

Safety net for young gymnasts

Basic classes give a chance in life to those who get cut

By WANG XIAODONG and ZHOU LIHUA in Xiantao, Hubei

Eight children, all in red leotards, limber up on giant floor mats, with their eyes occasionally glancing at a portrait on the wall of Li Xiaoshuang, a former world gymnastics champion and local hero. Each dreams of the day their picture will hang beside it.

"There are usually far more students than this," said Zheng Shunsheng, a coach at the Li Xiaoshuang Gymnastics School. "These kids are training for a competition in August. But it's the summer break, so the rest of the students are at home resting."

Welcome to Xiantao, in Hubei province, the home of gymnastics.

For decades, this city has produced a steady stream of world-class athletes, including four Olympic and world championship gold medal winners.

Yet, for every child that has passed through its sports-focused education system and achieved glory, hundreds more have fallen by the wayside, often finding they lack the skills to get even a basic job.

Even some former national champions had to rely on heavy

manual labor to survive after leaving the national teams because they lacked necessary skills in all but sports.

Education authorities say that is one tradition they aim to bring to an end.

"We used to select youngsters (for our training programs) with the sole aim of turning them into gold medal winners, but we ignored the need to give them general education," said Li Yong, director of the general office of the city's sport administration.

"Only a very small proportion of students are selected by the provincial or national teams. Most who fail may have wasted time and couldn't keep up with others after they chose to study at a regular school.

"We're doing more to improve the general education of students at gymnastic schools, including working with the education commission to find the best teachers in the city."

Xiantao, a city of only 500,000, and its neighboring areas traditionally produce people of small stature who are able to bear hardship, which makes them perfect for gymnastics.

Its people have gone on to 100 gold medals at Chinese and international competitions,

including Li Xiaoshuang, who won gold at the Barcelona and Atlanta Games as well as the men's all-around event at the World Gymnastics Championships in 1995.

Tough competition

"Due to its success, the city attracts many parents from across China to send their children here with a championship hope," said Yan Yongping, a coach for three decades at the Li Xiaoshuang Gymnastics School.

The boarding school recruits mostly children aged 3 to 8. It has produced four world gymnastics champions since the 1970s.

However, behind the city's success in sports competitions are strict training and selection standards, which means most students who started to train in gymnastics schools as early as 3 years old quit years later if they were not selected by the provincial or national teams.

"The chance of succeeding in sports competition is very slim," said Zheng, as he coached the eight children in an otherwise empty 2,000-square-meter gymnastics hall.

Although the school looks ordinary from the outside, old and gray, the hall inside is mod-



Children practice doing handstands at the Li Xiaoshuang Gymnastics School in Xiantao, Central China's Hubei province.

ZHU LIUDI / FOR CHINA DAILY

ern and new. The boys were practicing basic gymnastic skills such as twirling with their arms on a low balancing beam and doing somersaults.

"I've coached about 240 youngsters over the past few years," Zheng said. "Nowadays, parents are also becoming more realistic, and most of them send their children here to get exercise or learn independence, not to become a champion."

Yang Rui, principal of the school, said that as China is winning more gold medals in international competition, some people question the selection system.

"We realized the aim of education in sports schools is to cultivate talent, rather than just produce medal-winning machines," he said, adding that

the school began integrating general education into the curriculum last year.

The school, most of whose students are 4 to 8 years old, is cooperating with the best kindergarten in the city, asking it to send qualified teachers to ensure the students will have the same general education curriculum, such as music and basic sciences, as other children do at normal schools.

Qualified teachers

However, finding enough teachers remains a problem.

"According to the requirement of General Administration of Sport, all sports school trainees must first pass general education before entering competitions to be selected for higher-level schools or teams in

the future," Yang said.

A guideline issued in 2010 by the State Council required public sports schools to take more measures to improve general education and employment for sportsmen, and education departments to send qualified teachers to public sport schools.

However, more effort is needed to realize what are promised in the guideline, said Liu Peng, minister of General Administration of Sport, in a televised speech on July 3.

Despite giving more importance to general education in sports training, the "home of gymnastics" still plans to continue its glory in sports competitiveness by popularizing gymnastics and other sports.

"We are considering popularizing gymnastics at our kinder-

gartens," Li Yong said. "It can provide a fun option for kids and give us the opportunity to identify and select the ones with gymnastics talent."

"Besides, we also plan to develop other sports, such as weightlifting and diving, in which we have already made great progress, to further improve our competitiveness in sports competition," Li said.

Players who are selected to continue at a higher level practice hard and dream of winning medals.

"I'll take part in the National Games next year, and I hope I can win at least a third place in a gymnastics event," said Xu Hua, a member of the Hubei provincial gymnastics team in Wuhan.

At 20 years old, he has been practicing gymnastics for more than 15 years, including 10 years with the provincial team. Xu said he was selected by a coach at his kindergarten and sent to a gymnastics school in Wuhan when he was 5 and a half years old.

"About seven of my classmates at the gymnastics school were chosen and sent to the provincial team along with me, when I was about 10 years old. Now, only two are still here," Xu said.

"Though the competition is fierce, I'm not worried. Every one of us here has a chance of winning a gold medal," he said with confidence, referring to the others training in the gymnastics hall in Hubei's Olympic Sports Center.

"If I fail in the National Games, I might quit and apply to a college to study," he said.

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Wealthy Chinese charter flights to watch Olympics

By YU RAN in Shanghai yuran@chinadaily.com.cn

Wealthy Chinese sports fans have been chartering private jets from Shanghai to London to watch the Olympic Games.

More than five chartered jets have set off from Shanghai Hongqiao International Airport for the British capital since the start of the Games, according to an airport immigration officer who did not want to be identified.

"More than 40 passengers, mostly Shanghai businessmen, traveled with their families and friends to the Olympic Games in chartered planes," he said.

The officer predicted more people will charter flights ahead of the Games closing ceremony on Sunday.

According to Jing Yiming, vice-president of Shanghai Airport Group, 132 business jets were registered in the Chinese mainland in 2011, up from 32 in 2008.

The business charter market in China is expanding, with more

companies providing services to meet the needs of wealthy businessmen.

"Demand from regular clients has increased dramatically in the past three years, as more people have realized that chartered flights are a better choice than waiting in an airport for hours," said Wang Jiale, a sales representative for Deer Jet, a subsidiary of Hainan Airlines.

Deer Jet offered charter services for soccer fans to fly to the European Championship in June and July, and is now sending clients to London for the Games.

The cost of the charter service exceeds 1 million yuan (\$157,000) for a round trip, and requires a reservation at least one week in advance.

"Taking an overseas trip in our chartered flights has become more popular as wealthy businessmen want privacy with their friends and family," said Wang.

He said chartered flights have become trendy among wealthy businessmen for meetings, private activities and family trips.

"I've heard that a Zhejiang businessman used the charter service just to attend a wedding in Italy," Wang said.

"I'm not sure if our plane has been chartered for the London Olympics, but we have increased our charter flight services for businessmen both in China and overseas to meet the increasing demand," said Wang Jian, board secretary of China Eastern Airlines.

Wang Jian said the charter flight service enables groups of individuals to take long-distance trips in peak seasons without worrying about failing to book a plane ticket.

"I would like to try the charter flight service in the future for family trips, which will definitely be more enjoyable," said Guan Hongsheng, a businessman from Wenzhou, Zhejiang province.

Guan added that private jets have been popular abroad for some time, and it is a trend that will become increasingly common in China as wealthy people seek increased privacy.

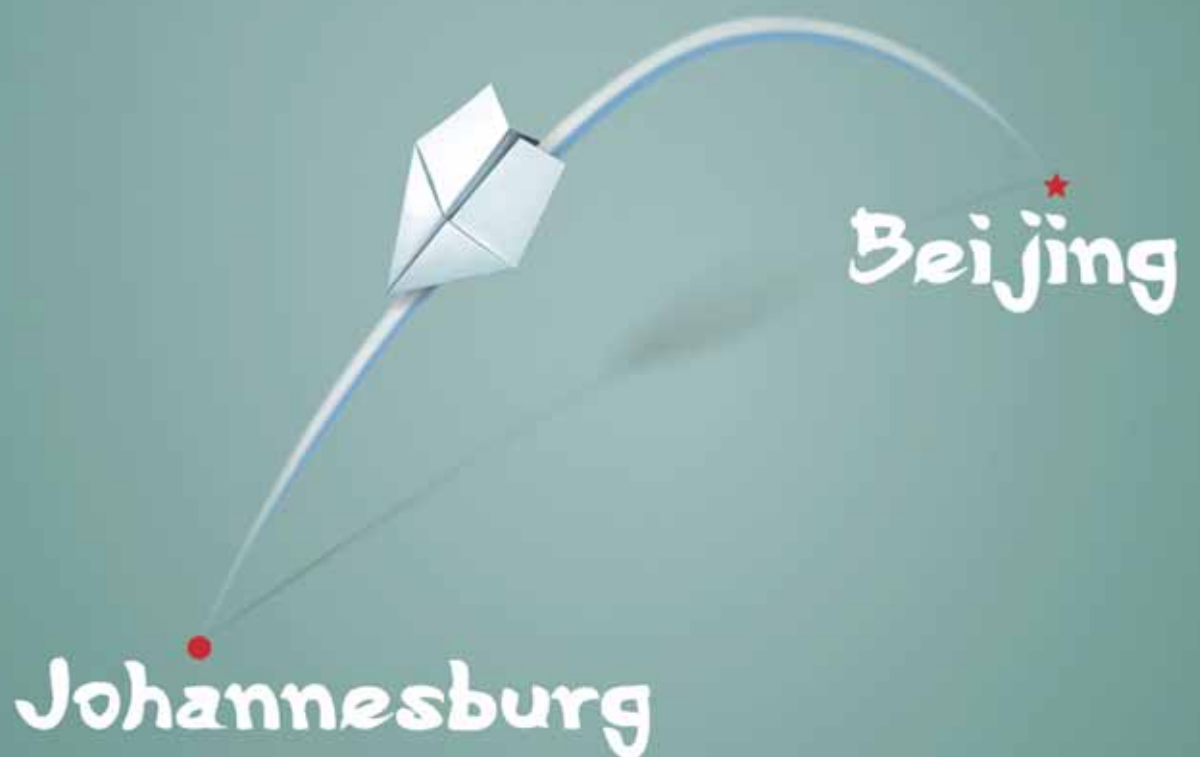


Chinese fans wave flags as they watch the London 2012 Olympic Games.

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