

SPORTS

MIXED MARTIAL ARTS



China's Yan Xiaonan connects with a jab to the chin of Brazil's Claudia Gadelha during their strawweight bout at UFC APEX in Las Vegas on Saturday. ufc

China's UFC warriors on title-fight collision course

Yan Xiaonan emerges as potential challenger to champion Zhang Weili

By SUN XIAOCHEN
sunxiaochen@chinadaily.com.cn

The Ultimate Fighting Championship is witnessing something huge in the making as Yan Xiaonan's inexorable rise propels her toward an all-Chinese title bout against reigning strawweight champion Zhang Weili.

Yan's defeat of Brazilian Claudia Gadelha on Saturday in Las Vegas has pushed the 31-year-old into the 115-pound division's top five to earn her a potential shot at the belt.

Outlasting Gadelha with her power and agility, Yan notched her sixth straight triumph — all via unanimous decision — since joining the Vegas-based promotion in August 2017.

"It's up to the UFC. From the moment I won, I've been ready to challenge the champion. I can fight anytime as long as they call me up," Yan said in a post-fight online interview.

"I hope Weili can keep winning until the day we meet in a Chinese derby, which I hope can be staged in China so that all of the world's MMA fans can understand just how powerful Chinese women are in this sport."

Fans, though, will need to be

patient, with former champion Rose "Thug" Namajunas of the United States being lined up by the UFC as Zhang's next challenger.

Namajunas earned a title shot in July after a split-decision victory over Brazil's Jessica Andrade, who was dethroned by Zhang in August 2019.

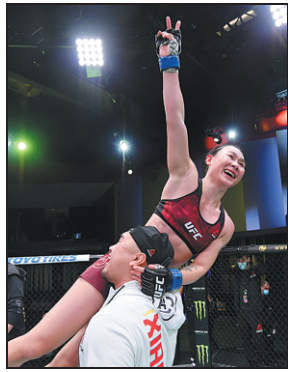
Should Zhang (21-1) come out on top in that as-yet-unconfirmed matchup, the 'Magnum' will cross paths with Yan (31-1), who believes she has what it takes to dethrone a compatriot she counts as an inspiration.

"She is the best in the division but I am a strong fighter as well," said Yan, who represents China Top Team, coached by former men's featherweight fighter Zhang Tiequan, the first Chinese signed by the UFC in 2010.

"Facing Zhang I think my advantage will be my speed and movement. We are both Chinese so I think I know how to fight her better than anyone else.

"The result could go either way depending on our form on that day, but to go for a challenge against her I have to be 200 percent confident in myself."

With MMA's profile on the rise in China since Zhang's title-winning



Yan Xiaonan celebrates her decision victory over Claudia Gadelha on Saturday in Las Vegas. UFC

heroics, the Chinese "derby" could be a game-changer for the combat sport in the world's most populous nation.

"It's crazy, and so quickly, too," UFC president Dana White told ESPN on Saturday of the prospect of an all-Chinese showdown. "Yan obviously beat a very tough vet in Claudia tonight, and we'll see what's next for her."

Despite its enormous commercial appeal, a Zhang/Yan fight is unlikely to happen in China any time soon while the current pandemic-related travel restrictions remain in place.

Since resuming the action in May following a two-month hiatus, UFC events have been staged in bio-secure bubbles in Las Vegas and Yas Island, Abu Dhabi.

With all incoming travelers to China still required to quarantine, Yan said she will remain in the US to receive treatment on some minor injuries and to continue honing her anti-grappling defense with her team.

Developing a solid striking style from sanda, aka Chinese kickboxing, Yan's ground skills improved dramatically during a pre-fight training program at the Team Alpha Male gym in Sacramento, California, where countryman Song Yadong, a bantamweight UFC fighter, is based.

"I am still not quite satisfied with my fight. I can see room for improvement in my ground control and grappling skills," said Yan, a Liaoning native.

With 12 active Chinese fighters signed on official contracts, the UFC has kept investing in its talent development program in China with high hopes of nurturing more world champions like Zhang.

The promotion opened the UFC Performance Institute in Shanghai last year to facilitate the training of athletes selected from local MMA clubs and martial arts schools to enter its talent pipeline on scholarship programs.

Digest

BASKETBALL Zhejiang survives scare to stay perfect in CBA

The Zhejiang Golden Bulls survived a major scare to keep their perfect (10-0) start to the CBA season in tact with a 106-104 victory over the Shenzhen Aviators in Zhuji, Zhejiang province, on Monday.

Shenzhen debutant Askia Booker and Shen Zijie combined for 34 points to help the 14th-ranked Aviators to a 56-39 interval lead.

Zhejiang closed the gap with four Wu Qian 3-pointers, with Austrian Sylvan Landesberg also finding his range to give the top-ranked Golden Bulls a 90-86 advantage during the final period.

The game seesawed in the dying moments before another Wu 3-pointer — his seventh in total for a 26-point haul — finally killed off the Aviators' challenge. Booker finished with a game-high 37 points.

"I was the one to blame for the first half because I wasn't feeling well and therefore our preparations were not good enough," said Zhejiang coach Liu Weiwei.

GOLF Garcia out of Masters after testing positive

Sergio Garcia pulled out of the Masters on Monday after informing Augusta National he tested positive for the coronavirus, making him the second player to withdraw following a positive test.

Garcia won his only major at the Masters three years ago in his 19th appearance, the most of any player before winning a green jacket.

"After 21 years of not missing a major championship, I will sadly miss the Masters this week," the Spaniard tweeted. "The important thing is that my family and I are feeling good. We'll come back stronger and give the green jacket a go next April."

Joaquin Niemann of Chile announced last week that he tested positive and withdrew.

The field was down to 92 players, with two other former champions not playing. Angel Cabrera, who won in 2009, had surgery on his left arm and is not expected to return until January. Trevor Immelman, the 2008 winner, won't play this week and is instead working the CBS broadcast.

NFL Pats fans shut out for remainder of season

The New England Patriots announced Monday that no fans will be allowed to attend home games for the rest of this season.

The announcement comes days after Massachusetts governor Charlie Baker instituted new interventions to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in the state. Massachusetts saw 11,692 new cases in the past week, according to the Coronavirus Resource Center at Johns Hopkins University.

The fan ban includes the New England Revolution of Major League Soccer, who also play at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough.

The Patriots (2-5) next play at home in Week 10 against the Baltimore Ravens (6-2). The Patriots played the New York Jets on Monday night in East Rutherford, New Jersey, with Bill Belichick's side winning 30-27 to halt a four-game skid.

Jersey, with Bill Belichick's side winning 30-27 to halt a four-game skid.

SOCCER Barca's Fati facing long layoff following surgery

Barcelona forward Ansu Fati will be sidelined for about four months after undergoing knee surgery on Monday, the club said.

The 18-year-old Fati tore the internal meniscus in his left knee in Barcelona's 5-2 win over Real Betis in La Liga on Saturday. He was replaced at halftime after not recovering from a challenge by Aissa Mandi inside the area. The club said Fati's surgery was successful.

Fati has emerged as a key player for Ronald Koeman's Barca side this season, scoring five goals and notching two assists in 10 matches.

The injury had already ruled Fati out of Spain's upcoming games against Switzerland, the Netherlands and Germany after he was named in Luis Enrique's squad last week. Real Madrid's Marco Asensio has been called up in his place.

Madrid reeling from Valverde injury blow

Real Madrid's injury problems worsened on Monday with the confirmation that Uruguayan midfielder Fede Valverde will be out of action for at least a month with a broken bone in his lower shin.

The Real Madrid website explained that Valverde has "been diagnosed with a fracture of the posterior tibial bone in his right leg," and although the club didn't specify a recovery time, he is likely to be sidelined for at least a month.

Valverde has become a key player in midfield and if he is out for a month he will miss at least six vital matches for Zinedine Zidane's side, including La Liga visits to Villarreal and Sevilla as well as Champions League trips to Inter Milan and Shakhtar Donetsk.

If Valverde's recovery takes more than a month, he will also miss the first Madrid derby of the season, against Atletico, on Dec 12.

BASEBALL Williams, Lewis named rookies of the year

Seattle Mariners center fielder Kyle Lewis was the unanimous winner of the American League Rookie of the Year award, and Milwaukee Brewers reliever Devin Williams won the National League honor on Monday night.

The 25-year-old Lewis was one of MLB's breakout stars during the pandemic-shortened season, batting .262 with 11 homers and 28 RBIs in 58 games. He led big-league rookies with 37 runs, 90 total bases and a .364 on-base percentage.

Lewis also made a couple of memorable plays in center, robbing Oakland's Ramon Laureano of a grand slam on Sept 14. He is the first player to win the award for Seattle since Ichiro Suzuki in 2001.

Featuring a devastating change-up and a four-seam fastball that gets into the upper 90s, Williams was practically unhittable this year. The 26-year-old right-hander went 4-1 with a microscopic 0.33 ERA, striking out 53 in just 27 innings.

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