

## Sports

# Debacle on ice: Strange journey of China's Olympic hockey team

## NHL players to skip Beijing on pandemic concerns

SHANGHAI: The Chinese men's hockey team were lined up as lambs to the slaughter for the NHL's stars and nearly barred from their own Olympics. Now, against all hope, they just might not get blown off the ice. Before the puck is even dropped at centre ice in Beijing next week, the mixed squad of Chinese and foreign-born players will have already experienced Olympic-level ups and downs in one of the strangest team journeys to a Games.

The latest twist came last month when the National Hockey League (NHL) said its players would skip Beijing on pandemic concerns, sparing China potential humiliation on home ice—the hosts are grouped with Canada, the United States and 2018 silver medalists Germany. That's a loss for the Olympics but a boon for the Chinese team on their debut at the Games, said Li Longmou, a hockey commentator who will call matches for state broadcaster CCTV. "It's good for the Chinese team because they may get better results," Li said.

### 'Will they finally win?'

Winter sports are in their infancy in China and hockey has been starved of state investment compared to football and basketball, said Li. When Beijing was awarded the Games in 2015, Chinese sports officials realized they faced embarrassment in one of the marquee events. So a professional team was created to compete in the Kontinental Hockey League, Russia's top professional competition and widely considered the world's second-best after the NHL, to serve as a sort of training camp for the national players. China bolstered the team, called Kunlun Red Star, with Canadian and American players of Chinese descent, some of whom had played sparingly in the NHL or other pro leagues.

Several are expected to suit up in Beijing via undisclosed citizenship arrangements reached with

China. But things haven't gone so well with Kunlun Red Star. The team have never posted a winning record since debuting in 2016, finishing each season at or near the bottom of the league. With the KHL season pausing for the Olympics, Red Star's record is a woeful 9-39. "Will Red Star finally get a win?" the league's own website asked in a despairing headline.

### 'Not good for hockey'

The dismal showing nearly put China's Olympic dreams on ice. Governing body the International Ice Hockey Federation said in late September that China, ranked 32 in the world, were so bad that they might be barred from Beijing despite the automatic berth typically extended to hosts. "Watching a team being beaten 15-0 is not good for anyone, not for China or for ice hockey," IIHF president Luc Tardif told AFP in an interview at the time. The squad was given until October to prove its mettle, but didn't exactly dazzle, managing two wins, nine losses and ending the month with an 8-0 drubbing at the hands of another losing team.

Still, the IIHF announced soon after that China could take the ice in Beijing. More good news came in December with the announcement that Connor McDavid, Alex Ovechkin and other NHL luminaries would be absent. "That dramatically changes things" said Mark Dreyer, a Beijing-based China sports analyst. China will still struggle to win a game "but the scores are not going to be nearly as bad as people were predicting," he said.

The team and individual players did not reply to AFP requests for comment. China has stated that it hopes the Beijing Games will fuel growth in all winter sports in the country, and Li said a decent performance in the rink could do much for hockey. "For some (Chinese), how much they like a sport is determined by the performance of the national team



BEIJING: In this file photo, Liu Zihao (left) of Beijing Arcfox and Zhang Zhuo of Beijing Shougang vie for the puck during an ice hockey match - part of a Beijing 2022 Olympic Games test event, at the Wukesong Sports Centre in Beijing. —AFP

at the Winter Olympics." A better Chinese performance could mean "more media attention and more sports fans may start to like ice hockey", Li said.

### 'Right direction'

Still, hockey faces hurdles in China in the longer term. Li estimates there are only about 5,000 youths playing regularly in the huge country. Dreyer said the NHL is "missing a massive opportunity" to

promote hockey in China's untapped market, having invested far less than other foreign sports leagues. Without the luxury of an automatic berth in the future, it's hard to say when China might next qualify for the Olympics. But Dreyer says noticeably larger numbers of Chinese are taking up the sport, at least in the capital. "The growth of ice hockey in China is definitely moving in the right direction," he said. "There's a lot of good organic growth." —AFP

## No slogans: Beijing curbs enthusiasm for Olympics

BEIJING: When Beijing won the bid for the 2008 Summer Olympics, crowds poured onto the streets of the Chinese capital bursting with national pride. Two decades later, locals are noticeably lukewarm about the Winter Games. The build-up to the Beijing Winter Olympics, which start next Friday, has been largely muted, with an absence of the ubiquitous slogans, extravagant floral arrangements and flags from last time. "The enthusiasm is not as strong as in 2008," said one Beijinger surnamed Liu, who preferred not to give his full name. Winter Games generally attract less attention than Summer ones, but the apparent ennui could also be down to a changing Chinese perception of their country's power.

"In 2008, the economic stature of the country was not yet so high in the world so we thought hosting the Olympics was a symbol of national rebirth," Liu told AFP. "Today, the Games are a sporting event like any other." Since the 2008 Beijing Olympics, China has become the second-largest economy in the world and the warmer image it pushed back then has been replaced by a fiery nationalism. Under President Xi Jinping, China has presented a far more muscular attitude to world affairs.

"2008 really was China showing that it was firmly on the global stage," said Heather Dichter, sports historian at De Montfort University in England. Simon

Chadwick, sports industry expert for Emlyon Business School, said: "It was almost like the relaunch of brand China—it was a coming-out party, it was an announcement that China was back on the global scene. "China perhaps feels less dependent on the rest of the world (now) and in a position of strength, which means that it no longer worries so much about the external gaze."

### Fans and bubbles

In addition, with Beijing 2022 the second Olympics to be held under a coronavirus shadow, measures brought in to ensure that the Games are COVID-safe have left many of the capital's residents feeling locked out. Two years of a global pandemic have upended the organization of all big sports events, but China has maintained a strict "zero-COVID" policy, keeping its borders largely closed since spring 2020.

Beijing is counting on the Games to showcase the success of this approach, which it has repeatedly hailed as mirroring the success of its system of top-down governance. "If there is a resurgence of the epidemic during these Games it will clearly be a failure for China and potentially backfire for Beijing," said Carole Gomez, specialist in sports geopolitics at the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs.

The Games will have no international spectators and only a small number of invited domestic fans. Foreign athletes will be locked in a tight bubble and all Olympic sites are sealed off from the rest of the city. During a recent rehearsal of the opening ceremony at the "Bird's Nest" stadium, police blocked off all the streets leading to the main Olympic Park for as much as a kilometer away. Local Jiang Haoliang told AFP he has little interest in the Olympics. "Most people won't be able to attend in person," he shrugged.

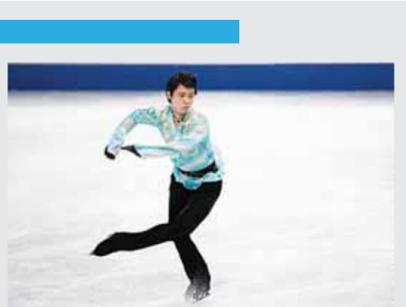


BEIJING: The Olympic Tower adorned with the Olympic Rings is seen near the Main Media Centre (MMC) ahead of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics in the Chinese capital yesterday. —AFP

### 'Ideological heat'

The reduced enthusiasm for the Games might also be down to the simple fact that winter events generally arouse less public interest than Summer Olympics. This is particularly true in China, where government efforts to build interest in winter sports have been ramped up in recent years but started from a nearly non-existent base. And while China is a superpower in the Summer Games, it is a relative minnow in winter sports.

"Winter sports in China tend to be much more the domain of the affluent middle classes," said Chadwick. "For some of the events, like curling, it might be somewhat an esoteric event that doesn't capture the popular imagination the same way." But these Games also land in a very different China to the more outward-facing country from two decades ago. —AFP



SAITAMA: In this file photo, Japan's Yuzuru Hanyu competes in the men's free skate during the 2021-22 Japan Figure Skating Championships at Saitama Super Arena. —AFP

## Japan's 'Ice Prince' Hanyu reigns over Olympic skating

TOKYO: All eyes will be on Yuzuru Hanyu when he attempts to complete a hat-trick of Olympic figure skating golds in Beijing, but don't expect that to bother him—Japan's "Ice Prince" revels in the spotlight. The two-time defending champion will bring his full mega-watt star power to the Winter Games when they begin next week, watched around the world by his adoring legion of "Fanyu" supporters. With his elegant skating style and delicate, boyish looks, the 27-year-old inspires complete devotion among his fans. That extends to them showering the ice with Winnie the Pooh toys after his routines, in a chaotic tribute to the tissue box cover he carries to the rink with him.

But a pandemic-enforced ban on overseas fans at the Beijing Games and limited domestic spectators means Hanyu will be largely going it alone this time. A place in skating immortality awaits if he can rise to the occasion and join 1920s star Gillis Grafstrom of Sweden as the only other man to win three Olympic singles titles. "When you put on the Japan jersey, you have to win," Hanyu said when he was selected for his country after winning the national championships in December. "The Olympics isn't an exhibition—it's a place where you have to win."

### Secret weapon

Now the elder statesman of men's figure skating, Hanyu has been at the top of the sport for almost a decade. He began skating as a child in his native Sendai, in Japan's northeast. When the massive earthquake and tsunami hit the region in 2011, Hanyu was practicing on the ice and was forced to flee the rink on his skates.

He went on to win his first Olympic gold in Sochi in 2014, before becoming the first man in 66 years to defend his title at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games. Hanyu had to overcome an ankle ligament injury to win his second gold, admitting afterwards that he was at barely a quarter of full fitness. He hurt the same ankle again in practice in November last year, forcing him to miss the entire Grand Prix season. But he returned in dazzling style at Japan's national championships in late December, and it was there that he unveiled his secret weapon—the quadruple axel. —AFP

## Ski star Shiffrin aiming for more Olympic gold

YANQING: Mikaela Shiffrin will head to Beijing with a proven Olympic track record and on the back of World Cup form after a tumultuous year that has kept her in the spotlight as one of the world's best alpine skiers. Despite her medal haul, Shiffrin has insisted she keeps her three Olympic medals wrapped in socks and tucked away in a drawer, and only hung up her world championships medals to fill dead wall space.

It is indicative of the American's steel-edged approach to ski racing that has been nurtured from a young age. It is easy to forget that Shiffrin is still only 26 years old, having remarkably won her first world slalom gold in Schladming in 2013 aged just 17, two years after her World Cup debut. The statistics are truly incredible. She went on to win three

more world slalom titles in 2015, 2017 and 2019 as well the 2014 Olympic slalom title before claiming giant slalom gold and combined silver at the Pyeongchang Games in 2018.

Shiffrin, a three-time defending overall champion, has already notched up 73 wins in the World Cup, including 47 in slalom, leaving her within touching distance of retired former US teammate Lindsey Vonn's female record of 82 World Cup wins. She has also racked up victories in the giant slalom (14), combined (one), parallel slalom (four), city event (three), downhill (two) and super-G (four), making her the only skier, male or female, to have won in all FIS disciplines.

### Champion mindset

Coach Mike Day is in no doubt that Shiffrin is one of the greatest ever skiers. "She is an extremely sound skier," Day told AFP in an interview. "She's built her fundamental base at a young age and it's very solid. "She has that champion mindset, the ability to perform on demand, even when she is not at her best she goes out and performs. Because she is such a good skier, she is able to produce



PLAN DE CORONES: USA's Mikaela Shiffrin competes in the first run of the Women's Giant Slalom event as part of the FIS Alpine World Ski Championships in Kronplatz, Italian Alps. —AFP

that volume and be as well-rounded, and has been able to transition to a four-event skier smoothly and efficiently."

Astonishing as her race-winning figures may be, they are lost on Shiffrin herself - she argues that statistics and

numbers "dehumanise the sport and what every athlete is trying to achieve". "My goal has never been to break records for most World Cup wins, points or most medals at world champs," she maintains. —AFP

## Taiwan will not send delegation to Beijing Olympics ceremonies

TAIPEI: Taiwan will not send an official delegation to the opening or closing of the Beijing Winter Olympics due to China's strict pandemic controls and flight disruptions, the self-ruled island's governing body for sport said. The decision comes at a time when relations between Beijing and Taipei are at their lowest in

decades with China ramping up military and economic pressure under President Xi Jinping.

Taiwan's Sports Administration said late Friday that its 15-member delegation will not attend the opening and closing ceremonies due to "pandemic prevention and flight schedules". Its tiny winter team, which includes four athletes, will be flying to China from the United States, Switzerland and Taiwan, the administration added in a statement.

"According to the event's pandemic prevention and entry policy, flights have been adjusted and delayed, and not all could arrive in Beijing by the opening ceremony on Feb 4." Authoritarian China regards democratic Taiwan as its own territory and has vowed to one day seize it, by force if needed. Record numbers of

Chinese jets are now buzzing around the island's air defence zone and the People's Liberation Army has staged regular drills simulating an invasion.

China has cut off official communication with the government of President Tsai Ing-wen since 2016 because she regards Taiwan as an already sovereign nation. The last time Beijing hosted an Olympics in 2008, relations with Taiwan were much warmer and a large delegation visited. Taiwan and Beijing have argued for decades about representation at the Olympics. Since 1981, Taiwan has had an agreement with the International Olympic Committee to compete under the name Chinese Taipei. It was a compromise that would allow Taiwan to compete in sports without presenting itself as a sovereign nation. —AFP