

# Glory days may be over in volleyball

## WOMEN'S TEAM APPEARS TO BE IN DECLINE AFTER A DECADE OF DOMINATION ON WORLD STAGE

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CHINA DAILY

BEIJING — Chinese fans got used to watching the women's volleyball team gaining glory on international stage while the nation's basketball and soccer teams struggled.

However, the glory days may be at an end.

The women's volleyball team, which dominated the world by winning World Cup, World Championship and Olympic titles in the 1980s, hit rock bottom at the just-concluded World Championship when it failed to reach the quarterfinals.

It was a huge blow to its preparations for the Asian Games.

China has won the past three Asian Games titles but a series of setbacks in international competitions and trouble between the players and coaches have cast increasing doubts over its chances of defending the crown.

China has struggled since winning gold at the 2004 Athens Games. The team has seen a number of head coaches come and go amid rumors that the national players are divided into two groups and have no respect for each other or the coaches.

"Both the players and I have huge pressure coming into the games," said coach Yu Juejin. "Women's volleyball has a glorious tradition and the fans have high expectations of us. We have no choice but to win the title in Guangzhou," Yu said.

"But we have to face the truth that there are some problems in the team. We have some veterans with injuries and young players who are not consistent on the court."

China now seems to be paying for its lack of effort to develop young players after the 2004 Olympics and has apparently lost its overwhelming advantage in Asia.

"We are no longer in the world's elite club any more. We are struggling and slumping," said Yu.

The nation's biggest setback came in last year's Asian Championship final, where it was shocked by Thailand.

According to a poll on sports.sina.com.cn, China's leading portal, half of the respondents said the women's team was no longer a world powerhouse.

One third of respondents said



TORU HANAI / REUTERS

China's Wang Yimei spikes the ball against Japan's Megumi Kurihara during their second-round match at the FIVB Women's Volleyball World Championship in Tokyo on Nov 6.

China would not successfully defend its title in Guangzhou.

CCTV commentator Hong Gao said China lost most of its awe after a 3-0 group loss to Russia at the World Championship.

"We have no superior spike or advantage at the net. We have lost the defense and the techniques in set-up and transition. We have lost everything that our former team used to boast," Hong said.

China's slump has boosted hopes of the Republic of Korea (ROK) standing atop the podium.

"We are growing up and the gap between China and us is getting smaller," said ROK head coach, Park Sam-ryong, whose side beat China at last week's World Championship. "The chance to beat China is right ahead of us. We have the confidence to win at the Asian Games. We plan to beat every opponent and take the Asian Games title."

Apart from ROK, China will also have to play up to its best against dangerous teams like Japan and Thailand.

### Bigger challenge for men

The China men's volleyball team faces greater difficulties against key rivals Iran, ROK and Japan.

"There are four to five teams which have the chance to win the title," said head coach Zhou Jian'an. "China is one of them and aims to win."

China, which has won three of the past nine Asian Games titles, was defeated by ROK at the last Asiad in Doha and now finds Iran and Japan are rising rapidly and will now present other hurdles.

Previous Asian Games had been dominated by the East Asian trio of China, Japan and ROK, but rising Iran is set to buck the trend.

Similar to European players, Iranians boast superior height, strength and jumping ability over their Asian opponents and won the Asian Championship in August by beating China in the final.

Japan, which boasts six Asian Championship titles and one Olympic gold medal, is a traditional powerhouse in the continent and goes flat out every time it meets China.

Japan advanced to the second round of last month's World Championship while China was knocked at the group after three straight losses, finishing in a historic low 19th place.

"You have to take the pressure being a coach. We didn't play good at the World Championship. But we compete on home soil at the Asian Games and must win the championship," said Zhou.

### PAST RECORD >> ASIAN GAMES

MEN	
2006	Silver
2002	4th
1998	Gold
1994	Silver
1990	Gold
1986	Gold
1982	Silver
1978	Bronze
1974	Bronze
WOMEN	
2006	Gold
2002	Gold
1998	Gold
1994	Silver
1990	Gold
1986	Gold
1982	Gold
1978	Silver
1974	Bronze