

## SPORTS

SNOOKER

## Masterful Yan in frame for greatness

Prodigious Chinese potter tipped for more major titles after historic victory at sport's second-biggest tournament

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A new snooker star is born, and now fans and pundits alike reckon on the sky's the limit for newly crowned Masters champion Yan Bingtao.

On Sunday night, the steely nerved 20-year-old became just the second Asian winner of the prestigious tournament, showing maturity beyond his years to defeat four-time world champion John Higgins 10-8 in an enthralling final in Milton Keynes, England.

The victory earned Yan a check for £250,000 (around \$340,000), and in many observers' estimations has transformed the Chinese No 2, who was making his Masters debut, into a contender for April's world championship.

More than his prolific potting or solid safety play, it was Yan's coolness under pressure that convinced the experts that he is destined for greatness — although the man himself admitted he was a bundle of nerves as he closed on victory.

"I felt very tired in the closing moments tonight," said Yan, a native of Zibo, Shandong province. "My heart was beating hard on that last red, I was so close to the winning line and he kept fighting. That was the moment that I felt the most pressure.

"I just told myself to keep working and not give up. I controlled the cue ball. I just slowly finished the last three or four balls after potting the red.

"My mom and dad were watching on TV. They probably didn't sleep tonight. They have always told me to never give up and to enjoy my life."

With Chinese fans watching the action live on TV into the early hours, and news of the victory viewed over 3.5 million times on Weibo by Monday morning, Yan was quick to acknowledge all the support back home.

"Thanks all of you who waited in front of the screen and cheered for me. The championship for me is a milestone. I will keep fighting," Yan, whose run to Masters glory took place behind closed doors due to the COVID-19 pandemic, posted on Weibo.

As well as managing the growing weight of expectations on his shoulders, Sunday's win will also require some physical strength on Yan's part when it comes to placing the hefty Paul Hunter Trophy into his presentation cabinet.

"I finally took a close look at the trophy. It's too beautiful... And I just weighed it. It's about 30 kilograms... Well that's the weight to match my favorite trophy," he added.

## Digging deep

Yan turned pro in 2015, becoming the



China's Yan Bingtao kisses the Paul Hunter Trophy after beating John Higgins 10-8 in the final of the Masters — widely considered snooker's second-biggest tournament — in Milton Keynes, England on Sunday night. The victory saw the 20-year-old become only the second Asian player to win a Triple Crown event. XINHUA

first player born in the year 2000 to join the circuit. In 2019, he captured his first ranking title at the Riga Masters in Latvia, becoming the first teenager to win a ranking event since compatriot Ding Junhui in 2006.

From day one of his Masters journey, Yan had to dig deep. All of his matches leading up to the final — against Neil Robertson, Stephen Maguire and 2020 champion Stuart Bingham — went the distance on 6-5 scorelines. On Sunday, he also faced an uphill struggle, trailing Higgins 3-5 and 5-7 before clawing his way back.

The victory makes Yan the youngest Masters champion since Ronnie O'Sullivan claimed the title in 1995 at the age of 19. Yan

is also the youngest finalist since Ding lost the 2007 edition.

Now expectations are soaring Yan can surpass the 33-year-old Ding, who won the last of his four Triple Crown titles at the 2011 Masters and who has so far failed in his bid to become the first Chinese to win the world championship.

Many of the game's greats, including Sunday's runner-up Higgins, are tipping Yan to end that wait.

"I have played him the last few years, he has not much to learn in the tactical department and he is scoring as well now," Higgins told the BBC.

"He is about the same age as my boy. He could be a world champion without a shadow

of a doubt, so China is very lucky to have him."

John Parrott, the 1991 world champion, echoed those sentiments, telling the BBC: "You need talent but his temperament is bulletproof. To be that age and to be so calm and composed when playing for one of our biggest trophies is magnificent."

Six-time world champion O'Sullivan is sure the world has just witnessed the emergence of a new snooker legend.

"It's like when (Stephen) Hendry came along, then type of players, John Higgins, Mark Williams, you thought, 'this could go on for a while,'" O'Sullivan told Eurosport.

And "The Rocket" reckons Yan has a better chance of being crowned world champion at



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**Yan Bingtao,** acknowledging the support of the fans back home after his historic Masters triumph

the Crucible than Ding.

"I think he's got more chance of doing it because he's got a lot more time on his side," O'Sullivan added.

"I think it's a good time to be coming into snooker. It's hard to say because there might be another three or four (new talents) come out the woodwork in one or two years and we might be saying the same about them.

"But at the moment he (Yan) is the most mature. We've seen him do it under extreme pressure and you need to be able to perform under pressure to win the Crucible.

"I just think he's going to get stronger and stronger and it will bring other players through as well. I'd be very surprised if he doesn't win at least one or two world titles."

## MMA

## China's Li-thal force moves step closer to ultimate prize

By SUN XIAOCHEN  
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After pulling off the biggest win of his career in spectacular fashion, China's Li Jingliang is making no secret of his ambition to go all the way to the pinnacle of the Ultimate Fighting Championship.

On Saturday night, Li upset the odds to defeat returning contender Santiago Ponzinibbio of Argentina via a first-round knockout in a welterweight bout on the main card at UFC Fight Island 7 in Abu Dhabi.

The stunning win has helped Li crack the top 15 in the 170-pound division, and now the 32-year-old from Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region has set his sights on following in the footsteps of his female world champion compatriot, Zhang Weili.

"It's by far the toughest victory I've pulled off in my career but I am sure there will be more higher-ranked opponents for me to beat down the line," Li said during an online post-fight interview with Chinese media.

"I think I proved myself tonight for the UFC and Dana White to see that I am here to fight for the championship.

"I am not just a participant. I am going after the belt seriously just like everyone else does."

Hot on the heels of Zhang's successes in the women's ranks, Li's rise to prominence has thrilled fans in China's growing MMA community — and the UFC is taking note.

"Huge for Li. That was a legit finish," UFC president White said of



Li Jingliang of China goes on the attack against Santiago Ponzinibbio of Argentina during their welterweight bout at UFC Fight Island 7 at Etihad Arena in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, on Saturday night. Li won with a first-round knockout. ZUFFA LLC

the stoppage win in the post-fight media conference. "This was a big win for him."

After losing his previous bout to American veteran Neil Magny in March last year, Li (18-6) entered Saturday's contest as the underdog. However, he was aggressive from the start against the seventh-ranked Ponzinibbio (27-4) in his first outing on Abu Dhabi's Yas Island, where the UFC has set up a bio-secure bubble with strict COVID-19 countermeasures to keep the action going during the pandemic.

Known as the "Leech" in the Octagon, Li landed a vicious left hook on the chin of Ponzinibbio, who was on

a seven-fight winning streak, at 4:25 in the opening round to send his opponent crashing to the canvas.

The victory earned Li a \$50,000 bonus and the admiration of the global MMA community.

"Wow underdogs killing today," welterweight Belal Muhammad of the United States wrote on Twitter.

Niko Price, another American fighting in the same division, tweeted: "Size doesn't matter," referring to the Argentine's larger physical frame.

Born to a family of modest means in Tacheng, a rural prefecture in Xinjiang, Li trained in sanda, or Chinese kickboxing, as a teenager. In

2008, he moved to Beijing to train at the same MMA gym with his hero and mentor Zhang Tiequan, who in 2010 became the first Chinese fighter to sign for UFC.

Since his UFC debut in May 2014, Li has amassed 10 wins, seven of those via KO or TKO, to become China's biggest hope in the men's ranks. He is bidding to emulate the success of Zhang Weili, who won China's first UFC world title by wresting the strawweight belt off Brazil's Jessica Andrade in August 2019 in Shenzhen, Guangdong province.

With 12 Chinese fighters currently signed to UFC, Li believes the organization's consistent invest-



Li can't contain his joy after winning his UFC welterweight bout in Abu Dhabi on Saturday. The victory lifted Li into the division's top 15, with the 32-year-old Chinese determined to eventually scrap his way to a world-title shot. ZUFFA LLC

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**Li Jingliang,** Chinese UFC star after victory last weekend

ment in talent programs in his homeland will yield more champs sooner rather than later.

"China has an abundant supply of talent especially coming from the sanda system," said Li, who attributes his exceptional striking skills to years of training in the Chinese kickboxing program.

"They just need to get more exposure to the MMA culture and system as early as possible and to have more technical exchange with MMA fighters.

"I believe that the Chinese force will reign in many divisions in MMA eventually."

Having spent two months prepar-

ing for the fight, first in Las Vegas and then Abu Dhabi, Li is looking forward to a family reunion and treating himself to some Xinjiang home cooking as soon as he finishes a mandatory two-week quarantine after landing in China.

But he doesn't plan to relax for too long, and is already thinking about his next bout.

"It's up to Dana White and his team. Whoever they set me up against, I will be ready," said Li.

"I don't care who it is as long as I can challenge a higher-ranked opponent.

"My goal is to beat the best and win the belt."