

When the going gets tough, the tough gets going

This famous sporting cliché is an excellent description of the performances by Zack Piontek (Tuks/HPC) at the African Open Judo Tournament in Mauritius during the past weekend.

Piontek won the gold medal in the under-90kg category. In doing so he gained 100 valuable international ranking points, and in all probability improved his ranking with three positions to about 24th. If Piontek can sustain this ranking, it means in theory that he will qualify for the Olympic Games in Rio.

It was not only the fact that Piontek was able to win the tournament that was exciting, but the way in which he did so showed true character.

The Tuks/HPC judoka admitted that he snatched victory out of the jaws of defeat in two of his encounters.

“My first fight, which was against Rastam Alimli (Azerbaijan), was a thriller right up to the last second. With literally only eight seconds left he managed to throw me for a yuko. Although it meant that he was on the verge of victory, I was not going to give up. When we resumed the fight I started chasing him and he kept moving backwards, not wanting to risk physical contact. Unfortunately for him, with only one second remaining, he stepped off the judo mat. This gave him his fourth penalty point which cost him the fight and gave me the victory.

“My second fight, which was against Andrew Burns (Britain), was also special. At last year’s Commonwealth Games in Glasgow I managed to beat him but in the semi-finals of last year’s African Open he beat me. This meant that we were one all as far as victories were concerned. I was eager to regain the lead in our one on one battle and fortunately ended up winning quite easily.

“My opponent in the semi-final was Italy’s Walter Facente. The Italian dominated the fight in the beginning. I just couldn’t get to grips with his fighting style but decided that there was no way I was going to allow myself to be beaten. I managed to regroup and to get my focus right. When I saw an opportunity I moved in and went for the big throw. It was successful and I threw the Italian for an ippon which gave me the victory.

“I am very proud of the way in which I won because I had to dig deep to do so.”

In the final of the under-90kg category Piontek managed to beat Africa’s top-ranked judoka, Abderrahmane Benamadi (Algeria).

“It was also a special victory. We have fought quite a few times over the past years and Benamadi usually won, but this year I seem to be able to get the better of him. Apart from beating him now I was also victorious in Russia earlier this season.”

Piontek has no plans of slowing down. If everything goes according to plan he will compete in two more tournaments this year. He will first compete in Korea at the end of November and afterwards in Japan.

