

BASKETBALL

Three the magic number for Yao

CBA chief urges China to target glory in burgeoning 3x3 game

By SHI FUTIAN
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Yao Ming reckons 3x3 basketball offers China a special chance to shine in the sport.

The Chinese Basketball Association is building toward 3x3's Olympic debut at Tokyo 2020 by staging a national 3x3 tournament, which is open to amateurs and professionals alike and offers members of the winning team the chance to play at the Games.

Speaking at a media conference for the Road to Olympics — National 3x3 Basketball Tournament in Beijing, Yao, an eight-time NBA All-Star who was elected to the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame as a center, joked he might come out of retirement to play point guard.

On a more serious note, the CBA president believes 3x3 has opened a new window of opportunity for Chinese basketball because, unlike the traditional five-on-five game, it is new to almost all countries.

"The first Olympic basketball tournament was at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, and after almost 30 years of development 3x3 basketball was announced to join the 2020 Summer Olympics, reshaping the history of the sport," Yao said.

"Through the new national tournament, lots of young athletes will have the chance to compete in the Olympics. This is a new start for Chinese basketball. By establishing this system early, we will achieve better results for the future of the sport," Yao said.

As the exclusive business partner, Infront China is responsible for the business

development of the nationwide tournament, which was launched in November.

The inaugural tournament includes qualifying, provincial and regional rounds, a north-south championship and the final national championship, in late April.

The tournament also fits into China's National Fitness Program, which is tasked with increasing the nation's participation in grassroots sports.

"We want to connect the National Fitness Program with the Olympics to give it new energy," said Yao.

"Through the Road to Olympics platform everyone can have a chance to display their skills, which can greatly benefit the nation's fitness."



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Yao Ming, Chinese Basketball Association president

Infront, a world-renowned sports marketing company with headquarters in Zug, Switzerland, is confident it can make the tournament its latest success story in Chinese basketball.

Infront China's involvement with the national team and the CBA has resulted in record levels of television coverage and sponsorship.

"We have been closely cooperating with Chinese basketball for 13 years, and we have made extraordinary contributions to the development of the Chinese basketball market," said Anne Zhao, managing director of Beijing-based Infront China.

"The new cooperation on the 3x3 basketball tournament is the latest milestone of our long-term partnership. We will try our best to make a new and healthy contribution to promote the development of the 3x3 basketball in China."

Gettin' their kicks



China (red) defeated South Korea to win the women's team crown at the WT World Cup team taekwondo championships in Wuxi, Jiangsu province, on Saturday. Five-member Team China disposed of the Koreans 53-17. China also won the mixed team title, beating Russia 19-18 in a tiebreaker after the two sides played to a 18-18 draw in regulation time. Iran won the men's team title, beating China 76-56 at Wuxi Taihu International Expo Center. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

GOLF

Li living dream after Dubai win

By SHI FUTIAN
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Li Haotong is poised for a rocket ride up the world golf rankings.

"Last night, my phone was exploding. Seriously. And there were so many messages saying 'Oh, Haotong', on the website or whatever," the 22-year-old from Hunan province said after holding off four-time major winner Rory McIlroy to win the Omega Dubai Desert Classic by a single stroke on Sunday, denying the Northern Irishman's bid to win his first title in 17 months.

Li claimed his first European Tour title at the China Open in 2016 and then stunned the golf world with an impressive third-place finish at last year's British Open.

"This is truly an amazing and brilliant victory, and congratulations to Li," fellow Chinese pro Wu Ashun posted on Weibo.

Li notched a tournament record 23-under 265 after a 3-under 69 in the final round to edge McIlroy, who also shot a 69 on Sunday.

A 10-foot birdie putt on the 15th set the stage for Li's victory, but McIlroy ramped up the pressure by taking just two



Li Haotong celebrates his one-shot victory over Rory McIlroy at the Dubai Desert Classic on Sunday. AFP

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Li Haotong, after winning the Dubai Desert Classic

shots to reach the green on the par-5 18th.

The first Asian to win the event, Li pocketed about \$500,000 for the biggest victory of his young career. His second championship on the European Tour is likely to push him to No 32 in the world rankings — the first

male golfer from China to break into the world's top 50.

"I don't have many trophies at home, so I was quite happy to lift that heavy thing!" Li said. "I just didn't realize I could make that putt on 15 — that was huge. I think that was the turning point."

"On the last four holes I

made some of the best shots of my life. I think my game is in a good position now."

Li turned professional in 2011 on the OneAsia Tour and PGA Tour of Australasia. On May 1, 2016, he captured his first European Tour victory at the Volvo China Open.

In 2017, Li mainly played on the European Tour, and also had some breakthroughs at the majors. A low point came last June when he threw his putter in a lake in frustration at the French Open, only for it to be fished out by his mother.

None of that mattered in Dubai, where McIlroy was frustrated by what he called "mental errors."

"It was a couple of bad shots, a couple of poor decisions, a couple of mental errors, a few tentative putts," said McIlroy.

"I kept leaving myself in places where I couldn't really give the ball a run at the hole because the shots were downhill, downgrain, downwind."

"If someone had told me at the start of the year I would finish third and second in my first two events, I would have said, 'Yeah, I'll take that.' But being in the positions I've been in and having two close calls it's a little difficult."

"The competitor in me is very disappointed right now."

World Cup a benchmark for reforms

Yao Ming expects his reforms of Chinese basketball to start paying off by 2019 when China hosts the FIBA World Cup.

Since becoming president of the Chinese Basketball Association in early 2017, the eight-time NBA All-Star has introduced a number of measures designed to reinvigorate the CBA and the national team.

Eight Chinese cities will host the World Cup from Aug 31-Sept 15 next year, when Yao hopes to see a marked improvement from the national team.

"Hosting the World Cup will inject a cardiac stimulant into Chinese basketball and make the sport develop in all aspects," said Yao at an unveiling ceremony for the tournament's mascot finalists in Wuhan.

The 37-year-old, though, cautioned that the reforms were still in their infancy.

"Before we choose the road for development, we need to make sure what fits us most and what prerequisites we need," he added.

Of all his changes, the creation of two national teams, each with an independent coaching staff and roster, to alternately represent China at international events through 2018 has attracted the most headlines.

The move aims to better encourage up-and-coming talent and, in turn, create more competition for places as the squads work toward merging for the FIBA World Cup and the

men's mascot finalists in Wuhan.

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Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

Yao also said that some university players have been allowed to play in the CBA All-Star Game because the CBA hopes to whip up basketball fever in Chinese schools and select more young players.

"Basketball faces stiff competition from sectors such as electronics sports in attracting the young generation," he said.

"That's why we will encourage Chinese basketball to continue its cooperation with the education and entertainment sectors to create a platform where kids can enjoy learning different things simultaneously."

XINHUA

EXTREME SPORTS

Ultra-runner Bai to take on epic Pole-to-Pole challenge

By XINHUA

Chinese ultra-runner Bai Bin, 48, has unveiled plans to run from the South Pole to the North Pole, covering a distance of approximately 24,000 kilometers in around 300 days.

Bai, a native of Guizhou province and a 17-year veteran of the grueling sport, told a media conference in Beijing that the Pole-to-Pole challenge is the most important of his life.

Bai will leave Beijing on Feb 25 for China's Changcheng (Great Wall) Station in



Ultra runner Bai Bin

Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, the United States and Canada.

Bai made history in 2011 when he ran over 10,000 kilometers across six countries and regions in 150 days.

"I run 70-80 kilometers in daily training, and I am confident of making it this time," Bai told Xinhua.

"I hope more people will love this sport," he added.

He also revealed that the expedition will form the basis of a number of kinetics and psychology studies as part of research into running and human endurance.

Feng, Lin light up women's game

By CHINA DAILY

Li Haotong's win in Dubai wasn't the only highlight for Chinese golfers on the weekend.

Women's world No 1 Feng Shanshan maintained her top ranking by finishing third at the LPGA season-opening Pure Silk-Bahamas LPGA Classic.

In 2012 Feng became the first Chinese golfer, male or female, to win a major when she captured the LPGA Championship, and in 2016 she won a bronze medal at the Rio Olympics.

Although Feng failed to clinch the Bahamas title, her poised performance secured her top ranking for an 11th consecutive week and increased her points advantage over world No 2 Park



China's Lin Xiyu (left) won the ALPG Ballarat Icons Pro-am in Australia while compatriot Feng Shanshan was third at the Pure Silk-Bahamas LPGA Classic over the weekend. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Sung-hyun of South Korea.

"I am very lucky to be the world No 1," said Feng, who took over top spot in November and won the Best Breakthrough of the Year honor at the nation's annual Sports Awards, marking the first time

a Chinese golfer won it.

"The award is not only for me, it is also a great honor and a positive sign for Chinese golf. There must be more golf talent coming up from China in the future."

The Bahamas tournament

was shortened to 54 holes because of winds gusting to 45 mph.

With the help of floodlights during the final round at Paradise Island's Ocean's Club, Brittany Lincicome of the US birdied four of the last five holes to shoot 7-under 66 for a 12-under total of 207 that sealed a two-stroke victory over Wie Ling Hsu of Chinese Taipei.

Meanwhile, at the ALPG Ballarat Icons Pro-am in Victoria, Australia, China's Lin Xiyu started her season in style by defeating Lydia Hall of Wales in a sudden-death playoff.

"This is a great boost to start the year with a win. I have been working hard in the off-season and it feels good to play well in the first round of the year," said the 21-year-old Lin.