

SPORTS

BASKETBALL



Yang Hansen dons a Memphis Grizzlies cap as he walks on stage after being selected 16th in the first round of the NBA Draft on Wednesday in New York. The big Chinese center was a surprise early pick, and is headed to the Trail Blazers after Portland struck a deal with the Grizzlies. AP



Yang Hansen shakes hands with NBA commissioner Adam Silver after being drafted 16th overall by Portland on Wednesday. AFP

By SUN XIAOCHEN
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His face lit up, eyes wide open, and the whole country went as wild as Yang Hansen did. Soaked in huge disbelief and excitement, it was a historic night for not only the young center's budding career, but also the future of Chinese basketball.

Unexpected, yet making total sense, Yang was drafted into the NBA in the first round at the 2025 NBA Draft on Wednesday night in Brooklyn, New York. The Portland Trail Blazers, using a trade from Memphis, selected the Qingdao Eagles star with the 16th pick overall, leaving the nation celebrating an NBA Draft pick for the first time in nine years.

It caught the entire Chinese hoops community off guard when the Trail Blazers staked their claim on the talented youngster much earlier than his projected second-round slot.

Hearing his name called by league commissioner Adam Silver amid worldwide attention, Yang took a few seconds to gather his poise, tidied up his suit before proudly stepping on his dream stage to rapturous applause at the Barclays Center, and the nationwide cheers from across the Pacific.

The 7-foot-1 (2.16-meter) center from East China's Shandong province has etched his name in history by becoming only the third Chinese first-round pick into the league, following in the footsteps of legend Yao Ming (1st in 2002) and retired star Yi Jianlian (6th in 2007), and by being the first selected since his national teammate Zhou Qi was picked at 43rd overall in 2016 by the

Yang blazes trail to NBA

Surprise as China's "Baby Jokic" drafted early in first round

Houston Rockets.

And there was no better occasion than on the eve of his 20th birthday to realize his long-cherished NBA dream, with Yang due to celebrate the milestone on Thursday in the States.

"To be honest, I felt a bit sleepy (waiting in the crowd) at that moment, and suddenly all the cameras moved toward me. And I was like: 'This can't be happening.' I wasn't expecting it this early," Yang confessed in an ESPN interview.

"My legs felt numb (walking down the steps) and I couldn't believe I was shaking hands with the commissioner already.

"It's a dream come true — earlier than I thought — to be honest," said Yang, who's played two years as pro for the Eagles, his hometown club in the Chinese Basketball Association.

Long considered China's "next big thing" destined for the NBA, Yang had prepared thoroughly for almost every scenario with the draft, supported by his CBA club, family, his Chinese agent and promoted by Los Angeles-based agency Klutch Sports Group, yet still didn't quite anticipate securing an NBA franchise spot so early.

But for some, it wasn't a surprise at all, as it turns out.

"We've been scouting him deeply for almost two years now ... He was the target," Portland's general manager Joe Cronin said after the draft when asked about the trade with Memphis to get the opportunity to pick Yang.



Yang Hansen reacts to his earlier-than-expected pick by the Portland Trail Blazers in the first round of the NBA Draft in New York on Wednesday. AP

"For us it was so important to get him. So, we decided to do what some would say 'reach'. We decided to take that swing and over-draft, technically, a player that we really valued."

Now, it all makes perfect sense that it was Portland that was the first franchise to invite Yang to an individual workout on May 28, right after the Draft Combine in Chicago. And, apparently it was the first

among all NBA clubs to send scouts to study Yang's form in the CBA — as early as late 2023.

Not everyone in Portland was happy about what some fans described a "gamble", but Cronin insisted that Yang's huge potential, which fits in today's all-around game, will pay dividends in the long run.

"He's a very capable player, a very talented young man that has a

bright future. I would just ask (people to) give him time, let him settle in and watch him grow. I think everyone will be positively surprised," he said.

"His skillset is very advanced for his age, and he's mature physically ... he can withstand the strength of the NBA guys.

"His ceiling is very high. It's extremely difficult to find a young player of that stature with that skill-set. It might take him some time, but, as he figures out the speed and pace in our game, I wouldn't put a ceiling on him. He's that talented."

Joining Yang at the draft were his parents, Yang Lin and Zhu Jing, his Chinese agent Ma Jie, and translator and assistant Liu Yucheng, who all attributed Yang's successful draft campaign to his talent, work ethic, discipline and charming character.

"We hope he can play hard here and win honor for our country," Yang's mother Zhu summed-up her hopes for her son.

"He's earned it, and he deserves it," said Yang's agent Ma. "It's not just his own honor, it's also a celebrated moment for Chinese basketball, particularly during a tough period."

Since the retirement of the golden generation led by Yao, an eight-time NBA All-Star, no Chinese player has made a consistent impact in the NBA, with international results of the Chinese national team also suffering a sharp decline, failing to qualify for the last

two Olympic Games.

The emergence of Yang's peers, including another young hopeful Cui Yongxi, who was signed by the Brooklyn Nets last year, but was later released due to a knee injury, has rekindled new hopes that the Chinese men's program can stand tall again, with key players honing their talent overseas.

In his first year in the CBA, Yang was named the 2023-24 season's Defensive Player of the Year and Rookie of the Year, while also making the league's All-Star team and being named to the Domestic First Team. Yang was again named an All-Star and received First Team honors in the 2024-25 CBA season, where he averaged 16.6 points, 10.5 rebounds, three assists and 2.6 blocks per game in 45 starts, leading the 8th-seeded Eagles into the play-off quarterfinals.

Dubbed "Baby Jokic" by his Chinese fans, Yang put his intriguing blend of size, skills and basketball IQ on display under the watchful eyes of club staff, and turned heads during his US training trip for the resemblance of his game to the versatile "point-center" role of Denver Nuggets' three-time league MVP Nikola Jokic.

The Trail Blazers, though, will provide time and patience for their own play-making big man to grow.

"Nobody is Jokic, they're big shoes to fill," said Cronin.

"There will be adjustments for him to make, just like all the other guys drafted tonight, but it will be our job to prepare him and get him there as quickly, and as well, as possible. We're excited to have this opportunity to grow him into a good player."

TENNIS



Zheng Qinwen (left), Wang Xinyu (center), and Buyunchaokete will all be vying for grass-court glory at the All England Club when Wimbledon's main draw opens on Monday. AP / XINHUA

China's aces hoping for a long run on the lawns of London

By SUN XIAOCHEN

With the country's top-two aces both enjoying quite a positive warm-up on grass, tennis fans in China are eager to tune in and, perhaps, witness the nation's best Wimbledon campaign in years.

A semifinal run by world No 5 Zheng Qinwen, followed by a career-first final appearance of 33rd-ranked Wang Xinyu, both at recent grass-court WTA 500 events, have sent an encouraging signal leading up to the season's third major — China's current best have finally found their feet on the tricky surface and are ready to try to match their predecessors' heroics at the prestigious All England Club.

Despite being outranked by reigning

Olympic champion Zheng, the 23-year-old Wang has emerged as a red-hot contender at this year's Wimbledon, which swings off main draw action on Monday, after she stunned four top-20 opponents in a row, including world No 2 and Roland Garros winner Coco Gauff, en route to the final at last week's Berlin Open — setting down a clear marker about her new-found confidence on grass.

Although not seeded in the 128-player draw, Wang believes her breakout week in the German capital could help unleash more of her power on the lawns of London at her fourth Wimbledon appearance.

"I think it's definitely a big encouragement for me to achieve such a breakthrough last week," said

Wang, who was eventually edged out 2-1 by 2023 Wimbledon champion Marketa Vondrousova in the Berlin final to miss out on a first WTA singles title.

"Perhaps I wouldn't say it before last week, but if you ask me now, I'd pick grass as my favorite surface.

"To be able to hang in there, compete toe-to-toe against such a great player on grass — a former Wimbledon champion — and push her hard in such a close match, I think it says a lot about my improvement on grass as well," said Wang, who squandered a huge 6-2 lead in the critical first-set tiebreak to eventually come up short against the Czech ace.

Wang's previous best at Wimbledon was last year's round-of-16

appearance, her deepest run at any Slam, and the same distance she reached on the hard courts of the 2023 US Open.

She's skipped this week's Bad Homburg Open, also in Germany, to focus on fine-tuning her moves, fast-paced returns and serves on grass to prepare for Wimbledon.

"I have to keep it secret, though," Wang said of her recent technical drills during an online interview with Chinese media on Wednesday.

Wang has also become the first ever Chinese woman to reach the final of a WTA 500 grass-court tournament, as retired stars Li Na, Zheng Jie and veteran Zhang Shuai all made grass-court finals, but only at WTA 250 level.

At Wimbledon Zheng Jie reached

the semifinals in 2008, becoming the first Chinese player, man or woman, to fight into the final-four at a Slam, while two-time major winner Li (2011 French Open and 2014 Australian Open) made it to the quarters three times in 2006, 2010 and 2013.

Zhang was the last Chinese player to reach the quarters in 2019, and no other has gone beyond that mark since then.

Apparently not as dangerous on grass as she is on hard courts and clay, China's 5th seed Zheng Qinwen remains a force to be reckoned with, having shown impressive recent form of her own on grass by reaching the HSBC Championship final at the Queen's Club two weeks ago.

With a final run at last year's Aus-

tralian Open and a gold-medal finish at the Paris Olympics, Zheng is fired up and ready to back up her elite credentials on all surfaces, with this year's Wimbledon a fitting opportunity to prove it.

The 22-year-old's best result at Wimbledon was a third-round run on her tournament debut in 2022.

China's world No 82 Yuan Yue has also qualified for the women's main draw through ranking, while 307th-ranked Zhu Lin will appear in the main draw as well, via the protected ranking policy.

In the men's draw, world No 69 Buyunchaokete will be the sole Chinese representative, with higher-profile aces Zhang Zhizhen and Shang Juncheng both having withdrawn due to injuries.