

SPORTS

OLYMPICS



Liu Guoliang (second right), president of the Chinese Table Tennis Association, and China's table tennis team watch the broadcast of the ceremony marking the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party of China, in Weihai, Shandong province, on Thursday. CTTA

Centenary celebrations boost Team China's belief

CPC anniversary inspiring delegation in final phase of Tokyo preparations

By SUN XIAOCHEN
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Three weeks out from the delayed Tokyo Olympics, the Chinese delegation has stepped up a gear in its final preparations for the Games, with over 400 athletes raring to do their country proud.

Chinese athletes had earned 317 spots for Tokyo 2020 by June 29, the official deadline of the revised qualifying system for the Games, which will open on July 23 following a one-year postponement due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

With talent evaluation still taking place within multiple Chinese national squads, including gymnastics and diving, the final Olympic roster has yet to be confirmed by the Chinese Olympic Committee. However, it is reported that a total of 413 athletes will be sent to Tokyo, with strict COVID-19 protocols in place.

Although diminished by the retirement of a number of veterans, China will continue to pin the bulk of its gold-medal hopes on sports in which it has traditionally enjoyed the most success — diving, weightlifting, table tennis, gymnastics, shooting and badminton.

Those six sports have contributed a whopping 70 percent share of the total 224 Summer Olympic gold medals the country has won since its debut in 1984.

The all-conquering table tennis team is tipped to achieve a clean sweep of golds, including the newly added mixed doubles event, for a sixth time at the Olympics, despite facing tough challenges from host Japan in women's singles and doubles.

The Communist Party of China's centenary celebrations have offered the team extra inspiration to overcome whatever challenges lie ahead, said Liu Guoliang, president of the Chinese Table Tennis Association.

"The strong and fearless spirit of our Party has motivated us to do our utmost in our daily training and prepare ourselves to the best of our ability to pay back the support of the country with excellent performances in Tokyo," Liu said on Thursday at the team's training base in Weihai, Shandong province, after watching the televised centenary ceremony.

Liu, however, played down expectations of a golden sweep across all five events in Tokyo, citing the unusual build-up to the Olympic tournament during the pandemic and the host's home-court advantage.

"We have the ability and confidence to go for all five golds, but there are challenges and risks as well ... Ups and downs, wins and losses, are all part of the sport. I don't want to give my players too

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Liu Guoliang, president of the CTTA

much pressure," he said after the team's four-day warm-up tournament last month in Weihai.

As defending Olympic champion in Tokyo, China's women's volleyball team is also under pressure to deliver more glory.

After a year and a half without any international competitions, the team, coached by legend Lang Ping, honed its young reserve players through five tough losses during the first half of the Volleyball Nations League in Italy last month.

When the full roster returned after several key players finished their quarantine, Team China finished the tournament with seven wins in

a row, including victories over potential Tokyo podium rivals Russia and the United States.

With the country's women's soccer team no longer among the world's elite, Lang's squad looks set to lead China's charge in team ball sports in Tokyo. None of China's men's teams in basketball, soccer and volleyball qualified for the Olympics.

"Drawn into a competitive group at the Games, we have very little margin for error. Our Olympic experience from the previous Games is our biggest advantage that we are going to count on," Lang said before the trip to Italy.

After a month-long overseas trip, the team last week returned to its base in Beilun, Zhejiang province for the final stage of preparations behind closed doors.

In addition to the country's strongest events, China has also set its sights on challenging the world's best in two Western-dominated sports — swimming and track and field.

China's national track and field team has earned 52 qualification spots across 23 events for Tokyo, where they will go for golds in men's and women's 20-kilometer race walking and women's shot put.

"I've qualified for the Games and broken the world record, which proved my improvement over the years and has boosted my confidence significantly," said race walker Yang Jiayu, who set a 20km world record of 1:23:49 at the national championships in March.

SOCCER

Li Tie's history chasers relishing final challenge

By SHI FUTIAN
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Team China faces a daunting task to reach the 2022 World Cup finals in Qatar after being drawn alongside Japan, Australia and Saudi Arabia in the final phase of Asian zone qualifying. Head coach Li Tie, however, described the draw as "really good", vowing his players would give their all in Group B, which also features Oman and Vietnam.

"We will try our best to play well in each match," said Li. "Due to the pandemic, we haven't played any quality friendlies for over a year, so I hope before the final stage of Asian qualification, we can have some quality matches. We have so many Chinese fans, which means great support but also pressure for us."

Iran, South Korea, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon make up Group A following Thursday's draw in Kuala Lumpur.

Japan, Australia and the Saudis all featured at the last World Cup in Russia, and China captain Wu Xi is expecting a tough challenge as the nation bids to qualify for the tournament for the first time since its debut in 2002.

"All teams in Group B are competitive, and we shouldn't take any of them lightly. But first and foremost, we have to secure victories over Vietnam and Oman," said the skipper.

China will open its campaign against Australia on Sept 2 before taking on Japan five days later.

Each group winner and runner-up will qualify for the finals in Qatar, with the third-placed teams advancing to a playoff. The winner of that tie will face an intercontinental opponent in a final playoff for a World Cup spot. Group matches are scheduled to conclude by March, with the first playoff slated for June.

China reached the final phase after showing signs of improvement in the latter stage of the second phase of qualifying.

Li's first official match in charge was last month's 7-0 rout of Guam in front of 30,000 spectators in Suzhou, Jiangsu province, before the remaining Group A matches were switched from Suzhou to Sharjah, UAE, after coronavirus cases were detected in two rival squads.

Despite the loss of home advantage, Li's men earned victories over the Philippines (2-0), the Maldives (5-0) and Group A leader Syria (3-1) in the UAE to secure a spot in the final phase of qualifying.

"No matter who we play against, I think the fact that Team China managed to enter the final phase is pretty encouraging for soccer fans in the country. It has also boosted our confidence," Team China goalkeeper Yan Junling told Chinese publication Soccer News.

"Now everyone in the team wants to try their best to see if we have any chance of reaching the World Cup finals. We have a chance, even against the strong teams."

"We also need to see how much of a gap there is between us and those



Wu Lei has netted five times in China's last four games, and will be key to the team's chances as it vies for a World Cup finals spot in the Asian zone 'Final 12' qualifying campaign. XINHUA

top Asian teams. With the right tactics, we will see if we have chances to beat those teams. We will win the games we are expected to win and try our best in the tougher challenges. So we can see if we have improved from four years ago."

China was a fourth seed in Thursday's draw, conducted by the Asian Football Confederation, with Japan and Iran placed in the first pot as the top seeds.

"Asian soccer has changed a lot. While the strong teams have been developing fast, the weak teams have also made many changes, among which the biggest difference is the addition of naturalized players," Yan added.

"We noticed several of the Philippines' players actually spoke Spanish. With these naturalized additions, these teams are now a different proposition."

"We also have naturalized players, and they are very important to us. They are all outstanding and they are helping the growth of domestic players. Since joining the national team, they have become one of us. We are good friends on and off the pitch. Everyone can see their strength on the pitch and it will take more time for them to show more of their potential."

Brazil-born strikers Ai Kesen (aka Elkeson) and Alan both hit the net in China's recent qualifiers, while England-born defender Jiang Guangtai (aka Tyias Browning) has shown a degree of consistency at the back.

Homegrown ace Wu Lei, however, upstaged the imports by netting five times and laying on two assists in the last four games. The 29-year-old, who plays for La Liga club Espanyol, is expected to be key to China's chances in the coming games.

"We have achieved our first goal and our next goal is to qualify for the World Cup finals. Time is limited and I hope the entire team can maintain this momentum," Wu said.

"We need to have faith and believe in ourselves. Reaching the World Cup finals is the dream for all soccer fans in China. We will try our best."

Digest

FIGURE SKATING Sui and Han reveal Beijing buildup plans

Olympic silver medalists Sui Wenjing and Han Cong will begin their buildup to Beijing 2022 by taking part in the second and third events of the 2021-22 Grand Prix of Figure Skating Series.

Sui and Han's first stop of the series will be at Skate Canada in Vancouver (Oct 29-31) before returning for the Cup of China in Chongqing (Nov 5-7), the Chinese Figure Skating Association confirmed on Wednesday. The pair finished runner-up at March's world championships in Stockholm.

Peng Cheng and Jin Yang will also take part in two events of the series — the Cup of China and Internationaux de France in Grenoble, where young Chinese pair Wang Yuchen and Huang Yihang will make their senior grand prix debuts.

Jin Boyang, who struggled at the worlds to finish 22nd, will attempt to rediscover his form at the Cup of

China. Ice dance pair Wang Shiyue and Liu Xinyu will also be in the field in Chongqing, as well as the NHK Trophy in Japan.

OLYMPICS China announces shuttlers for Tokyo

The Chinese Badminton Association on Wednesday announced a 14-player squad for this summer's Tokyo Olympics.

Rio champion Chen Long will defend the men's singles crown at his third Olympics, while women's world No 2 Chen Yufei and top-ranked mixed doubles pair Zheng Siwei and Huang Yaqiong will all be chasing their first golds at the Games.

According to Badminton World Federation rules, teams can enter a maximum of two players or two pairs, provided they have a top-16 singles or a top-eight doubles ranking.

The only one of the five events that China has not fulfilled its quota is the men's doubles, where lone duo Li Junhui and Liu Yuchen ranked third

in Olympic qualification.

Chen Long and Shi Yuqi will lead Chinese medal hopes in the men's singles, with Chen Yufei, who led the Olympic points tally, and He Bingjiao targeting the podium in the women's singles.

China will be represented in women's doubles by Chen Qingchen and Jia Yifan, and Du Yue and Li Yinhui. World No 2 pair Wang Yilyu and Huang Dongping will join Zheng and Huang in the mixed doubles.

Breast-feeding athletes allowed to bring babies

Canadian basketball player Kim Gaucher, who is breast-feeding her infant daughter, has been successful in her quest to bring the baby to the Tokyo Olympics.

The International Olympic Committee says nursing mothers will now be allowed to bring their babies to the Japanese capital. The move comes after Gaucher made an emotional plea via Instagram to have 3-month-old Sophie travel with her

to the Games.

Gaucher, a 37-year-old from Mission, British Columbia, said the IOC was forcing her to make a tough choice: skip the Olympics or spend 28 days in Tokyo without her child.

"We very much welcome the fact that so many mothers are able to continue to compete at the highest level, including at the Olympic Games," the IOC said on Wednesday in a statement.

"We are very pleased to hear that the Tokyo 2020 organizing committee has found a special solution regarding the entry to Japan for mothers who are breast-feeding and their young children."

The IOC had stipulated that no family could travel to Tokyo due to COVID-19 restrictions.

SPORTS SCIENCE University's journal sees influence grow

A Shanghai-based sports science journal has been rated third-highest for "impact factor" on the latest

Science Citation Index.

The *Journal of Sport and Health Science (English version)*, published by the Shanghai University of Sport, saw its impact factor soar from 5.200 last year to 7.179 this year. The publication was cited 2,746 times, according to Clarivate Analytics.

The JSHS has published 43 editions since it was launched in May 2012. It is the first English-language sports science journal to be published in the Chinese mainland.

Every year, it features over 2,000 articles written by authors from more than 70 nations and regions. Papers from the journal are downloaded more than 1 million times per year.

SOCCER Man United closing on \$100m Sancho swoop

Jadon Sancho appears finally headed to Manchester United from Borussia Dortmund after a long-running pursuit of the winger.

United has agreed to a deal in

principle to sign Sancho for 85 million euros (\$100 million) from Dortmund, a source said on Wednesday. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss a transfer yet to be completed.

The 21-year-old Sancho is currently with the England squad involved in the European Championship as the team prepares for its quarterfinal with Ukraine on Saturday. Despite Sancho commanding a big fee after impressing in the Bundesliga, he is yet to start for England at the tournament.

Sancho started his career at Manchester City but rejected a deal to stay and joined Dortmund in 2017. He has scored 38 times in his 104 Bundesliga appearances.

Now he is set for City's fierce local rival to help United's bid to dethrone its neighbor as English Premier League champion. The new season starts for United on Aug 14 against Leeds at Old Trafford.