rico's Melissa Mojica threw Shaherkani to her back, with a match-ending ippon. Shaherkani adjusted her head covering as she stood back up, and then shook Mojica's hand to a rousing applause.

The crowd was friendly toward Shaherkani, cheering triumphantly when the PA announcer broke from his typical monotony of introductions to say, "The first woman ever from Saudi Arabia to compete, Shaherkani."

What was perhaps the least significant bout to the outcome of the women's +78kg weight class may prove to be the most historic judo match of the entire 2012 Summer Olympics. That is still to be determined, as we see what changes come to the women's athletics program in Saudi Arabia, and several other nations in the region, which prevent women from having the same opportunity to play sports as in most of the world.

But for one day, Shaherkani found herself representing Saudi Arabia in an Olympic judo bracket, needing to win five matches to earn a gold medal—the same opportunity as everybody else.

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