



Singapore's Kiria Tikanah Abdul Rahman (above and far right, in her bout with Romania's Ana Maria Popescu) conceded she rushed towards the end and lost 15-10.
PHOTOS: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, LIANHE ZAOBAO



FENCER KIRIA GIVES WORLD NO. 1 A SCARE

With just 35 seconds left, Singaporean trails Romanian veteran Popescu 11-10 but fades



Sazali Abdul Aziz
In Tokyo

Five metres and 206 ranking places separated Singapore epee fencer Kiria Tikanah Abdul Rahman and Romanian world No. 1 Ana Maria Popescu on the piste at the Makuhari Messe Hall.

But, when the countdown clock indicated just 35 seconds remained in their women's individ-

ual table-of-32 bout yesterday at the Olympic Games, they were also separated by a single point.

Kiria, 21, had shown scant regard for world rankings to get to Tokyo, upsetting a series of higher-ranked opponents at the Olympic qualification event in April.

Yesterday, she came close to claiming her biggest scalp yet as she pulled the score to 10-11.

But, in a battle of nerves, Popescu, 36, who has more Olympic medals (an individual silver at the 2008 Beijing Games and the team gold in Rio eight years later) than Kiria has had Olympic bouts before their battle, held hers and went on to win 15-10.

Later, beads of perspiration still trickling down her forehead, Kiria

said: "At the end I was rushing a bit because I wanted to keep the momentum up (after scoring two consecutive points) and also because... I didn't have a lot of time left."

"Her experience showed. She knew I was going to rush, so she took advantage of that."

Wisdom was the key for Popescu, who lost last night's final 11-10 to China's Sun Yiwen, but Olympic debutante Kiria has accumulated some of her own as well.

Kiria said she had a chance to cross blades with Popescu in a training session on Wednesday and "badly" lost the five-round spar which she described as an "eye-opening experience".

Her coach, Henry Koh, said that based on Kiria's showing yesterday, her tactical knowledge and mental toughness "went up another half-level" after the brief training encounter with Popescu, whom he rates as one of the most

well-rounded epee fencers.

"Think about it, do you really improve in strength or skill so much in the space of three days? No, it's up here that's different," he said, pointing to his head.

In the morning, Kiria upset Hong Kong's world No. 90 Coco Lin 15-11 in the opening round despite having lost both their previous encounters and "freaking out on the inside" after trailing Lin 2-0.

Her Olympic debut has ended after two bouts but Kiria's passion for fencing is galvanised by it.

"When the score was 11-10, I knew I stood a chance against one of the world's best," said Kiria who climbed the rankings to No. 65 following her bouts.

"I wasn't too fussed about losing the match... being able to share the (stage) with world champions was a really amazing experience."

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