

BADMINTON

Chen serves up shining example

China's Olympic champion lets her fearless performances do the talking as she embraces role-model status

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For singles ace Chen Yufei, nothing trumps helping her team triumph — it's little wonder then that the 24-year-old Tokyo Olympic champion is relishing her growing status as a role model both on and off the badminton court.

"Because of the medals I have won, I get a lot more attention. So I think I need to set an example for others. I need to try my best each day. If someone can learn something from me, I am happy," Chen told China Daily in an exclusive online interview last week.

"Certainly I demand more of myself. And I have greater expectations of myself. Others also have more expectations of me. All I can do is block out the outside noise and be myself."

Chen won the nation's hearts for her gritty performances in the Uber Cup final and Thailand Open last month.

Although Team China failed to defend its Uber Cup title in a 3-2 defeat to South Korea, Chen's grueling 91-minute singles victory over South Korea's An Se-young left fans in awe of her perseverance and determination to fight to the end.

Doubles player Jia Yifan credited Chen's brilliance for "boosting the team's confidence" as tens of millions of TV and online viewers were captivated by her heroics.

At the end of the epic battle, both players collapsed on the floor in exhaustion, and Chen admitted the match ranks among the most memorable of her career.

"Even for me, playing a 91-minute match is very rare. I only had one thought at that moment, which was to simply keep fighting. I must win," said Chen.

"We always need to be prepared for the toughest situations in matches. It felt like I would die that day, but I'm willing to fight to the last second on the court."

"People asked me how I would rate that match. I said, 'Definitely among the top 3 of my career to date.' It's very memorable. It's a team competition after all, so the entire process was hard for everyone."

Chen has represented Team China at the Uber Cup since 2018, failing to help her team reach the final



China's Chen Yufei winds up for a smash at the Thailand Open in Bangkok on May 21. The 24-year-old has become a household name in China since claiming gold in the women's singles at last summer's Tokyo Olympics. AFP



Chen Yufei returns to Tai Tzu-ying of Chinese Taipei during their Thailand Open singles final on May 22. AFP

in her debut. However, that setback only served to fuel her motivation as she shone to help China win its 15th Uber Cup title in Denmark last October.

"I think the Uber Cup means a lot to me. I gradually realized I need to shoulder more and more responsibilities. And such a strong sense of responsibility is the reason why I have become who I am today," said Chen.

She insists she is more nervous when playing team competitions, and finds triumphing for her country more rewarding than any personal achievements.

"Team competitions require us to be really united and work together for the result. So fighting together for Team China is something that is very important for all Team China players," said Chen.

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Chen Yufei, reigning Olympic women's singles champion

"Instead of resting after the 91-minute match at this year's Uber Cup, I changed my clothes and went directly to the stands to cheer for my teammates. I cheered so loudly I almost lost my breath. I could not even see clearly. I find it a lot more nerve-racking to watch others play than actually play myself."

Just a few days after the Uber Cup, Team China competed at the Thailand Open, also in Bangkok,

where Chen pocketed a silver in the women's singles.

However, despite the hectic schedule, Chen was straight back on the practice court to prepare for forthcoming tournaments.

"We resumed training right away. Although we have just finished some big tournaments, we still have a lot more matches to play... We barely have time to rest," said Chen. "Everyone on our team tries really

hard to be the best of themselves. Everyone tries the hardest they can on the court. Being the best of yourself is the basis of contributing to your team."

Fresh challenges

Chen became a household name in China after winning women's singles gold at last summer's Tokyo Olympics. However, she's not about to let complacency set in as she targets more glory.

"The Olympic gold is for sure a highlight of my career. I was so excited to win such a high honor. The kids get very excited when they meet me. They ask to take pictures with me or ask for my autograph," said Chen.

"But gradually, I'm changing my mentality, because I have a lot more competitions ahead of me. I can't

always live in the past, in past Olympics."

With a new generation of players fast emerging from rival nations, Chen is well aware China needs to keep pushing hard for improvements.

"I think learning from each other is important. Competitions are not just about winning or losing," she said.

"From our opponents, we also can learn many good qualities, techniques and tactics. And we need to keep our dreams. We need to level up our strength and defend Team China's honor."

"For the younger generation of badminton lovers, If you really like the sport, you should keep your dreams and keep trying. The process will be very difficult. And it's going to be very hard. But you need to believe in yourself to succeed."

Chen's appeal lies beyond her skills on the court, with fans also drawn to her likable personality in front of the TV cameras, as well as her quirky antics with teammates.

"We are all funny people, but I think the doubles pairs are the funniest. Such as Jia Yifan and Huang Dongping, they are really hilarious in everyday life," said Chen. "That's how we get along every day."

VOLLEYBALL

China's hungry new breed of Olympic hopefuls have eyes on Paris prize

After completing a 50-day training camp in Jiangmen, Guangdong province, China's men's volleyball team on Tuesday set off for Brazil to compete in the 2022 Volleyball Nations League (VNL) where it hopes to take the first steps toward qualifying for the 2024 Paris Olympics.

After missing out on most international competitions over the last two years due to the pandemic, the current Chinese roster is something of a mystery to the public, but the squad is clear in its goal.

"The team's top priority is to earn a ticket to Paris 2024," said captain Jiang Chuan.

Changes to the sport's Olympic qualification system mean world rankings will play a bigger role in determining the lineup for the Paris Games. So, acquiring ranking points will be crucial for the young squad over the next couple of events.

The average age of China's VNL squad is 25, including six players born in 1999 and three in 2000.

"Compared with the top-tier teams like Brazil, Serbia and Argentina, we are a very young and inexperienced team," said Jiang. "In men's volleyball, players tend to peak around 30 years old."

Despite a lack of international experience, Jiang says a surge of young talent has triggered healthy competition among the Chinese players.

"Playing in high-level games can



Captain Jiang Chuan is hoping to lead Team China to qualification for the 2024 Paris Olympics. XINHUA

enrich their experience," said Jiang. "The more they encounter a situation, the more confident they will be next time they deal with the same situation."

Having joined the national team in 2016, the 27-year-old Jiang has taken it upon himself to mentor the young players.

"I don't want them to go down a winding road in their development. I want to provide them with short-cuts that are based on my own experience, so they can improve quicker," he said.

Jiang also serves as a link between head coach Wu Sheng and

the youngsters.

"Coach Wu is very strict and some young players can be afraid to speak their minds, so I can help them communicate better," Jiang said. "For instance, if the young players feel fatigued, I might suggest the coach switches a training session to video analysis."

Team China last competed on the international stage at the 2021 Asian Men's Volleyball Championship, where it took home the bronze medal. Jiang was encouraged by that result, but is keen for the team to keep pushing forward.

"We are narrowing the gap to

the top Asian teams, but it's difficult to know how we rate among the world's best teams," he said. "We have been preparing by watching other teams' highlights, and we will examine ourselves in the games."

"We will try our best to beat our Asian rivals in the first round in Brazil, and we will go all out to compete with the South American and European teams to gain confidence," added Jiang, whose team opens its VNL campaign against Iran on June 8 in Brasilia, followed by games against Japan, Slovenia and the host, before the tournament moves on to the Philippines.

Jiang is urging the squad to keep a positive mindset from the off.

"We gradually lost our confidence in straight losses at previous editions of the VNL. This time, we will start off with full confidence, otherwise we will be playing into their hands once again," he said.

As for his personal goals, Jiang harbors ambitions of one day playing in more competitive overseas leagues, but for now is concentrating on helping the national team earn an Olympic berth. "I have never thought about how far my career might go on for, but I will play as long as the national team needs me," he said.

The 2022 VNL takes place in Canada, Brazil, the Philippines, and Bulgaria from June 8 until July 24.

XINHUA

Spike in fortunes



China's Li Yingying rises for a spike during a Volleyball Nations League match against the Netherlands in Ankara, Turkey, on Wednesday. China, featuring a new-look lineup in the wake of the team's failure to reach the second round at last summer's Tokyo Olympics, lost the first set but came back to win 16-25, 25-22, 25-23, 25-23. The VNL is new head coach Cai Bin's first international tournament in charge after he succeeded the legendary Lang Ping following the Olympics. XINHUA