

All eyes, especially in Asia, are on the competition between China's Sun Yang and South Korea's Park Tae-hwan. **Chen Xiangfeng** reports in London.



Rising Chinese swimmer Sun Yang and his South Korean counterpart Park Tae-hwan are virtually doppelgangers. Both are considered cool and trendy. Both are often seen with black-rimmed glasses perched on their noses and huge headphones covering their ears. And both frequently travel to Australia and have trained with big-name coaches.

The two are youth idols and media darlings in their homelands.

They're set to face off after Park, the reigning Olympic men's 400m freestyle champion, announced last month that he'll swim the 1,500m — the event in which Sun holds the world record — in London.

It's one of the most anticipated rivalries in the Olympic pool, after that between Michael Phelps and Ryan Lochte.

Sun — who, at 20, is two years younger than Park — says, "(Park) is my idol, but I'm not scared at all of him. I'm better than before. Both my coach and I feel I'm stronger".

The Korean brought his country its first Olympic gold in swimming in the 400m four years ago in Beijing, while Sun failed to advance to the final, ranking 28th in 3 min 50.90 sec.

Sun improved dramatically over the past two years and stunned the world by breaking Australian Grant

Hackett's 10-year-old world record en route to gold in the 1,500m at the 2011 Shanghai World Championships. But he was again foiled in his attempt to usurp Park in the 400m and finished in second to the Korean in Shanghai. Sun also came in second in the event at the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games.

Sun regards the Shanghai loss to Park as a valuable lesson.

"I learned how to face defeat," Sun said recently at a training camp at Bath University.

"It makes me a stronger person coming to London."

This season, the strapping Chinese has managed to close the gap on Park by clocking the fastest time in the event at a national meet in April.

Meanwhile, Park seems unconcerned about the challenge from Sun, whom he's never lost to 400m in international competitions.

He says he's more concerned about breaking the world record.

"This isn't about a competition with Sun," Park told the Korean Times.

"What I think is more important is to win the record battle with myself."

While his 400m prospects are uncertain, Sun is widely considered a shoo-in to take the gold in the 1,500m, in which he set a world record of 14:34.14 in Shanghai.

Park, who has been putting more effort into shorter-distance events in recent years, trails Sun by more than 13 seconds with a best time of 14:47.38. Apart from their specialty events, the

duo will extend their competition to the 200m, in which they have an outside medal chance — especially Park.

Park's explosion of stardom at home after the Beijing Olympic Games could also be replicated by Sun in China, if he wins his country's first Olympic men's swimming gold.

He is already hailed as China's next superstar and is poised to join the ranks of former NBA All-Star player Yao Ming, track hero Liu Xiang and French Open champion Li Na.

The 400m final is scheduled for July 28, the first day of the Olympic swimming competition.

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## China needs a star, and Sun is willing to oblige

By **CHEN XIANGFENG** in London  
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Yao Ming called it quits. Liu Xiang is still fighting his way back after a devastating injury.

China needs a hero. A nation whose Olympic success mostly comes in less-popular sports like badminton and table tennis is in desperate search of a new sports star.

Twenty-year-old swimmer Sun Yang came along just in time.

Sun, from Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, shot to fame at the 2011 World Championships in Shanghai, where he claimed the gold medal in the 1,500m with a world-record time that broke Grant Hackett's 10-year-old mark.

He is the runaway favorite in the event in London, and will be competi-

tive in other freestyle events.

"I think my chances of winning the 400m are great if I can swim normally," he said, before traveling to London. "As in the 1,500m, the gold medal belongs to me."

Sun's outspoken nature is unusual compared to other Chinese athletes, who generally prefer to maintain a low profile. It reared its head last August, when he criticized the Chinese Swimming Association for making him attend a commercial event without letting him know beforehand.

That characteristic, along with his trendy lifestyle and handsome appearance, makes Sun an icon among China's post-1990 generation and, of course, a marketing darling.

"I think I have a very good personality. I'm sunny and outgoing," he said.

**"I feel like a brave warrior with shield in hand."**

SUN YANG  
CHINESE SWIMMING STAR

Sun posts photos and communicates with his 8.06 million followers on his micro blog.

In one of the latest posts, he called on fans to cheer for him in London.

"The road of life is made step after step," he said. "It's not destiny that decides your life. It's every choice and every effort you make that decide your life. Cheer up with me, my friends."

Sun came from a sports school in his hometown that also produced Luo Xuejuan, the women's 100m breaststroke

champion at the 2004 Athens Games.

Luo described herself as a "beast" whenever she steps on the starting block. Similarly, Sun describes himself as a "warrior".

"I feel like a brave warrior with shield in hand. I am about to go all out," Sun said in a speech in front of the national swimming team before leaving for London.

"I am ready, London. Here we come. The Chinese men are coming."

Sun's aggressiveness may be a headache to normally protective officials, who prefer to shield their athletes from the public spotlight before major competitions. But he is widely adored by the younger generation.

"Brother Yang, I witnessed the number of your fans rise from 700,000 to more than 8 million. I'm so proud of you," one

of his fans wrote on the micro blog. "I love you so much and I believe more fans will join you after the London Games."

The 20-year-old is already a national darling in China. Commercials featuring him have been telecast frequently leading up to the Games, while a huge poster of him was hung at the entrance of Sanlitun, a popular shopping area in downtown Beijing.

In London, he has been chased by the international media, making him one of the most-watched Chinese athletes in town.

Sun shrugged off the pressure, hoping he can live out his Olympic dream, much as hurdler Liu Xiang did in 2004.

"I watched Liu making history in 2004 on TV," he said. "I wished I could do the same thing one day. I will give my utmost effort."