



From left to right: Zhou Yan (curling), Zhong Hongyan (canoeing), Gong Ruina (badminton) and Han Xiaopeng (skiing), in discussion with their teacher during an English class at the University of Wisconsin in the US. They were among 16 medal-winning athletes from 2008 Olympic Games, taking part in the university's 10-month-long "China Champions" program.

# Athletes feel English gives them inside track

Communication is vital for sports stars with global ambitions, report **Yu Yilei** and **Peng Yining** in Beijing and **Sun Xiaochen** in London.

After winning the Laser Radial gold medal at the London Games, Xu Lijia, 24, gave an interview to the BBC in English. She thanked people for their support in a fluent and confident manner. "I gave my best for the world and my country, China."

Xu is no stranger to success having won bronze at the Beijing Games in 2008. Nor is she a stranger to the English language and she is a leading figure among Chinese athletes eager to learn the world's most widely spoken language.

"Sailing has never been that popular in China. I've learned most of my skills and got most of my information through English," Xu said. "I wouldn't have won without learning the language. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that language learning has marked every progression in my career."

Reading in English has become part of a daily routine for Xu, who was born and raised in Shanghai. In her backpack there is always room for an English-language novel, perhaps a best-selling self-help book. She is currently reading *Close to the Wind*, the autobiography of British Olympic sailor Ben Ainslie, with marks and notes on almost every page.

Tellingly, the sentence, "When I am racing, I commit my all, body and soul, and nothing else matters," is highlighted in Xu's copy of the book.

"As more and more Chinese athletes display their talents overseas, the enthusiasm for learning English has grown in China's sporting centers," said Li Quanhai, deputy director of the China Aquatic Sports Administrative Center. "We encourage athletes to learn English and provide as many opportunities to learn as we can."

Since 2004, more than 1,000 athletes from 29 national and provincial teams across the sporting board — including the Olympic gold medal-winning gymnast Li Xiaopeng, the swimmer Luo Xuejuan and the table tennis player Zhang Yining — have participated in the English-language program provided by the Chinese Athletes' Educational Foundation. The athletes are coached by professional teachers, some of whom are native English speakers, in their classes every week. They are also encouraged to obtain a language qualification from Trinity College London, an international exam board whose certificate is recognized by colleges, universities and employers worldwide.

In 2012, 61 athletes passed the Trinity examination, with 17 of them earning an "A" grade, according to the CAEF. In addition to the program, Li said the national sports teams regularly use English in their training sessions and daily lives.

A whiteboard with the slogan "New Words for Today" hangs in the lobby of the dormitory used by China's yachting and sailing athletes. With words such as "Upwind", "Downwind", "Starboard", "Port", the board helps the competitors to learn sporting terms as well as commonplace expressions.

Meanwhile, the Chinese national table tennis team has paper tapes bearing English phrases pasted in its players' dormitories, canteen and training area. The tapes employ the sort of sentences and phrases frequently used in interviews, such as "It's the best day of my life" or "I enjoy table tennis."

"It's not just about talking fluently in front of the cameras," said Li. "Sometimes your English skills can even affect the result of the race."

Two interpreters accompanied China's yachting and sailing team to London, but Li said the athletes had to depend on their own language skills most of the time. In every international match, the weather reports and other essential race information are in English. Once offshore, the sailors have to communicate with the judges and rival competitors in English.

"If you are on a convergent course with another boat, you need to hail loudly to make clear your understanding of the situation and your intentions. Just as important, you may need to defend yourself at race hearings, where a rival competitor may be protesting at your actions. An inadequate command of English may mean that you don't put your case forward effectively and could result in you losing points and the race," said Li.

That message was driven home to Xu when she found herself in a hearing during an international race in 2002, at age 14. "With our broken English, we couldn't even describe clearly what had really happened out on the water, and if you lose the protest, you might lose your score," said Xu. "Since then I've realized how important the language is."

Now, every night after her backbreaking training sessions, Xu spends two to five hours learning English by reading and



Top: Li Na being interviewed during the 2011 Rogers Cup in Montreal, Canada. Above: Huang Xuechen (left) and Liu Ou on the podium after winning bronze in the synchronized swimming competition at the 2012 Olympic Games.

reciting material. After eight years, she has memorized all four volumes of *New Concept English*, one of the most popular English-language textbooks in China, which includes more than 200 essays and extracts from classic English literature. "Sometimes, I recited so much that my throat was sore," she said.

After winning the gold medal in London, Xu used English during an interview with China Central Television as she narrated a video of herself approaching the finishing line in the Olympic final. "Now let's take a close look at how Lijia is steering her boat and surfing the wave," she said to the camera, without recourse to a teleprompter or other aids. She was later interviewed by CCTV's English-language channel and the foreign media.

"Reporters love her," said Li. "She is one of the few Chinese athletes able to freely express themselves in English. Through English, Xu has learned a lot about the world and vice versa."

Li believes that Xu's superior English skills could see her altering the stereotypical image of Chinese athletes, by helping the world to understand more about them, he said.

Instead of mechanically answering "Yes" or "No", many Chinese athletes are now able to talk about themselves and their careers in greater depth. They have a passion for life and sports and have demonstrated that they are not simply "medal machines", according to Li.

## Outside sports

Highly developed language skills can also provide a brighter future for athletes when they retire, said Huang Xuechen, who won bronze and silver medals in the synchronized swimming events at the London Games.

"My life is not just about swimming. I am going to retire someday, and by then, my English skills might help me find a new job or apply for a college overseas," said Huang.

She admitted that she is still working on her English, but is able to conduct basic interviews with the foreign media. In addition to taking advantage of the English-learning programs provided by the General Administration of Sport, she has been teaching herself by surfing English-language websites.

"After training and practice every day, learning English is actually a good way to relax," she said.

Xu's language skills have also been welcomed by The International Sailing Federation. She said international sporting organizations are eager to work with people with different language skills, and upon retirement she would be delighted to join the federation and dedicate the rest of her life to sailing.

Away from the Olympics, China's top-ranked tennis player Li Na has also impressed the world with her proficiency in English. "Before this tournament, people said I couldn't do well on clay courts. Now I think

they will change their minds," said Li in English after winning the French Open championship in 2011 and becoming Asia's first Grand Slam champion.

As international brands chase the Chinese market, sports stars capable of boasting an international image are in a seller's market.

"She (Li Na) speaks English, she has a great personality, and she's a champion in a sport that China has traditionally not dominated. And with (basketball star) Yao Ming retiring, that leaves a big hole," commented Terry Rhoads, former head of sports marketing at Nike, in an interview with the British newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*. "She is also a great ambassador, very pleasant and very interesting. That has a positive effect on the way that people see China and makes Chinese people feel very proud."

The legendary table tennis player, Deng Yaping, who won six world championships and four Olympic gold medals, began learning English in 1997 at the ripe old age of 24. In Moscow in 2001, she made the final presentation for Beijing's bid for the 2008 Olympic Games in English, and took a lead role in winning the bid.

Subsequently, Deng received a master's degree from the University of Nottingham in 2002 and a PhD from the University of Cambridge in 2008.

She talked about learning the language in a speech delivered in English at Tsinghua University in Beijing, where she studied for her bachelor's degree. She told the audience that learning the language had not been easy, but the secret of her success came from establishing her goal, being confident and, just as in the field of sports, plenty of "practice, practice, practice."

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Xu Lijia

## A life on the ocean wave

By **PENG YINING**  
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Xu Lijia started her sporting life as a swimmer at age 6, but switched to sailing four years later.

"It was fascinating when I was first introduced to sailing. It was so much fun sailing on the ocean, compared with swimming back and forth in a small pool," she said.

After winning several world championships, in 2002 she was forced to take six months away from the sport after surgery to remove a tumor on her left thighbone. The hiatus made her realize how much she loves sailing. "During the break, I found myself missing sailing every day. I can't live without it," she said. "I love being free on the ocean."

The recovery period gave Xu extra time to learn English. "Once I decided to dedicate my life to sailing, learning English was the first thing I needed to do," she said.

The sport originated in Western countries, according to Xu, so learning English not only helped to improve her race performances, but also allowed her to enjoy the Western culture associated with the sailing.

"I like Western food. I hang out with foreign competitors and enjoy traveling in foreign countries," she said. "My English skills help me to enjoy sailing as a part of my life."