

Sports

China still searching for next Yao Ming, 20 years after NBA debut

'He brought NBA into China and took China into NBA'

BEIJING: Basketball Hall of Famer, business magnate, cultural ambassador - no Chinese athlete carries a richer legacy than Yao Ming, whose towering 7ft 6in frame (2.29 metre) stormed into the NBA 20 years ago. The centre was drafted by the Houston Rockets on June 26, 2002, kickstarting a glittering career that won him a succession of personal accolades and transformed the Shanghai-born Yao into a household name in both China and the United States.

A languid but deceptively agile player, Yao's gentle personality and wry humor off the court cemented him as a fan favorite and boosted the NBA's popularity in his home nation. Since his emergence, no Chinese player has come close to matching his achievements, and the prospect appears even less likely as the league has become mired in simmering tensions between Beijing and Washington.

In 2002, Yao was a face of an increasingly confident and open China, one whose economic rise was being matched by global sporting prowess. "He brought the NBA into China, but he also took China into the NBA," said fan Gao Dabao, 30, outside a basketball court in Beijing. "It was the time when the NBA had its biggest influence on China, and we all used to watch it on TV," he added.

The son of two former basketball pros, Yao cut his teeth with Shanghai Sharks before joining the Rockets as their first pick in the 2002 NBA draft. He

averaged 19 points and nine rebounds per game over nearly a decade with the Texas-based team who were dubbed the "Ming Dynasty". Yao played in eight All-Star Games and made the All-NBA Teams on five occasions, but injuries forced him to retire in 2011 at the age of 30.

"Yao Ming is the only Chinese player to have become a real NBA star," said Chinese basketball writer Wang Meng. "He grew into one of the best players in that Rockets team, which is something no other Chinese player has managed to do," he told AFP. Yao was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 2016 alongside Shaquille O'Neal and Allen Iverson. Yao now serves as chairman of the Chinese Basketball Association. Despite his riches, he keeps a relatively low profile, dabbling in winemaking, conservation and charity work.

One of a kind

For Chinese fans, Yao's international stardom encapsulated the optimism of an emerging nation with global ambitions. Simon Chadwick, director of the Centre for the Eurasian Sport Industry at Emlyon Business School, said Yao was "a statement signing, someone who represented a changing world, rather than (just) a star player".

Since then, however, "the power dynamic between the two countries has changed," he said.

Relations between Beijing and Washington have soured in recent years over trade, human rights and other issues. China's state broadcaster stopped screening NBA games after a 2019 tweet by the Rockets' then-general manager Daryl Morey in support of Hong Kong democracy protesters.

Only a handful of games have been shown on television in China since then and the league's fortunes have taken a beating in its biggest overseas market. Five other Chinese athletes have played in the NBA, but none have had the same impact as Yao. Most recently, compatriot Zhou Qi turned out for the Rockets but was released from his contract in 2018. Recent generations of Chinese players have struggled to match Yao's natural talent, said basketball expert Xing Chen.

Chinese basketball is "at a low ebb", he told AFP. "We need to bring through a new generation of athletes." "Asian players tend to have different physiques compared with those from North America and Europe ... and we lack the talent pool of the US," he said. Fans and experts told AFP they thought it unlikely that another Chinese player could win hearts and minds on both sides of the Pacific. "The (China-US) relationship isn't as ... friendly as before," said basketball fan Eric Zhang, 15.

"I think it's possible Chinese players can play in the NBA, but I don't think they can achieve the



BEIJING: In this file photo, Houston Rockets All-Star Yao Ming takes a penalty shot during their match against the New Jersey Nets in the NBA China Games 2010 basketball match at the Wukesong Arena. —AFP

heights Yao Ming once reached," he said. Today's players must navigate the "dangerous" ideological middle ground between China and the US, Chadwick said. Western sports organizations in China are "potentially (exposed) to political interference from Beijing and/or accusations of being complicit in issues such as human rights abuses," he said. "Yao in the mid-2000s was an entirely different proposition to what the Yao of 2022 would be." —AFP

Youth sparkles but swimming's golden oldies still win titles

BUDAPEST: Canadian 15-year-old Summer McIntosh headlined a crop of golden teenagers too young to drive who caught the eye at the World Swimming Championships, but a number of former prodigies showed they are still driven to win too. It was the veterans, notably Katie Ledecky, Gregorio Paltrinieri and Nicholas Santos, not the kids, who set records. There were extra opportunities as some elite swimmer skipped Budapest because of a competition cycle cramped by two Olympics three years apart.

As so often in swimming, more women hit early heights. McIntosh, who is still too young to drive in her native Ontario, grabbed her chance, winning two golds, a silver and a bronze. Italian breaststroker Benedetta Pilato, who won silver three years ago at 14, won gold and silver this time. Katie Grimes, an American 16-year-old, won a silver behind McIntosh. Claire Curzan, at 17, won four American relay medals to add to the relay silver from Tokyo as well as an individual bronze.

David Popovici was spectacular in winning two freestyle golds at 17. "I don't even drive yet," he said, adding that even at 18, when he would be entitled to a full Romanian driver's licence, he did not think he would have the time to learn. On the last night, Frenchman Leon Marchand, who turned 20 in May, was named male swimmer of the competition after winning two medley golds and a butterfly silver.

He shared the podium, and a slightly awkward embrace for the cameras, with the woman of the championships, Ledecky. Ledecky was one of the veterans showing that old swimmers don't fade away as fast as they used to. When she won the 800m freestyle at the 2012 Olympics at 15, Ledecky was a teenage sensation. Her 800m gold on Friday was a record fifth straight world title and her 22nd world championship medal, also a record for a woman.

"It's just year after year of hard work," she said. "I think back to London and I made it a goal not to be a one-hit wonder. "Here we are 10 years later...and still excited for the future as well." At 25 Ledecky might not seem old, but the stamina events are traditionally races for youngsters. She is the oldest woman's world champion in 800m and 1500m. There were fourteen 800m finals before Ledecky began her reign. Ten were won by teens. The oldest champion was American Janet Evans who had just turned 23 when she won her second title in 1994.

The pattern was repeated on the men's side when Paltrinieri became the oldest 1500m men's world champion. It was his third world title at a distance in which he won a bronze aged 18. "I'm 28 in a couple of months but I'm still learning," he said. Sprinters last longer. Nicholas Santos, a 42-year-old Brazilian, broke his own record as oldest world championship medalist when he took silver in the 50m butterfly, a non-Olympic event. Santos is a late developer. He did not win a major medal until he was 35.

'Enjoy it'

Ruta Meilutyte took longer to recapture her golden youth. The Lithuanian won Olympic gold in 2012 aged 15. She added a first world title the following year. Both were in the 100m breaststroke. It took her nine years to win her third gold, in the breaststroke sprint on Saturday, at the age of 25. She suggested the water had not always been calm. "I'm grateful for every step taken in my life, the bad ones and the good ones as well," she said. "I'm happy to be here, finally enjoying swimming." —AFP

Veteran Sjostrom, McIntosh complete swimming doubles

BUDAPEST: Sarah Sjostrom, who has been winning world titles for 13 years, and Summer McIntosh, who has been winning them for four days, both collected their second gold medals of the week in Budapest on Saturday. Sjostrom, a 28-year-old Swede who won the 50m butterfly less than 24 hours earlier, added the 50m freestyle, her 10th world gold. McIntosh, a Canadian 15-year-old, held off 16-year-old American Katie Grimes to win the women's 400m medley title. McIntosh, who won the 200m butterfly gold on Wednesday, claimed her fourth medal in Budapest in four minutes and 32.04 seconds.

Grimes was 0.63sec back, while another American, Emma Weyant, was a distant third ahead of Hungarian 33-year-old Katinka Hosszu, the defending champion. "I tried to push my body as much as possible," said McIntosh. "The crowd gave me so much adrenaline. "I really felt my body in the backstroke. "Katie is a top competitor, I like racing against her since we are in the same age group." Sjostrom finished her sprint in 23.98 seconds, 0.20sec ahead of Pole Katarzyna Wasick, with Australian Meg Harris and American Erika Brown tied for bronze.

The Swede took her first European title at 14 and her first world title a year later in 2009. This was her 20th world championship medal. "Maybe my mind-set and also a lot of hard work, but also I love what I do," she said of her

longevity. Sjostrom narrowly missed another medal when she anchored Sweden to fourth in the women's 100m medley relay that closed the championships. "It's been a busy four days for me," she said. "I feel like it's business for me too, I just go in and do my job I guess."

The United States won, anchored by 17-year-old Claire Curzan. Australia were second and Canada, with Penny Olesiak holding off Sjostrom, third. The men's 50m backstroke gold medal was presented twice, with the US anthem played twice. In the first race of the evening, Justin Ress was disqualified after video review for finishing entirely under water as he touched the wall first. His training buddy Hunter Armstrong was awarded gold, winning in 24.14 seconds.

Ksawery Masiuk, a 17-year-old Pole, initially took silver, 0.35sec back, with Italian Thomas Ceccon, who set a 100m backstroke world record on Monday, taking the bronze on loan. Armstrong wiped a tear away as he stepped off the podium after accepting the gold in the evening's first medal ceremony. "I'm very disappointed my team-mate was disqualified and hopefully Team USA's protest will be successful," he said. He got his wish, when a jury upheld the appeal. Ress came out alone to stand on the top step of the podium and receive his medal in the last medal ceremony of the championships.

'Go out fast'

Ceccon had taken pre-emptive revenge by swimming the breaststroke leg as Italy edged the Americans, the reigning champions and world record holders, in the 100m medley relay final. Britain were third. That was a fifth gold for Italy after Gregorio Paltrinieri earlier swam the second fastest time in men's 1500m



BUDAPEST: Sweden's Sarah Sjostrom competes to take gold in the women's 50m freestyle finals during the Budapest 2022 World Aquatics Championships at Duna Arena in Budapest. —AFP

freestyle history to win his third world title in the distance. The 27-year-old Italian surged away from the start, setting a breakneck pace. He was on world record pace for much of the race before fading at the end to finish in 14min 32.80sec and miss Sun Yang's mark by 1.78sec. American Bobby Finke was second, 3.90sec back, with Florian Wellbrock third at 4.14.

Paltrinieri said he had been motivated by finishing fourth out in the 800m "I came out with the mindset that I wanted to destroy the pool," he said after becoming the oldest ever 1500m world champion. "I'm 28 in a couple of months," he said. "But I'm still learning." Lithuanian Ruta Meilutyte won her first world gold since 2013 when she edged Italian 17-year-old Benedetta Pilato by 0.10sec in the women's 50m breaststroke final. South African Lara van Niekerk was third. Meilutyte had not won a major championship medal of any color since 2015. "It's nice to be a world champion," she said. —AFP

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