

PARIS 2024

SWIMMING

A Pan-oly of speed

Chinese swimming prodigy smashes own world record to win coveted sprint gold in epic fashion

By SUN XIAOCHEN in Paris
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Sure, it's a little early to make such bold proclamations, but freestyle swimmer Pan Zhanle's Paris heroics have immediately thrust his name into conversations about China's sporting immortals.

By breaking the world record in a sprint event long dominated by Western athletes, the teen sensation has left fans marveling at the emergence of a new, waterborne Liu Xiang, after Pan snatched up the coveted gold medal in the 100m freestyle final in the Paris pool on Wednesday, bringing back fond memories of Liu's epic 110m hurdles win at the Athens Games 20 years ago.

The magnificence of Pan's incredible 46.40-second world record swim, which secured Team China's first swimming gold medal in Paris on the fifth day of the Games has, as many claimed, also matched track legend Su Bingtian's feat of making the 100m final at the Tokyo Games three years ago.

The young phenom, who turns 20 on Sunday, took pride in joining his senior track stars as stereotype breakers.

"For myself, I haven't come to terms with it yet," Pan said of the gold medal's significance after the final at the Paris La Defense Arena. "My life goes on, for sure, and I will continue training and swimming."

"But, for Chinese swimming, and for my country, I think it's huge to prove that Chinese athletes can also prevail in another event we were not so good at in the past."

Boasting a strong start and a stunning second-split push, Pan touched first in Wednesday night's final, with a commanding 1.08-second lead over runner-up Kyle Chalmers of Australia. Bronze winner, David Popovici of Romania, finished a mere one hundredth of a second behind Chalmers.

To put that into perspective, Pan did it in what is being called a "slow pool" — built shallower than normal, at 2.15 meters in depth, resulting in more turbulence and bigger waves that athletes and coaches have blamed for slower-than-expected times in Paris.

Pan's new mark for the 100m free was the first swimming world record set at this summer's Games, making him the first male swimmer so far to eclipse a world record in 2024.

Yet, none of this was even imaginable less than three years ago, when Pan made his international debut at the 2021 short-course world championships in Abu Dhabi.

Failing to make the finals in any of the events he contested, Pan had to watch among the spectators, later self-effacingly changing the name of his social media account into "onlooker in the stands".

Since then, though, he's not missed any individual final at any major meet he has entered, nor has he let any opponent take him lightly again.

"I think it's huge to prove that Chinese athletes can also prevail in another event we were not so good at in the past."

Pan Zhanle, Olympic 100m freestyle champion and world record holder

Pan Zhanle smashes his own world record on the way to winning the men's 100m freestyle on Wednesday, finishing in 46.40 sec and securing Team China's first swimming gold of the Paris Games. WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY AND REUTERS

Overlooked talent

Relatively unknown to the world before Paris, Pan's meteoric rise started at his first long-course meet, the 2022 worlds in Budapest, where, at 17, he tied the Chinese national record set by 2015 world champion Ning Zetao with a sublime semifinal swim of 47.65.

Despite being overshadowed by then world-record holder Popovici, Pan still managed to give the Romanian prodigy a scare by following him shoulder-to-shoulder in the final's first split, before finishing fourth, just 0.21 sec behind the winner.

Following that Budapest launch, Pan fired his boosters, fueled by discipline and hard work supported by science and technology, such as underwater monitoring and analysis in training, which propelled him higher among the elite ranks of the sprint event, further raising expectations that even better results could be on the horizon.

A year later, by the time the world championships in Fukuoka, Japan, rolled around, Pan had started beating Popovici. In the 100m final, Pan maintained his scintillating pace, finishing fourth in a new Asian record time of 47.43, beating the Romanian star by 0.4 sec and placing just one hundredth of a second off the podium.

Powered by Pan, Team China won both men's free relays and the mixed 4x100m free relay. Combined with victory in the women's 4x200m free relay, it was the country's best-ever collective result at the long-course worlds.

A star had been born, but, as he continued his ascent, most eyes were focused on other stars in the swimming firmament.

Pan flew under the international radar until the all-important Olympic year arrived, landing in some style at February's worlds in Doha, where he broke the 100m world record for the first time in a surprising fashion.

Out of blue, in the men's 4x100m relay on Feb 12, Pan wowed the capacity crowd at the Aspire Dome by clocking 46.80 in a strong leadoff leg, shaving 0.06 sec off Popovici's previous record and leaving the on-site commentary team in awe. "We still have a race to complete here," the loudspeaker shouted in disbelief.

Wednesday night in Paris, Pan convinced even his strongest critics in the pool, and made sure that no one is looking elsewhere now.

Popovici, asked by some media how insanely, or perhaps suspiciously, fast Pan's swim looked, said it's all reasonable as long as Pan is working hard in the right direction. "I think we can go even faster. There are people now alive, and who are swimming, who can do it. It's just a matter of putting it together and doing it at the right moment," said Popovici, who will turn 20 next month.

"This is only motivation for us. I mean, we can't be mad, we can only congratulate him. This is what sports is."

Magnifique! Magical Marchand sweeps to Olympic double

Turns out, those comparisons to Michael Phelps weren't farfetched at all when it comes to Leon Marchand. They certainly weren't a burden for the 22-year-old Frenchman.

Marchand completed one of the most audacious doubles in swimming history on Wednesday night, winning the 200-meter butterfly and the 200 breaststroke about two hours apart, in front of a home crowd cheering his every stroke.

Two grueling races. Two very different strokes. Two Olympic records. Two gold medals.

Phelps, who won several doubles of his own while claiming a record eight golds at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, was duly impressed.

"That's probably the greatest double I've ever seen in the history of the sport," Phelps said while appearing on NBC's Olympics coverage in the United States. "The cheer, the electricity... I can't wait to talk to him to hear what it felt like."

"I'm a really shy person," Marchand said. "I was kind of the center of attention during those two races. I was trying to get the energy from the whole crowd. They're amazing to me, pushing me in every final."

The five-time world champion, little known outside the world of swimming before the Olympics, has become a national hero in the space of a week with his trio of golds.

"I've fulfilled a lot of dreams since I've been here. Doing this double was something I felt I could do, but to really do it, that's something else," he said.

"Of course, I had a lot of doubts, because everyone told me it wasn't possible," he said of the unprecedented double.

While the 15,000 crowd at the Paris La Defense Arena belted out a rousing rendition of *La Marseillaise* during the medal ceremonies, a smiling Marchand looked calm as he soaked up the adulation.

"I'm just trying to keep going. I really

enjoyed every moment of those two finals. It was really amazing for me to swim those," he said, after dethroning two defending champions.



Leon Marchand celebrates his win in the men's 200m breaststroke final at the Paris 2024 Olympics on Wednesday. AP

Thrilling the French fans and claiming the spotlight, even on a night when Katie Ledecky romped to another gold medal, Marchand notched up his second and third victories in the Paris pool and stamped himself — with the Olympics not even a week old — as one of the faces of the Games.

Trailing most of the way in the 200 fly, Marchand surged past the Hungarian world-record holder and defending Olympic champion Kristof Milak on the final lap to finish with an Olympic record of 1:51.71, touching first by just four-hundredths of a second.

Marchand's final lap was nearly 0.66 faster than anyone else in the field — and 1.26 clear of Milak.

"I've been watching so many races of his," Marchand said. "I know he has a lot of speed, way more than me, so I was just trying to get as close as possible, and then just push it until the end."

The bronze went to Canada's Ilya Kharun.

After rallying to beat Milak in the 200 fly with a finishing kick for the ages, Marchand made it look easy in the 200 breaststroke.

He led all the way, touching in 2 minutes, 58.55 seconds, as the fans — many holding up cardboard cutouts of his smiling face — nearly blew the roof off the arena.

Following on from his dominant victory in the 400 individual medley (IM) on Sunday, Marchand waved one finger and shook his head just a bit, as if he couldn't quite believe what he had done.

Then, he hustled off the deck to another rousing cheer to begin his warm down, before returning for the medal ceremony. After another boisterous rendition of *La Marseillaise*, the other two medalists walked slowly around the pool, getting their pictures taken.

Not Marchand. He hustled back to the practice pool. There's still the 200m IM to win.

AGENCIES

SPORTS

ROAD TO OLYMPICS

Editor's note: With the Olympic stage set, and golden glory beckoning, Chinese athletes have been going all-out to ensure it will be a medal-laden campaign at Paris 2024.

LOOKING TO SMASH IT

Team China's shuttling aces aim for a clean sweep in Paris

By SUN XIAOCHEN
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Watch out! The most dominant force in badminton is all set to reign supreme at the Olympics again.

With its collective strength restored and tested at recent major tournaments, the Chinese badminton team is primed and looking to serve up a gold-laden campaign at the Paris Olympics, leaning on a depth and diversity that no other contenders can match.

Led by the red-hot men's singles star Shi Yuqi, who has just replaced Danish ace Viktor Axelsen as the new world No 1, Team China now dominates the world rankings in four of the five events, with women's singles the only discipline topped by a foreign competitor — South Korea's reigning world champion An Se-young.

Team China's "three-peat" — winning the world mixed team title at the Sudirman Cup and the men's and women's team crowns at the Thomas and Uber Cup Finals, respectively — over the past 13 months has raised high hopes that a clean sweep of all five golds at the Olympics, achieved only once in history by the invincible Chinese squad at London 2012, is possible in the French capital.

Zhang Jun, president of the Chinese Badminton Association, did not mince words about Team China's Paris ambition.

"Of course we will try our best to compete for gold in all five events," Zhang said at the launch of the "Popular Badminton" International Legends Tour in Guangzhou on Monday.

"Our final preparation is going well. Physically, the players are all healthy and with no injury concerns. We've tailored specific training plans for each athlete, targeting their main opponents.

"We just have to help our athletes stay focused, try to take the pressure off them and approach everything as we normally would," said Zhang, who won back-to-back mixed dou-



Clockwise from top: Women's doubles queens Chen Qingchen and Jia Yifan; rising men's doubles pair Liang Weikeng and Wang Chang; and world No 1 mixed duo Zheng Siwei and Huang Yaqiong are striving to cement China's status as a badminton powerhouse at the Paris Olympics. XINHUA

bles Olympic titles with partner Gao Ling at the 2000 and 2004 Games.

Shi's time to peak

As China's first men's world No 1 since retired Olympic champion Chen Long in 2016, Shi has been enjoying a dream season, which saw him win four singles titles in five finals on the BWF World Tour and help the Chinese men's squad win its 11th Thomas Cup last month in Chengdu.

Hailed as the successor of the legendary Lin "Super" Dan and Chen, Shi's career has suffered a series of setbacks, including three surgeries and a disciplinary suspension, which had threatened to derail his career before it fully took off. The spell of misfortune, however, has simply proved to be a test on his path to something great, as a newfound momentum is building at just the right time.

"Mentally, I've become more mature and I'm much more motivat-

ed again with the Olympics approaching. I will cherish the opportunity and go all-out to try to reach the top step of the podium," said the 28-year-old.

Shi's attempt to win it all in Paris will face a stern challenge from defending Olympic champion Axelsen, who leads 9-3 head-to-head against Shi, but has suffered two straight losses to the Chinese star and conceded the top ranking spot after spending 132 weeks there.

Defending Asian champion Jonatan Christie of Indonesia has emerged as another serious threat, having upset Shi twice this year in the All England Open semifinals and Asian championships quarterfinals.

Having almost seen it and done it all at the elite level, former singles world champion Zhao Jianhua encouraged Shi to embrace the pressure and draw power from within.

"The pressure of competing at the Olympics and representing your country only once every four years is

huge. Yet, all the top athletes have been conditioned to live with it and get motivated by it," said Zhao, a 59-year-old legend who won back-to-back Asian Games singles titles in 1986 and 1990.

"For Shi, I hope he's improved his mental game well enough to be able to deliver under pressure at the Olympics."

Chasing history

In women's singles, reigning Olympic champion Chen Yufei is bidding to write her name into history, as she aims to become just the second woman of all time to retain her Olympic gold, following in the footsteps of Hall of Famer Zhang Ning, who achieved the feat in 2004 and 2008.

South Korea's world and Asian Games champion An is the biggest threat to Chen's ambition.

World No 3 Tai Tzu-ying of Chinese Taipei, Japan's two-time world champion Akane Yamaguchi and

Spanish veteran Caroline Marin, the first and only non-Asian Olympic women's singles champion (Rio 2016), are all legitimate medal contenders as well, each coveting Chen's title.

"To stay healthy and control the little errors in training and competition. That's my priority leading up to Paris. As long as I take care of myself and deliver my best, I am confident that I still have a good chance to defend my title," Chen said last month after helping Team China lift a record-extending 16th Uber Cup title in Chengdu.

"This process will be very difficult for sure," said Chen, who just posted consecutive wins against Marin and An to clinch her 17th career title on the BWF tour at the Indonesia Open earlier this month.

"It's about taking things one step at a time, and handling every detail in the process as I strive to achieve this goal."

In doubles, China's world No 1 mixed pair Zheng Siwei and Huang Yaqiong will try to make up for the only missing trophy in their glittering cabinet — an Olympic gold medal.

Women's doubles queens Chen Qingchen and Jia Yifan are also heading to Paris on a redemption mission, as the four-time world champion duo looks to cap what might be their final Olympics in gold. They will need to put their surprising defeat to Indonesia's Greysia Polii and Apriyani Rahayu in the final at Tokyo 2020 behind them to do so.

The men's doubles in Paris will see perhaps the most open medal fight among all five events, with China's young pair Liang Weikeng and Wang Chang, both born in the early 2000s, challenging an experienced field of opponents from South Korea, India, Malaysia and Denmark.

The badminton tournament takes place from July 27 to Aug 5 at the Porte de La Chapelle Arena, involving 172 athletes.

Retired stars rally for event

By SUN XIAOCHEN

With the world's best shuttlers primed for a fierce Olympic tournament, badminton enthusiasts from China and France are celebrating the opportunity to personally enjoy the sport in Paris at their own high-profile event.

The "Popular Badminton" International Legends Tour, a grassroots badminton promotional project launched in Guangzhou on Monday, will see some of the best performers from a national amateur championship — which kicked off on June 15 in Changsha and will visit at least 10 more cities, including Beijing, Guangzhou and Chengdu — head to Paris during the Olympics to take part in a grand sports and culture exchange involving young people from both countries. The event is set to take place from Aug 7-9.

A group of retired stars, including two-time men's Asian Games champion Zhao Jianhua, mixed and men's doubles Olympic gold medalist Zhang Nan and former women's world No 1 Zhou Mi, have

been invited to participate as ambassadors for the project, as well as to host junior training programs and play exhibition matches with amateurs at the various city stops.

Some of them will also join the event in Paris, to be held at the Hippodrome Paris-Vincennes, to interact with fans, French badminton stars and celebrities at the festival, as part of a series of exchanges to mark the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and France.

"The project will integrate badminton promotion into a grand celebration of art, culture and diplomatic exchanges, which helps popularize the sport in a creative and inclusive way," Zhang Jun, president of Chinese Badminton Association, said at the launch ceremony.

Olivier Grandjean, a French-language TV producer, host and writer, wished the project great success.

"It is a fantastic opportunity. The Olympics is an exceptional occasion to share emotions and common interests, despite the political differences between countries," he said.

Reigning Olympic champion Chen Yufei is bidding to write her name into history.

XINHUA



Soundbites

"For sure, the ultimate goal of every athlete is to step on the highest podium at the Olympics. Yet it has to be realized step by step. I hope our athletes can stay focused on every detail of their training and preparation, block out distractions from the outside world and stick to their respective plans to bring out their best."

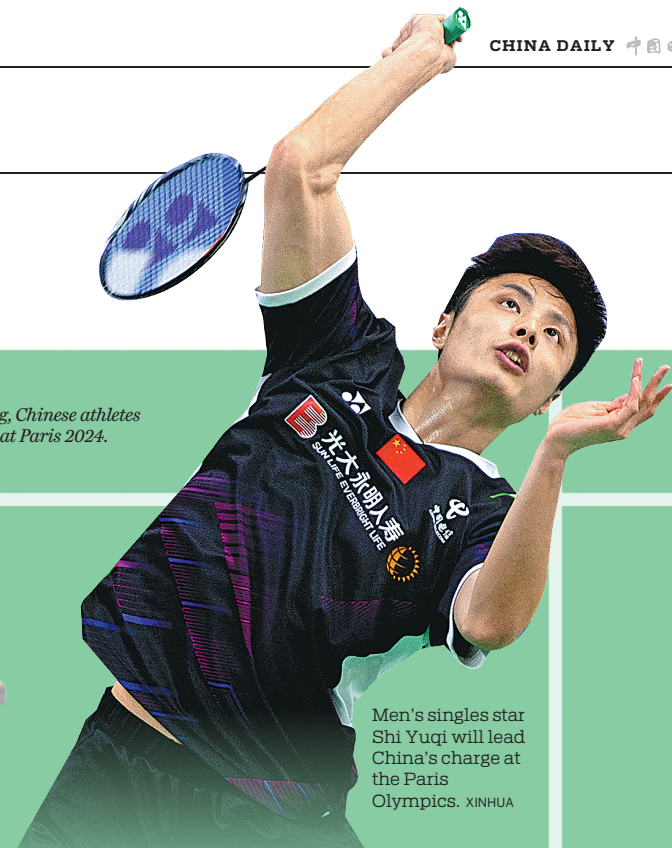
Zhang Nan, two-time doubles Olympic champion (2012, 2016)

"I think the women's singles competition is quite open now. Chen Yufei, as the defending champion, has her advantages in experience and finesse. Physically and technically, she's still in her prime at 26. Despite strong challenges from the rest of the world, I still pick her as a favorite as long as she stays healthy and produces her best."

Wang Yihan, singles world champion (2011) and Olympic silver medalist (2012)

"It's almost impossible to make any more breakthroughs physically, or tactically, with a month to go before the Olympics. The most important thing now is to relieve the pressure on the athletes and help them concentrate on their daily routines as normal, without caring too much about potential outcomes. I am confident that, when Team China finishes the Paris Olympics, we will be satisfied with the results."

Tian Qing, a two-time doubles world champion (2014, 2015) and Olympic champion (2012)



Men's singles star Shi Yuqi will lead China's charge at the Paris Olympics. XINHUA

PARIS 2024



Golden girl Deng hopes win will urge more kids to fall in love with BMX

By SUN XIAOCHEN in Paris
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Furious, aggressive, gentle and elegant all at once — that's the message China's BMX freestyle cyclist Deng Yawen delivered with her history-making golden run at the Paris Olympics.

For those back home who tuned in to watch a sport with no clue what to expect, teen rider Deng dazzled them, no doubt eliciting "oohs" and "aahs" from China's night owls as she lit up the Place de la Concorde under the scorching sun of Paris on Wednesday, performing some of the most spectacular BMX freestyle runs that the world has ever seen in the final of the women's freestyle park event.

With bar spins, high-flying flips, and then the killer trick of double tail-whips — twice — the Chinese favorite, a runner-up in qualifications, literally soared across a course set up with jumps, ramps and rails, exhibiting the best of what bicycle motocross — or BMX — has to offer.

Roared on by the enthusiastic crowd in the iconic Paris square, Deng landed on top of the podium after leading the eight-woman field with a near flawless 92.6-point second run, securing China's first medal of any color in the youthful urban sport that debuted at Tokyo 2020.

It was also China's third Olympic cycling gold across all disciplines overall, following back-to-back titles in the women's track cycling team sprint at Rio 2016 and Tokyo 2020.

The "kingdom of bicycles" has emerged as force on the highest sporting stage, yet Deng took more pride from setting a brave example for China's daring youth — boys and girls — to valiantly try new things.

"I was overjoyed, and only truly felt like an Olympic champion when I sang my national anthem with the Chinese flag raised, during the medal ceremony," said a proud Deng, an



Gold medalist Deng Yawen of China (center) poses with silver medalist Perris Benegas of the US and bronze medalist Natalya Diehm of Australia following the BMX freestyle women's park event on Wednesday. WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY AND REUTERS



18-year-old native of Southwest China's Sichuan province.

"I am so proud to show the world that I am from China, and I am even happier that I managed to change some opinions about young people, especially girls, that they should not try this or that because of danger, fear or any other perceived obstacles.

"BMX cycling used to be a very niche sport in our country. My gold medal today proves that we can develop a strong program quickly.

"I hope more fans will become interested in BMX, and that more young people will try it to make it more popular," said Deng, who won the World Cup series' Bazhong leg in her home province.

BMX freestyle park involves athletes taking a 60-second run over a rugged park course, performing a variety of tricks. The Olympic final features the top-eight qualifiers and ranks riders by their best run out of two attempts.

Deng set the tone with an impressive 92.5 in her first run, building an early lead in the field. But, she had to deliver under pressure in her second, after runner-up Perris Benegas scored 90.7 points in her second run to close the gap and Deng's teammate, Sun Jiaqi, fell on both of her runs.

Deng rose spectacularly to the occasion, though, holding her nerve to improve her score to 92.6 points on her second attempt, finishing higher than Benegas and bronze medalist Natalya Diehm of Australia.

Courageous decision

Overwhelmed with pride and joy, Deng, in a post-final interview, expressed appreciation for all the support from her coaches and association officials, before she took the opportunity to thank herself for making a bold decision seven years ago.

"Looking back, and regardless of what the future holds, it was definitely the best decision of my life," said Deng, a junior javelin thrower, who chose to join the new Chinese BMX freestyle program in 2017.

"As uncertain and risky as it looked back then, it has paved the way to where I am now, and I really appreciate myself for having the bravery to make the switch, and for all the hard work I've put in along the way," said Deng.

The dramatic shift from throwing a javelin far, to riding a bike high, and having to suffer falls off ramps and walls, was so tough that Deng almost cried every day trying to master some of the world's most difficult tricks.

"Countless falls and bruises here and there have almost been my daily routine. I still have that fear today, like when I pushed for big double tail-whips just now in my second run. That fear factor helps me stay as focused as I need to be, and keeps me sharp throughout the run," said Deng.

The rapid improvement of Chinese women's riders owes a lot to the Venezuelan legend Daniel Dhers, who has been coaching the Chinese national team over the past year.

Known as the "Godfather of BMX", Dhers, as an active athlete himself, has been riding together with his Chinese pupils and passing on his nearly two decades of experience in the sport to China's talented young riders.

With the national program mainly drafting hard-working athletes from other sports since its inception in 2018, Dhers said he had a good start to his tenure after accepting the coaching role, adding that it didn't take long for his lessons on technique, trick selection and the sport's culture to trickle through.

"He really helped us avoid making a lot of mistakes in training with his vast experience. He was instrumental in our technical breakthroughs," Deng said of Dhers' guidance.

'Flying fish' lands two more medals for HK

By ATLAS SHAO in Hong Kong
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Hong Kong's "flying fish" Siobhan Haughey won her second bronze of the Paris Games on Thursday, this time in the women's 100m freestyle, becoming the first athlete from the region to clinch four Olympic medals. It also takes the total number of medals won so far by Hong Kong, China, at this summer's Olympics to four.

Its first two were individual gold medals in fencing — won by Vivian Kong Man-wai in the women's epee, and Edgar Cheung Ka-long in the men's foil — followed by Haughey's bronzes in the 200m and 100m freestyle.

In the 100m freestyle final, Haughey finished the first 50 meters in 25.09 sec, putting her in second place, but dropped back to

third, taking the bronze in a time of 52.33 sec.

After the finals, Haughey spoke to the media, saying that although medals are important, what matters most to her is that she has put in a tremendous amount of effort and truly enjoyed this competition.

Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government officials, including Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu, sent congratulations to Haughey and her coach.

"Siobhan has maintained a high level of performance and remained fearless against the world's best athletes throughout the competition," Lee said, adding that all Hong Kong residents, including himself, are proud of Haughey.

Secretary for Culture, Sports and Tourism, Kevin Yeung Yun-hung said that Haughey demonstrated extraordinary skill, and emphasized

“Siobhan has maintained a high level of performance and remained fearless against the world's best athletes throughout the competition.”

John Lee Ka-chiu, chief executive of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

that the city is both thrilled and proud of her.

During the women's 200m freestyle on Tuesday, Haughey finished third with a time of 1 minute 54.55 sec.

Kong, who won the team's first gold at the Paris Olympics on Saturday, returned to Hong Kong on Thursday morning and received a rapturous welcome at the airport. The 30-year-old fencer expressed her gratitude to the public, and thanked everyone for supporting the athletes.

"It is a blessing to be an athlete in Hong Kong, especially in fencing," Kong thanked her predecessors for their efforts, which she said have enabled the current generation of athletes to enjoy greater resources to pursue their dreams.

She also congratulated Cheung and Haughey on their achievements,

and emphasized that the efforts and passion of athletes cannot always be measured by their results.

Regarding the prize money of HK\$6 million (\$769,000), awarded under the Jockey Club Athlete Incentive Awards Scheme, Kong expressed her intention to set up a charity fund aimed at supporting more children to engage in fencing. She aspires to increase the exposure of sports, with the hope that more individuals will discover one they enjoy and excel at.

Kong's brilliant performance also garnered plaudits from the Chinese mainland. In Mandarin, she expressed gratitude for the support, and said that all athletes deserve to be appreciated.

At the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, held three years ago, Hong Kong secured six medals, including one gold by Cheung and two silvers by Haughey.



Siobhan Haughey of Hong Kong, China, poses on the podium with her bronze medal for the Paris 2024 Olympics women's 100m freestyle swimming event on Wednesday. AFP

PARIS 2024

TENNIS

A FORCE OF NATURE

Tennis queen Zheng Qinwen's golden crown was forged not only by her burning ambition, but also a torrent of love and support from her parents



By LI YINGXUE in Beijing
and SHI FUTIAN in Paris

Girls who love to laugh usually have good luck, and the same goes for those who are disciplined. While her peers were savoring the latest bubble milk tea and dessert trends, 21-year-old Zheng Qinwen spent 360 days a year sticking to a strict, bland diet.

In more than a decade of rigorous training, Zheng never slacked off. She was always the first to arrive and the last to leave. This summer, that discipline has paid golden dividends in Paris.

On Saturday, Zheng dazzled at Roland Garros, winning the women's singles Olympic gold in emphatic fashion — the first-ever for an Asian athlete.

In the climactic moment, when the winning shot landed, she dropped her racket as she collapsed backwards onto the red clay and raised her arms in triumph, soaking in the thunderous cheers ringing out around Court Philippe-Chatrier.

"Actually, at match point, I could feel my hands trembling, but my focus remained intense, as I concentrated on executing the next shot. When I finally won the match, I had not only conquered the pressure, but also surpassed my own limits," Zheng said.

Once nicknamed "Fire," she has now perfected the art of balancing her hot-headedness with patience — blending "water" and "fire" — on the court, mastering the skill of channeling her energy with precision. This newfound poise has not only earned her greater success, but also the title of "Queen Wen" among her fans.

"I love my fans for giving me this title, honestly, because it fits my character well: You need to present yourself as queen of the court, because you need this energy, this power to show that you are the best," Zheng said.

"I remember before, when something bad would happen, or there would be a tough moment, I would struggle and get panicked. I could not find peace in my heart. But, right now, as you can see in this Olympic Games, when I'm 1-4 down, 0-4 down, I find a way to come back during the match," she said. "There is fire and there is water at the same time."

Zheng attributes her success to her family's unwavering support and the many sacrifices her parents have made along the way.

"They taught me how to be disciplined and to stay focused on my dream. Most importantly, they always believed in me and the heights I could reach. I want to thank them for that," she said.

Team family

Born in 2002 in Shiyan, Hubei province, Zheng was encouraged by her father, Zheng Jianping, a former track and field athlete, to explore various sports from a young age, including basketball, badminton, running, and even two years of table tennis. However, it was tennis that she truly fell in love with.

Zheng Qinwen describes her passion for the sport's "expansive space" and constant demand for strategic decision-making.

"It's not about who is stronger, more powerful or faster. Every decision you make on the court can change the outcome of the match," she explained.

At eight years old, Zheng Qinwen was sent to Wuhan, 200 kilometers away, to train — only seeing her parents every two weeks. She later moved to Beijing for further training and, at 14, ventured alone to Europe and the US to perfect her game.

Through it all, Zheng Jianping

has been a pivotal figure in her career, serving as her earliest nutritionist, physiotherapist, and coach. Her mother has consistently supported Zheng during her training, providing essential daily care and emotional support.

Zheng Qinwen recalled that her father has always had faith in her, regardless of whether she wins or loses. "When I was 12, he said that, one day, I'll become a Grand Slam champion. Even when I have some tough losses, he always believes."

"My mom is always there taking care of my mental health, and my body. My father and mother, they work as a team," she said.

The team's efforts have been richly rewarded. Zheng Qinwen has made steady and impressive progress. Turning professional in 2018 at the age of 16, she quickly established herself on the junior circuit, reaching a world junior ranking of No. 4.

In 2020, she embarked on a journey through Europe playing in ITF tournaments, starting with a world ranking of over 600. In just over three years, she has soared to a career-high ranking of No. 7.

National glory

When Zheng Qinwen was six years old, her father took her to Beijing to watch the Olympic Games. From the stands, she watched on as Li Na reached the semifinals.

Little did she know that, 16 years later, she would surpass Li by securing China's first-ever tennis singles gold.

Despite a challenging season, following her appearance in the Australian Open final in January, Zheng Qinwen appeared transformed when she stepped onto the Olympic stage.

"You can see the hunger I have in this tournament — in my behavior, my eyes — the hunger I have is different than in all the other tournaments I play," she explained.

The pressure of representing China fueled her with extra motivation and energy. Facing fierce opponents, she persevered through a gruelling schedule as she forged a path to victory. She overcame deficits against No. 15-ranked Emma Navarro of the United States, German former world No. 1 Angelique Kerber and current No. 1, and Roland Garros specialist, Iga Swiatek.

"There was a spirit holding me up. I just felt like never giving up during the games," she said. "I don't know why, because in a tour match, maybe I'd let it get away. At the Olympics, I just held on to it and kept fighting."

Before her match, Zheng Qinwen watched the gold-medal performance of China's former 110m hurdler Liu Xiang at the Athens 2004 Olympics. Something she did repeatedly in the days leading up to her own final.

"He mentioned that, in 2004, he won gold at 21, at the peak of his career. I thought to myself, I'm 21 now, too. Exactly 20 years later, I am standing on this stage, and I can do it, too," Zheng Qinwen revealed.

Now, it will be her heroes that inspire a new generation.

"I want to tell them: 'Dream big. Be brave and dream. But, don't forget that there will be tough challenges, doubts, tears and failure, but you must enjoy the process. All the losses are for that one moment of success'"

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Above: Zheng Qinwen's parents celebrate at home, as their daughter wins Olympic gold in Paris on Saturday. HU DONGDONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Left: Zheng Qinwen attends a Taste of Tennis event at Indian Wells in California in March. GETTY IMAGES

Below: Zheng Qinwen takes a selfie with fans following her Paris victory. XINHUA



Above: Zheng Qinwen poses with a pair of Olympic torches during her visit to the China House in Paris, following her gold medal win on Saturday.

NI MINZHE / FOR CHINA DAILY



PARIS 2024

FIELD HOCKEY

STICKING TO ITS TASK

China's hockey team marches on to déjà vu gold-medal clash with No 1-ranked Netherlands

Team China captain Ou Zixia (right) fights for the ball with Belgium's Delphine-Daphne Marien during Wednesday's semi-final match. AP

By SUN XIAOCHEN in Paris
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Everything to win and nothing to lose.

The Chinese women's field hockey team is embracing its David-vs-Goliath final challenge against top-seed the Netherlands as a golden opportunity to restore pride and appeal to the once glorious program.

Underrated and overlooked, the Chinese squad has put its rejuvenation on full display in Paris after defying long odds to advance into its first Olympic final in 16 years, riding on momentum driven by having one of the sport's legends at its helm.

Coached by Australia's two-time Olympic champion Alyson Annan, Team China put up a gusty fight against European powerhouse Belgium — which stands three places above China in the International Field Hockey world rankings — in Wednesday's semifinal.

China started strong, with Zou Meirong scoring a second-quarter goal. However, the Belgians managed to tie the match at 1-1, thanks to a last-min-

ute equalizer from Emma Puvrez, sending a legion of Belgium fans into frenzy at the Yves-du-Manoir Stadium in the western suburbs of Paris.

That's how it stood at the end of regulation time.

After conceding two goals in the nerve-wrecking shootout, Team China kept its cool to score three in a row. Goalkeeper Ye Jiao then rose to the high-stakes occasion, denying the Belgians' next three attempts with heroic saves to secure China an Olympic final berth — it's first at an overseas Games. The last time was at Beijing 2008, where the home team faced off against the mighty Dutch. It will be a case of déjà vu, then, when the pair meet again in the French capital.

While the challenge will be monumental against the No 1-ranked Netherlands, the "Snow Lotus" have an edge this time around, with Annan — former mentor of the Dutch team — now in China's corner.

No matter what step it eventually occupies on the podium, Team China has already turned heads and earned respect for a victorious Olympic campaign in many ways, said Annan of her players.

"We have talked about this a lot since I started. We want to win a medal. We want to be on the podium in Paris. This is why we do this," Annan said of the confidence and belief she's instilled into the team since she took the helm in 2022.

"I hope the message is that dreams do come true, and you have to dream to be able to have that vision. And the girls saw it and went after it, and, now, they've got both feet on the silver and are one step from gold.

"(We have) everything to win and nothing to lose," said Annan, who led the Netherlands to the gold medal at Tokyo 2020.

Entering the Olympic knockout stage as a dark-horse contender, Team China proved its medal credentials by upsetting its coach's native national side, the Hockeyroos, in a solid 3-2 quarterfinal thriller — a bittersweet result for Annan.

"I have mixed feelings," she said following the victory on Monday. "I'd have preferred this to have been the final."

With all of China's other qualified ball-sport teams having already crashed out of the Paris Games, the women's hockey squad has served up a huge

morale boost for the whole delegation by at least clinching a silver medal.

After going up against its European rivals with the crowd rooting against it in almost every game, Chinese captain Ou Zixia expects the team's return to the top table to draw more support and exposure back home.

"Hopefully, what we did here will bring more attention to the sport in China, inspiring more girls to pick up a hockey stick and give it a try," Ou told the handful of Chinese journalists in the mixed zone after the semis.

"This means everything for the sport's profile and for everyone on the team. For us, we don't think it as the end of a tough journey. We take it as a new beginning for the sport to be better developed," said the defender, who's represented Team China in 172 international matches across three Olympic Games.

Speaking of the biggest difference that Annan's coaching crew, including her assistant Ric Charlesworth, has brought to the program, Zou, Wednesday's goalscorer, said it's all about self-confidence accumulated by practicing with, and drilling against, the Western powerhouses.

"I think it's kind of an advantage for us to be considered as an underdog, while at the same time we believe more in ourselves and that we are actually way better than people think," said the 23-year-old midfielder who's scored two goals in Paris.

Since Annan took over the Chinese program, the team has spent the past two years traveling extensively to train in Europe and Australia, and play quality opponents in the FIH Pro League. Gradually, it has become more balanced offensively and defensively.

With the Aussie's coaching blended with the traditional discipline and zealous work ethic of Chinese athletes, Team China had climbed to No 6 in the world rankings prior to the Games, all the way from No 14 when Annan took over.

Now, it seems that the scalps of Australia and Belgium were nothing unexpected, at least for Team China's young aspirants.

"Mentally, we are stronger than ever, and, tactically, we've managed to keep pace with the strong European teams. We just need to hit them when they're off their guard," said Zou.



China's Yang Liu shoots from a penalty corner during the Paris 2024 Olympics women's field hockey semifinal against Belgium on Wednesday. AP



China's goalkeeper Ye Jiao celebrates stopping three shots in a row during Wednesday's penalty shootout. AP



China's players rush to congratulate goalkeeper Ye Jiao after she made three saves to ensure China's win in the Paris 2024 Olympics women's field hockey semifinal against Belgium on Wednesday. AP

TABLE TENNIS

A huge Fan: Champion paddler inspired by Real Madrid

By LI YINGXUE
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After winning the men's singles table tennis gold medal at the Paris Olympics, Fan Zhendong celebrated by mimicking the signature "crossed arms" goal celebration of French soccer star Kylian Mbappe. After completing the "Grand Slam" — winning the event at the World Cup, World Championships and, finally, the Olympics — emulating the young World Cup winner seemed fitting.

It was part of a series of tribute celebrations by Fan during the singles competition in Paris. Earlier, after defeating local favorite Felix Lebrun in the semifinals, he imitated Portuguese soccer star Cristiano Ronaldo's iconic "Siu" celebration. Following his quarterfinal match

against Tomokazu Harimoto, Fan's raised-hand gesture resembled that of English soccer player Jude Bellingham.

"They inspire me to give my all on the field, never give up, always strive to win, and dare to win," Fan explained. "The atmosphere here is like watching soccer, very exhilarating. So, interacting in this way, I also hope to thank everyone."

All three players are past, present and future stars of Spanish soccer giant Real Madrid, Fan's favorite team. The profile picture on Fan's Weibo account, which has 3.75 million followers, is a photo of him wearing a customized Madrid jersey.

Competitive sports are universal, transcending events, nationalities, and languages. Fan, a dazzling table tennis champion, not only experiences the unique charm of each sport

as a professional athlete, but also draws nourishment and energy from them, as well as friendship.

Fan's Weibo follows only 38 accounts, most of which are related to sports, with a notable exception being his favorite singer, Taylor Swift. His interests span a wide range of sports.

Before the Paris Olympics began, Fan encountered Spanish tennis players Rafael Nadal and Carlos Alcaraz in the Olympic Village and posted a photo with them on Weibo. "The Olympics mean far more to athletes than just the competition; it is a truly world-class stage, vibrant in every corner. I love and enjoy the Olympics!" he wrote.

Fan's friendship with German table tennis star Timo Boll is well-known, with soccer being a common interest. In May, Fan and Boll

watched Borussia Dortmund's 1-0 win over Paris Saint-Germain on a tablet together during the WTT Saudi Arabia Grand Slam.

Last year, during the WTT Champions Frankfurt, Boll took Fan to a Borussia Dortmund match.

Fan shared in a vlog that, while the atmosphere of soccer matches differs from table tennis, both are equally thrilling. He noted that the excitement and cheering in soccer stadiums complement the intensity and skill of table tennis, providing him with a unique and enriching experience.

He once explained on Weibo about his life beyond competition: "On the court, I am a dedicated athlete representing my country and have strived for national honor for over a decade. Outside the arena, in my private life, I am simply an ordi-

nary young man, with personal interests and relationships, aiming to be true to myself."

Following Fan's triumph in the men's singles, Real Madrid extended its congratulations on Weibo. Fan responded in Spanish, saying: "Thank you, because no one resists your desire to win!"

After his dominant semifinal performance, he commented on Weibo: "Hasta el Final!" This phrase, meaning "until the end", was inspired by a massive banner displayed by Madrid fans at Wembley Stadium in June, when it won the Champions League.

As a devoted soccer fan, the 27-year-old may deeply understand the slogan's message: there are no permanent champions in sports. True success comes from relentless perseverance.

It's something he expanded on in

the recent documentary *More Than a Champion*: "People often only see the final results, not the process. By focusing on daily effort, I can accept any outcome. Losing is important to remember, but shouldn't define you."

"After losing in Tokyo, I was uncertain about the future, or if I'd win the World Table Tennis Championship again. Yet, dedication always pays off, and I'm more open-minded now than before."

Fan is now one step closer to completing his Paris journey — there's just one medal left to win.

Alongside teammates Ma Long and Wang Chuqin, Fan will strive to bring home the team gold against Sweden on Friday.

All that's left for the supporters to do is speculate about what celebration Fan has planned, and to hope that he gets to perform it.

SPORTS

OLYMPICS

Athletes ready to skate, battle and roll

Shanghai will showcase four all-action sports, as the inaugural Olympic Qualifier Series kicks off on Thursday. The four-day event will thrill fans with a combination of adrenaline-pumping competition, culture, art and music. The series will conclude with a final leg in Budapest in June to decide the final points tally — and who gets a golden ticket to Paris, **Sun Xiaochen** reports.



Format: freestyle: street, park
Number of athletes: 176

A fun pastime and trendy commuting choice almost everywhere around the world, skateboarding's popularity has exploded in Asia since its Olympic debut at Tokyo 2020, with millions of participants and fans drawn to the awe-inspiring ability of athletes in the discipline to flip, spin and grind across ramps, rails and courses in both street and park settings, and

at high-level competitions.

The Olympic qualifier in Shanghai will bring the world's finest skateboarders to one of China's most dynamic, fashion-conscious and international urban audiences. They will undoubtedly be "oohed" and "aahed" by the city's cool kids, who will surely gather in their droves to watch the skaters show off their slickest tricks.

Unlike other events, where

some of the quota of Olympic places for Paris 2024 will be directly up for grabs at the qualifiers, the total 80 places for skateboarding will be decided by the Olympic World Skateboarding Ranking by June 24, with performances at the Shanghai and Budapest qualifiers contributing heavily to the final rankings.

The street discipline will see a close battle in Shanghai, with a noticeable power shift reshaping the sport's landscape since qualification began in 2022.

Men's reigning world champion Aurelien Giraud of France and Japanese star Shirai Sora, who both had disappointing campaigns at Tokyo 2020, have come back with a vengeance, while newcomers such as Oda Yumeka, Japan's defending women's world champion, and Australian prodigy Chloe Covell are primed to make their presence felt in Shanghai.

Led by teen sensations Cui Chenxi (15) and Zeng Wenhui (19), the host is preparing a competitive women's street team of five riders to vie with their more accomplished international rivals for the points that will get them to Paris.

In the other three events — women's park and men's street and park — Chinese riders remain far from world class, as they embrace this home qualifier as a learning curve for the future.

As the newest Olympic sport, and one where art meets athleticism, breaking involves athletes — known as b-boys and b-girls — flipping, spinning and pulling out body-bending gymnastic moves to the beat of hip-hop music in one-on-one dance battles.

A judging panel scores the dancers' routines for technique, trick execution, style, originality and, more importantly, synchronization with the soundtrack.

The qualifier series' Shanghai leg will witness a fierce battle for historic entries to Paris, where breaking will take place as an official medal event for the first time since being demonstrated at the 2018 Youth Olympics.

Current men's world No 1 b-boy Kim Heon-woo of South Korea will be one of the biggest stars to watch in Shanghai, alongside Japanese pair Isshin Hishikawa and Hiroto Ono, who are both vying for

the one spot left for Japan, with their compatriot Nakarai Shigeyuki already qualifying by winning gold at last year's Hangzhou Asian Games.

On the women's side, Japan's 2021 world champion Ayumi Fukushima, who will be 41 by the time the Paris Games roll around, will battle it out with her compatriots, current world No 1 Ami Yuasa and No 4 Riko Tshako, for one of the Japanese places available. Each National Olympic Committee gets two.

As an emerging force in breaking, Chinese dancers, especially b-girls, have gradually made names for themselves on the center stage, with

world elite star Liu Qingyi (b-girl 671) having already snatched up an Olympic ticket as Asian Games winner. Her fellow countrywomen Zeng Yingying and Zheng Ziyuan will join the Shanghai showcase to measure themselves up against the world's best.

A three-month winter training program has helped prepare Chinese breakers to be 100 percent ready, physically and mentally, for the home qualifier, according to Yin Guochen, president of China Dance-sport Federation.

Team captain Shang Xiaoyu, aka b-boy X-Rain, is embracing the qualifier as an invaluable tuneup for him to reach his goals in Paris.

"With many rounds to go at the qualifier series, it will be a great test of our stamina, technique and mental strength. I will try to open the series in Shanghai with flying colors and clinch a ticket to Paris," said the 2018 Youth Olympian.

Formats: B-Boy, B-Girl
Total quota of available spots: 14
Number of athletes: 80



The sheer embodiment of strength, agility and courage, sport climbing has been gaining traction in recent years, not just among extreme outdoor lovers, but also urban fitness enthusiasts, thanks to its Olympic inclusion.

The Paris Games will double the medals on offer for both the men and women by crowning one champion in boulder and lead combined, and awarding another medal in the speed discipline, unlike at the sport's Olympic debut in Tokyo, where only men's and women's all-around championships were crowned after competing in all three disciplines.

The separation of the speed event from the other two, more technical, disciplines suits China's Olympic ambition well, with most of the country's top climbers excelling in the speed race, where athletes scale a 15-meter-high wall against the clock in one-on-one elimination rounds.

"Speed being isolated as a medal event on its own was good news for us, because this is where we traditionally excel, especially on the men's side," said Wang Yunlong, manager of China's sport climbing team, after a recent training session.

Already having three athletes — Long Jinbao and Deng Lijuan in speed and Zhang Yuetong in boulder and lead combined — securing direct Olympic berths via last year's world championships and continental qualification events,



Formats: boulder & lead, speed
Total quota of available spots: 30
Number of athletes: 160

Team China is going all out trying to rack up enough points at the series' home leg in Shanghai, and at the final stop in Budapest next month, to earn full qualification quotas in speed — two women and two men — and at least three in the combined discipline, according to Wang.

International climbers, such as former men's world record holder Veddrig Leonardo of Indonesia, and his female compatriot, Rajiah Sallsabillah, 2023 Asian Games bronze medalist, are expected to challenge the host's best in the speed event.

In boulder and lead combined, where athletes jump, pull and swing their way up nearly impossible-to-fathom overhangs, world-class masters, including reigning men's Olympic champion Alberto Gines Lopez of Spain and women's Olympic silver medalist Miho Nonaka of Japan, have all signed up to the Shanghai leg with an eye on stamping their Olympic tickets.

Excitement is mounting for the inaugural Olympic Qualifier Series (OQS) event, scheduled to take place in Shanghai. As we gear up for this thrilling showcase of Olympic sports, here are essential tips to ensure you catch all the action:

1. First of its kind

This event, pivotal for qualifying for the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, includes competitions in BMX freestyle, breaking, skateboarding, and sport climbing. It will take place from May 16 to 19, marking the first time that athletes from these four sports will compete together at the

OQS will fan flames of excitement for new disciplines

same venue in a single urban park.

A total of 464 athletes, evenly divided between men and women, will participate in the OQS Shanghai. They will compete across all four sports to earn crucial ranking points.

Specifically, athletes in BMX freestyle, breaking and sport climbing are competing for a total of 100 points, split equally between Shanghai and the second part of the OQS in Budapest, with a maximum of 50 points available at each event.

For skateboarding, one-third of the final ranking points are derived from previous competitions, with the events in Shanghai and Budapest contributing equally to the remaining two-thirds.

2. Stars to watch

This high-stakes competition features 81 previous Olympians, including 18 who earned medals at Tokyo 2020. Notable competitors include defending BMX freestyle

Olympic champions Logan Martin from Australia and Charlotte Worthington from Britain.

In sport climbing, the event will feature stars like Veddrig Leonardo of Indonesia, a former men's speed world record holder, and Miho Nonaka of Japan, the Tokyo 2020 women's combined silver medalist.

Breaking, debuting fully in the Paris 2024 Games, will showcase elite competitors such as b-girl Ami from Japan and b-boy Jeffro from

the United States.

Although having not nurtured mature enough riders to make to the Olympic qualifiers, China's emerging freestyle BMX community is stoked for an opportunity to get close-up to, and learn from, the world's best at home, said Shen Jian, an eight-time Chinese BMX national championship winner.

And it's even safer to say that the Huangpu Riverside provides one of the world's most ideal stages for competing in, and enjoying, the extreme sport, known as BMX — short for "bicycle motocross".

Built against the backdrop of an iconic cityscape and close to an urban audience, The Shanghai park provides all the jumps, ramps and rails, and the optimal conditions, to compete.

A total of 48 freestyle riders, 24 women and 24 men, will be contesting for 12 direct Olympic qualification spots — six on each side — for Paris, where the adrenaline-pumping competition will take place in front of a live audience at the Games for the first time.

Defending men's and women's Olympic champions, Australia's Logan Martin and Britain's Charlotte Worthington, as well as Tokyo 2020 men's runner-up Daniel Dhers of Venezuela, United States' five-time world champion Hannah Roberts and Tokyo 2020 women's bronze medalist Nikita Ducarroz of Switzerland, are among the glittering list of riders to

Format: freestyle
Total quota of available spots: 12
Number of athletes: 48



PHOTOS BY XINHUA

deputy director of the Shanghai Administration of Sports, the event will incorporate various fan-engagement activities that are specific to each of the four sports featured. These activities are intended to enhance the spectator experience at the event, fostering greater interaction and enjoyment for attendees.

This approach is part of broader efforts by the organizers to ensure the Olympic Qualifier Series is both a competitive sporting event and an engaging experience for fans.