

## PART ONE

# The Olympic Games, the Asian Games, and China's National Games

## 奥运会、亚运会、全运会

**B**eijing lost its first bid for the Olympics to Sydney, but in 2001 the International Olympic Committee voted to award the Games to China. At last, said a student to a BBC reporter, "The world is embracing us." As the Games approached, controversies broke out and that embrace seemed at times to change into crossed arms and mutual recriminations. Bringing the Olympics Games to Beijing was first discussed in China one hundred years ago, and Part One of *China Gold* tells the story of a century of development and challenge, of war and revolution, and of an enduring commitment to build (and rebuild) a nation that could participate on the global stage with stunning athleticism, as well as politically and economically. The Olympics of 2008 have great symbolic importance, and to understand this, we look at China's participation in the Asian Games, as well as the Olympics, and at the National Games which have been an essential proving ground for Chinese athletes.



## How China Rose to Be a Sporting Giant

### 中国体育崛起之路

**A JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES,** the Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu 老子 said, begins with a single step. And so does a race of 100 meters and a nation's journey to the Olympic spotlight.

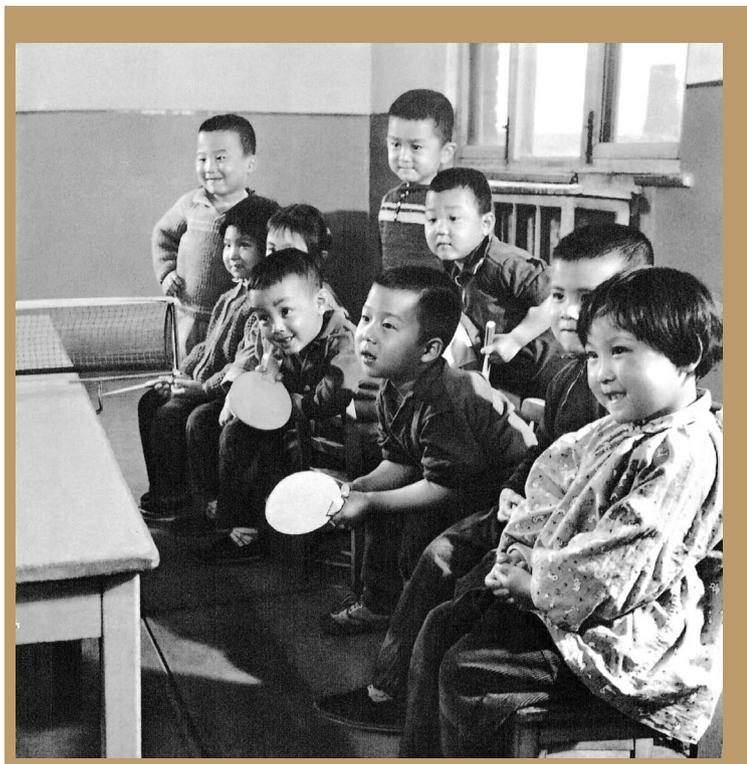
In 1932 a young man named Liu took that step when he moved into his starting position for the Olympic 100-meter race. As he did, he must have felt the great burden of the moment's historical significance; he must have withered under the weight of the expectations of a whole nation. LIU Changchun 刘长春 was at that moment the first Chinese ever to participate in the Olympic Games, and he was the single representative of the young Chinese Republic at the Olympics in Los Angeles.

Seconds later—11.1 seconds, to be exact—the first chapter of Chinese Olympic history was over. Liu Changchun had been eliminated in the first preliminary heat, finishing well behind most of his competitors.

Liu's failure became yet another open wound in the long history of defeats and humiliation that China had suffered at the hands of foreign powers. Humiliation had been a constant of Chinese history for almost a century, starting with the defeats during the Opium Wars of the mid-1800s at the hands of a technologically superior Western power. The 1895 Sino-Japanese War, lost to an up-to-then inconsequential neighbor, was even more

devastating to China's self-image. Finally, only a month before the Olympic Games in Los Angeles, the Japanese had overrun a helpless Chinese army in Manchuria. Liu Changchun's failure in the preliminary heats seemed just another sign of Chinese backwardness and weakness.

More than seventy years later, another young Chinese man, again named Liu, moved into his starting position for an Olympic sprinting competition, the 110-meter hurdles. Again the expectations of a whole nation weighed on a young man's shoulders. However, this time, when the starting shot was fired, the hopes of his people did not drag the young man down. Indeed, he seemed



Chinese children learn sports such as table tennis at a very young age.

to be buoyed by those hopes. He flew over the hurdles. Exactly 12.91 seconds later, equaling the world record time, LIU Xiang 刘翔 had won China's first Olympic gold medal in a track-and-field competition and was about to become one of China's greatest sports heroes.

Liu's gold medal was China's crowning achievement at the 2004 Athens Olympics, placing the Chinese team second only to the U.S. team in the gold medal count. The special significance of Liu's victory, however, was the fact that he won in a sport in which the Chinese were traditionally not considered to be serious competitors because of their smaller and less-muscular physique. Liu Xiang's victory marked the beginning of the end of the assumption that Chinese athletes are able to excel in only a narrow field of sports. Liu, interviewed after his victory, said before bursting into tears: "I proved that Chinese people, Asian people, and yellow-skinned people are able to do well in track events."

These words expressed not only Liu Xiang's pride and happiness over his victory, but also the frustrations that past generations of Chinese had endured. His emotional statement echoed a feeling that remains important today: the joy, and the relief, that China feels at finally having overcome an era of weakness and isolation. China, during a short period of time, has risen from being in athletic terms a developing country to being one of the foremost sports powers in the world. This rise, mirroring China's overall rise to new economic and political power, has left many experts baffled and begs

## XU Haifeng



In taking the first gold medal of the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles with a steely performance, sharpshooter Xu Haifeng also became a Chinese icon—he was not simply a winner, but the first winner of gold for his country since its return to the Olympic Games after a thirty-two-year absence due to controversy over the recognition of Taiwan.

Xu was an unlikely Olympic hero; he'd been training in the sport for just two years, becoming a champion sharpshooter in Anhui Province in 1982 and winning his first national title in 1983. His previous formal experience at shooting consisted of a week of military training in high school—although he reputedly was a crack shot with a slingshot during his childhood in Fujian Province.

Before joining the national shooting team, which was coached by a former high school teacher and would set him on the path to the Olympics, Xu had been farming and selling chemical fertilizer in rural Anhui Province. Xu went to Los Angeles as the rookie on a team of six—expecting merely “to take part,” he later said. In the pistol events, attention gradually shifted from the Swedish world champion, Ragnar Skanaker, to the focused young man from China. Xu's victory in the 50-meter free pistol shooting final, at age twenty-seven, changed his life.

The absence of strong contenders from Eastern Europe due to the Soviet and Eastern bloc boycott of the Los Angeles Games certainly worked to the advantage of unknowns like Xu, but his win was no fluke, and he went on to prove his mettle in subsequent world competitions. In 1988, he won a bronze medal at the Summer Olympics in Seoul. Other wins accumulated over the years included three golds at the Asian Games in Seoul in 1986, four golds at the Asian Games in Beijing in 1990, and five golds at the 7th Asian Championships in 1991 as well as the World Air Pistol Championship that year.

Xu Haifeng's Los Angeles feat was commemorated in a Chinese television play, “Shots over Prada”—a reference to the name of the city's Olympic shooting range. He donated that first Olympic gold medal to China's National Museum. Retiring from competition in 1994, Xu became the coach of the gold-medals teams in the 1996, 2000, and 2004 Olympics. In anticipation of the 2008 Beijing Summer Games, Xu took over supervision of China's modern pentathlon team. A quarter century since the event that catapulted him to fame, Xu Haifeng remains a household name in China.

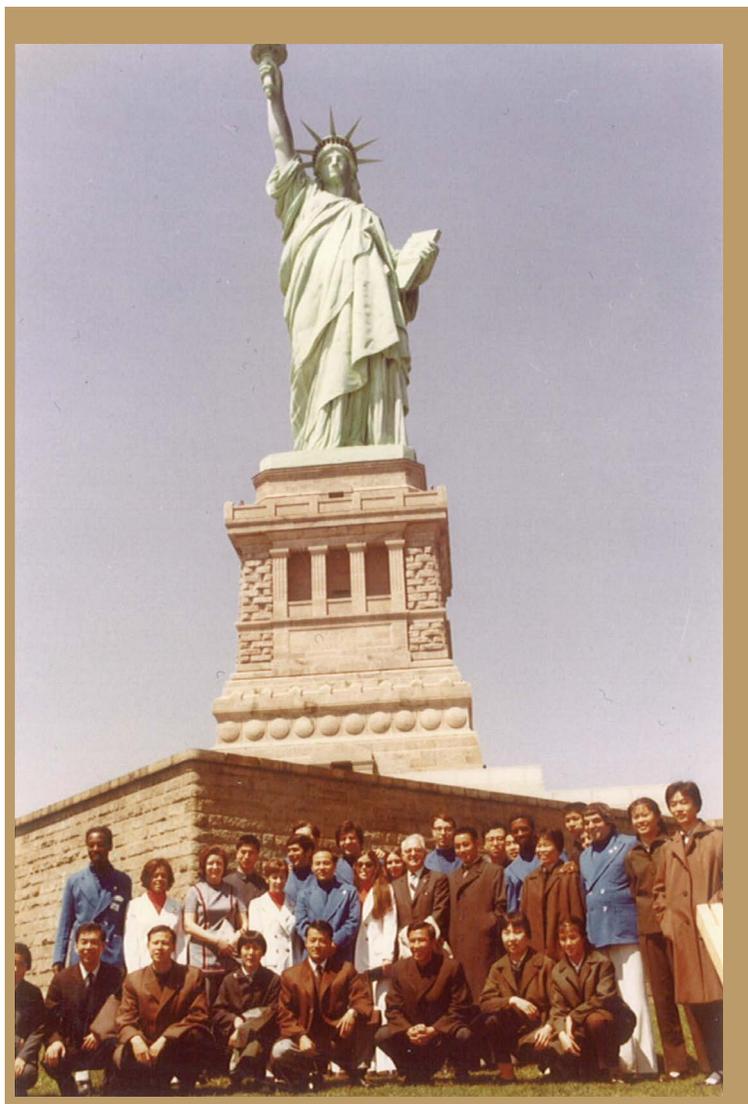
■ JUDY POLUMBAUM

the question that is asked so frequently: How did the Chinese do it?

### Ingredients of Success

The foundation of athletic success is, in China as in every other country, athletic talent embedded within the population. Being the most populous

country in the world, China obviously has the advantage of a vast number of people from which to extract athletic talent. However, this extraction of talent requires a sophisticated and highly organized sports system that identifies and fosters talent. The development of the Chinese elite sports system, which



The Chinese Ping-Pong team in front of the Statue of Liberty in New York during the 1970s.

made an unprecedented leap forward during the last two decades, required the carefully managed interplay of two largely different ingredients: the organizational infrastructure to detect and accommodate athletic talents, and the financial and human resources to

provide adequate sports facilities and training technology.

In order to provide these two ingredients, China developed a distinctive elite sports system that combines potent characteristics of the Western-style approach with the old Soviet-style approach.

## Organizational Infrastructure

The Chinese elite sports system, adopted during the period of reform and opening up during the 1980s, is based on the *Juguo tizhi* 举国体制 approach—the support of the whole country for the elite sports system. This approach, which gives priority to the task of elite sports development, assures that all available sports resources are channeled into elite sports.

The organizational infrastructure of Chinese elite sports follows many of the principles of the old Soviet sports system. It features a state-led and tightly controlled, highly centralized, and strictly hierarchical system that relies almost entirely on state funding. Efforts to transform the organizational system established during the 1950s into a more decentralized system promoting self-supporting and less-government-dependent sports development have largely failed to produce significant results so far.

One core element of the organizational infrastructure of elite sports in China is the far-reaching, effective system of talent scouting and advancement, frequently called the “pagoda system.” The basis of this system is mandatory physical education in the regular schools and in spare-time sports schools.

Only through an extensive scouting system on this basic level can the potential of the large Chinese gene pool be used and athletic talent identified across the country. Sports scouts travel the country, visiting regular schools in their search for students with athletic

potential. They discover talented athletes who sometimes are as young as five or six years of age. If children show exceptional talent, they might be offered entry to the multilevel elite sports education system, consisting of a network of specialized sports schools. Depending on their age, such children will be sent to one of almost five hundred elite sports primary schools or more than two hundred elite sports middle schools and high schools.

Currently, approximately 400,000 young athletes are being trained in these schools. Their potential for different sports will be examined, and their training will be individualized accordingly. If they distinguish themselves

during competitions against their peers, they will be promoted to the upper levels of the pagoda system at the municipal- and provincial-level sports schools, where they will be in full residency and extensively trained. From there they will have the chance of being called to the national teams and to compete in international competitions. China trains about three thousand world-class athletes on the national level—almost three times as many as the United States.

### **Financial and Human Resources**

However, organizational infrastructure alone does not explain the extraor-

dinary rise of Chinese sports. For many decades the Chinese sports system suffered from a lack of material resources—hardly surprising in a developing country—which translated into inadequate training facilities and backward training technology. The organizational system to detect and accommodate athletic talent might have been in place, but China did not have the monetary means to transform talented children into world-class athletes.

China's astonishing economic improvement after the reform of its economy during the 1980s provided the necessary second ingredient for athletic success: financial and human resources.



Ratomir Dujkovic, a famous Serbian footballer and coach, was brought to train China's team for the Olympics.

After the initiation of economic reform, sports facilities and equipment for elite sports education in China experienced a massive upgrade. Since then, more money has been channeled into the improvement of sports facilities and into the introduction of foreign, state-of-the-art training technology.

Also, training methodology has become more scientific. The traditional training method based on the “three unafraids” 三不怕 (unafraid of hardship, difficulty, and injury) and the “five toughnesses” 五过硬, (toughness of spirit, body, skill, training, and competition) still plays an important role

in Chinese training methodology, but it has been complemented by more scientific coaching, sports psychology, and sports medicine techniques. To facilitate this transformation, China has imported foreign expertise in training methodology by hiring successful foreign sports coaches from all over the world.

Legendary Yugoslavian soccer coach Bora Milutinovic, who led the Chinese national team into the 2002 World Cup finals and enjoyed enormous popularity in China, is only one of many examples. With this flow of material resources into its sports system, China

combines the most potent features of two different worlds: the strictness and meticulousness of the Soviet-style sports system and the sophistication and innovativeness of Western-style training, technology, and methodology. By the mid-1980s all the ingredients for China's ascent as a global sports power were present.

### Driving Force, and Political Dividends

However, ingredients alone do not bake the cake. Important as they are, an organizational infrastructure as well as financial and human resources do not produce a highly successful sports system by themselves: it takes an intense interest in athletic accomplishments on the part of people in power to channel resources into elite sports. In China's case the prerequisite is the political will of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The enthusiasm and determination that the party displays for the advancement of Chinese athletes suggest that the political benefits deriving from athletic success is particularly high for China's political leadership. In particular athletic success yields three forms of political dividends: the strengthening of international esteem, the intensification of national unity, and the demonstration of systemic strength.

A significant factor in China's unparalleled economic development, which to an extent is based on foreign direct investment, is the Western image of China as a land of limitless economic growth and opportunity. However, most investors are nervous by nature, and capital is increasingly mobile, even

## The Scholarly Stereotype



Why has hosting the Olympic Games been so important to China for the last hundred years? The answer to this question begins with label “sick man of East Asia” (*dongya bingfu*). This label seems to have had its roots in the port city of Tianjin, where the North American YMCA was particularly active. YMCA educators seem to have held a stereotype of sickly, effeminate, overly intellectual Chinese men. A popular story circulated among Western physical educators about a British consul in Tianjin who invited a high Chinese official—the Daotai—to dinner and afterward personally demonstrated for him the game of tennis. When he asked the Daotai what he thought, the Daotai responded that the consul was covered in sweat, and it would be better to hire someone to play in his place. This story made its way from the Western educators to their Chinese pupils and is still widely cited in China today as an example of the corrup-

tion of the “old society.” Also bolstering the stereotype of the sickly Chinese was the publication in 1911 of *The Changing Chinese* by Edward Ross, a prominent U.S. sociologist. In that book, Ross complained that young men imitated the stooped shoulders of the scholar and wore broad-rimmed glasses even when they didn't need them, so they could look like scholars. He decried what he perceived as a lack of admiration for martial virtues. And perhaps most damning of all, he said that the young men played tennis like girls.

Of course the notion of the effeminate, intellectual Chinese is strongly contradicted by the martial arts tradition. Indeed, one can argue that kung fu films, more than anything else, have erased the perception of the effeminate Chinese among young Westerners, who admire Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li.

■ SUSAN BROWNELL



Under protest, the Taiwan delegation to the 1948 Olympic Games had to accept being renamed as Formosa to avoid diplomatic disagreements.

in China. Therefore, the narrative of China's ascent needs to be fed constantly with new successes, and winning Olympic gold medals is one way to do this. Achievements of Chinese athletes in international sports, especially in events that are the focus of intense public attention, are a compelling way of asserting China's power and earning international esteem. International esteem is also a prerequisite for claiming a more influential position within the international political system. Therefore, the success of Chinese athletes does indeed yield a great political dividend on the international stage.

The athletic arenas of the modern world are the cradles of the national

heroes of our time. The rise of Chinese sports has created many national sports heroes, such as Liu Xiang in track and field, YAO Ming 姚明 in basketball, and GUO Jingjing 郭晶晶 in Olympic women's diving. These heroes have become a focal point of national sentiment that bridges the deep socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural rifts that divide today's China. In a country as vulnerable to fragmentation as China, whose national coherence is constantly threatened by deeply entrenched divisions running through society, all-embracing symbols of national unity are of great political value. When Chinese spectators watch a Chinese athlete achieve victory, it does not matter if those spectators are poor farmers from Guizhou or rich business-

men from Guangdong, veterans of the Communists' Long March of 1934–35 or their grandchildren who spend their days online gaming in an Internet cafe, Mongols from Hohhot or Han Chinese from Beijing.

When such spectators witness Chinese athletes outclassing their competitors, these unbridgeable differences are forgotten, and all of these people are, at least for the moment, mainly one thing: Chinese. Sports have an extraordinary ability to create a feeling of national connectedness that overcomes the divisions of class, age, and ethnicity. Success in sports is a powerful source of national pride and unity. For China's political leadership, whose power is directly connected to the susceptible

unity and coherence of the People's Republic of China, this effect of sports obviously yields an enormous political dividend, creating a strong political incentive to allocate resources to the elite sports system.

A third important political dividend lies in the power of association. International competitiveness in sports is the privilege of wealthy and powerful nations. China's rise in the athletic arena can therefore be utilized as a symbol of the strength of the Chinese political system and its leadership, as a symbol of the competence of the Chinese Communist Party. The glow of the gold medals around Chinese athletes' necks also shines a positive light on

the performance of the Chinese political elite. And most Chinese athletes are indeed well versed in stressing that their success is owed to the Chinese state and the party. During a time when the Chinese Communist Party faces enormous political challenges to its power, when its legitimacy is no longer measured by revolutionary heritage but rather by tangible political performance and success, the party looks for new ways to prove its capability. Producing successful athletes is one way for the political leadership to demonstrate its capacity and to strengthen its assertion that the current political leadership can successfully lead China into a future full of challenges.

From the beginning of the period of reform in the 1980s, the political dividends of sports success have been high. The organizational structure necessary for the creation of a superlative sports power was already in place, and the material means began to be readily available. Subsequently, virtually all the stars were aligned for the ascent of China as a global sports power—and that is why five equally aligned stars, in bright yellow on red ground, will certainly be seen many times as the national flags are raised at the medal ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

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