

AN ANGEL GETS HIS WINGS

He swam to freedom. Now Angel Perez is paddling for gold



Perez became a U.S. citizen last spring, six years after leaving Cuba.

Angel Perez was Cuba's best hope for a kayaking medal in the '92 Olympics. But just two races away from the podium, the 21-year-old heard a sound—*Snap!*—that broke his heart. It was "only" a broken paddle in a training run, but the Cuban sports federation didn't have the money to replace it and the paddle he borrowed from a German felt too foreign. Perez finished next-to-last in his heat.

Just like that—*Snap!*—he knew he'd had enough. Tired of government restrictions and poor equipment, Angel decided to defect a year later while the Cubans were training in Mexico. They had Saturday night and all of Sunday off, enough time for Perez and two teammates to get a good head start. He persuaded his coach to hand over their passports, claiming they were meeting some women for lunch outside of town. Instead, the men took an overnight bus north to the border, where they planned to wade across the Rio Grande. But heavy rains had transformed the normally placid stream into a raging torrent choked with tree trunks and debris. It was too late to turn back. They stripped to their underwear, jumped in and swam for their lives.

"I thought I was going to die," Perez says. "I could barely keep my head above water." When the

Cubans finally dragged themselves up on Texas soil, they kissed the ground. A friend met them as arranged and drove the refugees to Miami, where they sought political asylum. Two of the three quit kayaking, but Angel loved the sport too much to abandon it. He got married. He found a job installing burglar alarms. And, in the stolen moments of his life, he put his paddle in the water and trained in old wooden boats borrowed from a high school club team that he coached.

After watching the '96 Games come and go, Perez was invited to train with the U.S. squad. The next year, the Immigration and Naturalization Service granted him a reentry permit, allowing him to travel and compete abroad. Perez and Peter Newton quickly became the No. 1 K-2 boat in the country, finishing fourth in the 200 and 500 meters at the '98 World Championships. Last August, Angel sat in the four-man boat that finished sixth at worlds.

Still, none of it topped that day last spring when Perez stood and heard "The Star-Spangled Banner" played for him and a group of America's newest citizens. "I just kept dreaming of the next time I hear it," he says. "Hopefully, I'll be standing on the podium with a gold medal." —Anne Marie Jeffords

Watch the Birdie

Badminton isn't just a pastime for pasty bluebloods on manicured lawns or beery picnickers killing time until the burgers are done. Not the way five-time national champ Kevin Han plays, with shuttlecocks streaking off rackets at 200 mph.

Han, 27, learned the game at junior national camp in his native China, which grows badminton champs like bamboo. But he left his homeland in 1989 to join his estranged father in New York City, where he delivered weirdly foreign Chinese food and put his game on hold for almost two years.

Eventually, Han found his way to the courts at Columbia University, won a few small tournaments and earned an invite to train with USA Badminton in '92. Four years later, he was the lone American to compete in Atlanta, losing in the first round. By '97, he had cracked the world's top 25, but classes at Colorado State—he earned his computer science degree in December—and a full-time job with MCI limited his time. "He could be top 10 if he didn't have to work," says coach Ardy Wiranata, a silver medalist for Indonesia in '92.

After his recent victory at the Guatemala International, Han hopes to boost his No. 30 ranking at the Korea Open (Jan. 11) and the Chinese Taipei Open (Jan. 19). China, Denmark and Indonesia have the podium reserved in Sydney, but Kevin has no regrets. "I can't think about what could have been," he says. "I love my life here too much to wonder." —Anne Marie Cruz

1.10 Ring Leaders
Fists fly at the U.S. Boxing Championships in Colorado Springs