

She ran a personal best; then she learned her hijab disqualified her

By Hannah Knowles, Washington Post on 11.01.19

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Noor Alexandria Abukaram racing in a cross-country meet. Photo by: Noor Alexandria Abukaram Facebook

The mood after the race was jubilant. Sixteen-year-old Noor Alexandria Abukaram, who had just run her best time yet, hugged her high school teammates as they realized they were headed to regionals.

Then the students went to check their individual times at last Saturday's Ohio cross-country meet on October 19, Abukaram remembers. It seemed there was a mistake — her 22:22 was not listed.

Other team members who'd sat out Abukaram's race told her what they'd heard: An official at the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) approached their coach just before the race to say Abukaram needed a waiver to wear her hijab. Without it, she couldn't compete.

"I was disqualified from something that I love to do because of something that I love," Abukaram told The Washington Post on October 25. "Because of something that's a part of me."

Abukaram's story, shared in mid-October in a Facebook post, has put a spotlight on athletic dress codes that critics say discriminate against Muslims. Abukaram says she's been overwhelmed with

messages sharing support and similar experiences; by October 24 the issue had even caught the eye of presidential contender Senator Elizabeth Warren, Democrat of Massachusetts, who tweeted to Abukaram, "I've got your back."

"Every kid should be able to feel safe and welcome at school — and Muslim students should never be denied participation in school activities," Warren wrote.

Abukaram says her hijab had never posed an issue at meets before. October 19's event was her seventh this season, and she's competed in soccer and track without problems, too.

She and her headscarf, she says, "go hand in hand." She races in long sleeves, leggings and the Nike sports hijab donned by pros and Olympians.

The idea that her choices as a Muslim could interfere with her athletic pursuits was not new, though. Abukaram says she's watched her older sister come home crying from soccer games, after being told to change out of religious garb like the long pants she wears in addition to a headscarf.

Many female Muslim athletes face scrutiny for their decision to cover their hair. In France, a brand's rollout of a "runner's hijab" stirred a backlash, with the country's health minister remarking that she "would have preferred a French brand not to promote the veil." Ibtihaj Muhammad, the first U.S. athlete to compete in the Olympics with a hijab, has described sticking out uncomfortably at competitions and being asked to remove her headscarf for an event ID photo.

The Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) says it wasn't singling out Abukaram that weekend, just enforcing its rules. Students need a waiver to run cross-country in "religious headwear," spokesman Tim Stried told The New York Times, and Abukaram's school had not requested one.

Abukaram's request after October 19's race was approved "immediately," Stried said. That meant Abukaram could run in the upcoming regionals.

For Abukaram, the decision to strike her time was still hurtful. She wants the waiver requirement dropped — something OHSAA is now considering, Stried told the Times.

Abukaram's coach wants the policy changed, too.

"My hope is that this incident highlights how detrimental this rule can be and spurs positive change for our sport," Jerry Flowers told The Post in an email.

Flowers said he only learned "at the starting line" Saturday that Abukaram would need a waiver. He opted against asking his athlete to remove her hijab or swapping her out for another runner — and decided not to break the bad news right before she competed.

"She had earned the right to race with the varsity, so I felt the best thing to do was to let her run unhindered," Flower said.

Abukaram says word came afterward like a "punch in the gut." She respected her coach's resolve not to shake her concentration, but she wished meet officials had told her earlier.

Her family was equally indignant: "She earned her time on that race," said her mother, Yolanda Melendez.

Her parents plan to talk with OHSAA about changing the group's rules. Abukaram is more focused on the upcoming regional competition, though.

If things go well, she might wear her hijab at the state race.

Quiz

- 1 The CENTRAL idea of the article is developed by:
- (A) explaining why OHSAA has enforced regulations that require athletes to get a waiver signed in order to wear religious headwear
 - (B) describing the reactions of several different people upon learning that Abukaram's hijab disqualified her from racing
 - (C) discussing how Abukaram and her family plan to challenge OHSAA to change its requirements regarding the hijab
 - (D) highlighting barriers that female Muslim athletes around the world have faced in regard to wearing their hijabs during sporting events
- 2 Which of these statements would be MOST important to include in an objective summary of the article?
- (A) Then the students went to check their individual times at last Saturday's Ohio cross-country meet on October 19, Abukaram remembers. It seemed there was a mistake — her 22:22 was not listed.
 - (B) Other team members who'd sat out Abukaram's race told her what they'd heard: An official at the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) approached their coach just before the race to say Abukaram needed a waiver to wear her hijab. Without it, she couldn't compete.
 - (C) Abukaram says her hijab had never posed an issue at meets before. October 19's event was her seventh this season, and she's competed in soccer and track without problems, too.
 - (D) Many female Muslim athletes face scrutiny for their decision to cover their hair. In France, a brand's rollout of a "runner's hijab" stirred a backlash, with the country's health minister remarking that she "would have preferred a French brand not to promote the veil."
- 3 Which of the following people quoted in the article would be MOST LIKELY to agree with the idea that sharing Abukaram's experience could help others understand the importance of changing OHSAA's waiver regulation?
- (A) Senator Elizabeth Warren
 - (B) Ibtihaj Muhammad
 - (C) Jerry Flowers
 - (D) Yolanda Melendez
- 4 Which answer choice would BEST describe Yolanda Melendez's reaction to Abukaram's disqualification?
- (A) angry with OHSAA and determined to enact change
 - (B) horrified and brought to tears by the discrimination her daughter faced
 - (C) uncomfortable with the coach's decision to allow Abukaram to race
 - (D) disappointed that the school did not file the necessary paperwork