

LONDON OLYMPICS

Brazilian teen dreams of Olympics, meeting Tiger

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RIO DE JANEIRO (Reuters) - In Rio de Janeiro's dirt-poor neighborhood of Japeri, 15-year-old Anderson Nunes dreams of emulating Tiger Woods not Ronaldo and playing golf for Brazil when the sport returns to the Olympic Games in 2016.

The lanky teenager, ranked fourth among Brazilian golfers in his age group, is competing this week in the Junior British Open at Fairhaven in Lancashire, northwest England, alongside the world's best young players.

After the tournament, Nunes will stay in England to watch the British Open and the prize he hopes to take back with him to Brazil is a shirt signed by Woods.

“My dream is one day to meet Tiger Woods and play a tournament with him, shake his hand and be able to say I have spoken with him. He is my idol,” Nunes told Reuters in an interview at his humble home.

Unlike the vast majority of lower-income children in soccer mad Brazil who know little about golf, Nunes became familiar with the sport because his uncle was a caddie at an elite course in Rio's wealthy Zona Sul region, where his mother works as a maid five days a week.

He and other children in the neighborhood only got a chance to play golf because in 2005 a group of caddies, including his uncle, set up an improvised three-hole course on a vacant lot in Japeri.

Their initiative was backed by Rio's golf federation and the government's sports department which made investments to improve the course.

Now Japeri Golf Club, Brazil's first public course, offers free lessons to children aged seven to 17 although the academy's benefits go way beyond golf.

Besides being encouraged to keep their school grades up in order to play, youngsters are also kept away from drugs and crime.

Nunes's small room has little beyond his trophy collection, which the timid, soft-spoken boy showed off with some pride.

WORRIED MOTHER

"I used to spend a lot of time in the street. My mother was always worried about me staying out on the street all day. So my mother got me into golf and now I don't do anything else, just study and play golf."

However, Nunes said he had faced rough times because of discrimination.

"Now I feel a bit better but back when I started I used to feel bad because people wouldn't treat us well and ignored us only because they were rich.

"But after we started getting better and my golf (skills) improved, the juniors who play with us, they treat us in the same way as anyone else," he said.

Nunes's best clubs and golf bag were a gift from a wealthy admirer who also helped pay to refurbish his modest home. But his goal is to sign with a permanent sponsor and help his mother pay the bills.

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Although his coach Tiago Silva, fourth in Brazil's 2011 rankings, believes that might be a little too soon for his pupil, Nunes said nothing was impossible.

"I don't know. It depends on me. If I want this, I will have to train hard and play better than I do now. I think that to be able to get in (to the 2016 Olympics), I will have to be within the 20 best in the ranking," he said.

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