

YOUTH



At 5 am, it was still dark. On Nov 5, to the rumble of drums, Yao Miao, together with nearly 500 runners, set off through the cold wind and thick fog under the Xingshan Gate in Taizhou, Zhejiang province.

Fifteen hours 8 minutes and 56 seconds later, as the sky returned to darkness, Yao, accompanied by the cheering of spectators on both sides of the road, crossed the finish line.

After 115 kilometers running along the Great Wall, through mountains and bamboo forests, past reservoirs and orchards, Yao won the women's title in the grueling Tsaigu Trail, announcing the return of the ultra-trail queen after a three-year absence from competitive action.

"I feel so great. I haven't had this much fun in a long time," Yao said after the race. Gaining fourth place in the overall rankings means Yao is only behind the top three male runners in the competition. "Everyone should try cross-country running if they have the opportunity, because it's pure and relaxing," she says.

Yao is a junior student majoring in physical education at Central China Normal University in Wuhan, Hubei province. She trains during the day and takes online courses at night.

The 26-year-old athlete, dubbed the "gold medal hunter born in 1996", gained her fame by winning the female category of the 101-km Courmayeur-Champex-Chamonix division, known as the CCC, at the Ultra Trail du Mont-Blanc in September 2018.

She not only became the first Chinese woman to win the competition, one of the world's premier mountain ultras, but also beat the female course record by nearly 20 minutes.

Born in a remote village in Liupanshui, Southwest China's Guizhou province, Yao had little idea about sports in childhood, yet during junior middle school, she had to walk around 8 km each day to and from school.

"When I set off with a couple of schoolmates in the morning, it was still dark and there was no light on the country road back then," Yao recalls.

In 2012, after graduating from junior middle school, she was selected by the local sports school, as coaches saw her potential in running, and she started to train for 3,000-meter and 5,000-meter events.

"Back then, I was slow among my teammates, especially when the whole team was practicing the 100-meter sprint. I was usually the last one to finish," Yao says, adding that the coach then decided to switch her focus to marathons, because



Above: Yao Miao won the women's title in the Tsaigu Trail held in Taizhou, Zhejiang province, last November. **Above left:** Yao competes in a mountain running race held in Jinsha county, Guizhou province, in September 2016. **Above right:** Yao endures harsh conditions in a cross-country race held in Daocheng county, Sichuan province, in April 2018. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



of her physical condition. Failing to complete the course at the 2019 UTMB hit Yao hard and it led to a temporary absence from cross-country running for Yao. "I was well-prepared and quite confident for the UTMB, and the withdrawing from the race hurt me so much that I decided to turn to marathons, to run in another way," she says.

Qi thought that Yao had run too fast during the first part of the competition, and her body was too exhausted, causing her vision to suffer.

During each competition, Qi will wait ahead at each supply station to talk to Yao, give her instructions for the next stage and inform her about her position in the race.

Qi, 34, says that Yao is not a naturally gifted athlete, but earns her results through hard work. According to him, to prepare for a race, Yao would train by running 1,000 km a month. "She is not nervous before an event, and she is mentally tough," Qi says.

"Unlike marathons, which are an Olympic event and have more professional instruction, for cross-country running, we need to figure out how to train and race by ourselves," he says.

According to Qi, muscle usage is different between marathons and cross-country running, so he adjusts Yao's training plan accordingly.

"She is ready to return to the UTMB race this year," Qi says.

After leaving ultra running and competing in marathons for three years, Yao has found that she is still passionate for long-distance running.

In the 2022 CCC division of the UTMB in August, French runner Blandine L'Hirondel broke Yao's trail record and won in 11 hours 40 minutes and 55 seconds.

Yao is glad to see her record broken after four years, as she believes it shows that female runners are getting stronger and faster. "I'm looking forward to meeting her on the trail," Yao says.

At the finish line of the Tsaigu Trail, Yao said she had been feeling philosophical about cross-country running, realizing that it echoes her idea about the meaning of life — it is a journey of happiness, suffering and enjoyment.

"The cross-country track is rugged and changeable, which, like the path of our lives, will not always be wide and smooth, but I want to keep running," she says, adding that, regardless of the conditions, she will persist, because we never know what's waiting around the next corner.

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Long-distance running queen reigns again

After an injury layoff, ultramarathon specialist returns to action in a bid to conquer the courses, report **Li Yingxue** and **Liu Kun** in Wuhan.

she showed good levels of endurance.

After four years of training and joining multiple competitions, Yao graduated from the sports school, but had no clear plan for the future. She worked as a trainee at her sister's beauty parlor in the morning and distributed leaflets for a gym in the afternoon.

During that time, as she didn't want to give up running, Yao had to get up at 5 am to train by herself before the busy working day started.

A month later, Yao realized that it was running that she was most passionate about and decided to become a full-time athlete, taking part in marathons and cross-country running competitions around the country, even though she had no coach and no sponsor.

At the end of 2016, she met Qi Min, another runner and coach from Southwest China's Yunnan province, at a competition and, the next year, Qi took Yao under his wing. After meticulous training scheduled by Qi, Yao's running performances started to improve and she began regularly appearing on podiums.

Her breakthrough year, however, was 2018. In January, she took part in the Hong Kong 100, a 100-km ultramarathon considered to be one of Asia's most competitive. She not



Yao, crossing the finish line of the Tsaigu Trail, is greeted by cheering spectators.

only won the race, but also smashed the competition's female course record by 40 minutes.

"That was the competition that I gained wide attention in the ultra running field," Yao recalls.

In June, she participated in her first overseas competition, the 120-km Laredo Ultra Trail in Italy. Yao finished second. She built a big lead in the first half of the race, but was passed by another competitor on the final descent.

"I started losing my vision in the middle of the race and I could not see the surface of the trail clearly," Yao recalls.

Three months later, she produced a remarkable performance at the UTMB and produced a dominant win in 11 hours 57 minutes and 46 seconds, more than 30 minutes ahead of the second-placed runner.

"I was quite excited when crossing the finish line, because it proves that Chinese athletes can stand at the top of the podium in cross-country running," Yao says.

In 2019, she took part in the 170-km race at the UTMB, the longest distance of the event, for the first time with confidence and ambition.

The race, on a brutal course, started at 6 pm. After a night's running, when the sun came up, her vision began to blur, and she finally had to drop out of the race because

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Yao Miao, endurance runner

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