



The Chinese women's national wheelchair basketball team practise their maneuvers at the China Disabilities Training Center (CDTC). PHOTOS BY JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY

Winner in competition, winner in life

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Ping Yali has appeared on national television many times, each time accompanied by her faithful guide dog, Lucky, a six-year-old golden retriever. The pair is best known as part of the 2008 Beijing Paralympic Games, when they participated in the lighting of the flame.

Lucky is Beijing's first trained guide dog, and the animal is often the reason Ping is invited to appear on television. But what few people realize is, Ping herself has a glorious, if unsung, past.

She is a gold medalist from the Paralympic Games in Long Island, New York.

The year was 1984 and Ping was only 22, but she won China's first gold medal in the long jump event. The sports meet was then known as the International Games for the Disabled, and was held before the Olympic Games.

Ping, born blind in one eye and with very little sight in the other, shed tears of joy when she heard the Chinese national anthem being played as she stood on the winners' rostrum.

In the past, Ping often had to explain that she was the first Chinese athlete who won gold, an achievement often credited to shooter Xu Haifeng, who also took a gold in the 1984 Olympic Game in Los Angeles later that year.

But after going through the ups and downs of her extraordinary life, Ping, now the owner of four massage parlors using blind masseuses in Beijing, prefers talking about business rather than gold medals.

Born in Beijing, Ping has been blind from a congenital cataract. As the youngest daughter and the only disabled child of the family, Ping was given a lot of love and care by her mother.

While attending a school for the visually handicapped, the athletic Ping was encouraged to train for running and the long jump.

A blind athlete has many barriers to overcome, both physical and mental. It is tough enough for a blind person to walk, let alone run or jump. Ping says most blind people have a constant fear of running into obstacles.

"One of our innermost fears is that of falling into holes. For us, this symbolizes death. The two go hand-in-hand," she says.

Ping overcame this mental barrier and gradually found a way to train effectively with her coach. Her coach would physically demonstrate the different steps in doing the long jump, and Ping kept her hands on her coach's body, making mental notes so she could remember the moves.

The tough training often exhausted Ping, but her victories at the various games kept her going. In 1982, Ping was selected to participate in the Far East and South Pacific Games for the Disabled in Hong Kong, the first time China sent athletes. Ping won a silver medal that year.

"I couldn't see my national flag being raised, and the national anthem is played only for the champion, so I promised myself I had to win gold," she says.

After she did win gold in 1984, the government gave her a small apartment and 300 yuan (\$47) and Ping went back to work at the welfare factory for the disabled.

"After winning the championship, life presented me with many new problems," she says. "My troubles were far from over. It meant I had to start from scratch."

Ping gave birth to a son, who was also born blind, in cruel twist of fate. In 1997, the factory she was working at closed down, and she also got divorced. She was so dejected she thought about ending her life.

She says it was her son who gave her strength to carry on.

During the Spring Festival that year, she received another 300 yuan from the government, as a subsidy for needy families. "Ironically, it reminded of the reward they gave me for winning the gold medal. I told myself this was the last time I was going to get government support," Ping recalls.

"If my blind son had to depend solely on government aid, I would consider myself a failure as a mother. So to set the benchmark, I told myself I had to start my own business."

In 2001, Ping Yali became a licensed massage practitioner and opened a small business in her home with the help of friends.

It was tough going during the early stages. At first, Ping couldn't afford an accountant. And in order to attract more customers, she charged low prices. Sometimes, after a long, hard day, she would find her reward was a fake 100-yuan note. But there were also good encounters.

"The kind-hearted helped me through the turbulent times. They came to me for massages, and these kind souls gave me the strength and motivation to keep going."

Now Ping has a chain of four massage parlors in Beijing, employing more than 20 disabled workers.

And she sums it up with a simple statement: "When misfortunes come one after another, don't give up. Think of the strong points in your character. And, starting from the things that you can do, take it step by step until you reach your final goal. Please never give up, and a brighter tomorrow will eventually dawn."



WANG RU / CHINA DAILY
Ping Yali and guide dog Lucky at their home in Beijing.

We shall overcome

They come from all walks of life, but they go to London with a common aim — to test their physical limits and competition spirit with the world's best. In Beijing, Wang Ru finds out more about China's team to the London Paralympic Games.

The athletes are aged from 15 to 50 and include farmers, students, soldiers and the self-employed from every part of China. A total of 282 Chinese sportsmen and women will compete in the London 2012 Paralympic Games from Aug 29 to Sept 9, together with 4,200 other athletes from all over the world.

About half of our athletes are now training at the China Disability Sports Training Center in Beijing. Built in 2007, it is the world's largest such sport facility and falls under the auspices of the China Administration of Sports for Persons with Disabilities (CASPD).

Jiang Fuying, 24, is one of the athletes in training. In the 2008 Paralympic Games in Beijing, Jiang won the gold medal for the 50m butterfly stroke event and broke the world record.

She was a late starter and did not learn how to swim as a child even though she grew up along the Yangtze River. She was born with amyotrophy, a result of polio, and grew up in an orphanage in Jingzhou, in Central China's Hubei province.

"At school, I had a strong inferiority complex and was reluctant to communicate with others. Swimming changed my life," says Jiang, who learnt swimming in a week. In 2002, she joined the provincial swimming team.

"Swimming is a challenge for a disabled person, especially if the handicap is in the arms and legs.

"It means the athletes have to expose their disabilities, but in return, it make them more confident when they overcome it," says Zhang Honghu, coach of the Chinese national swimming team of athletes with disabilities.

Zhang, known as the "godfather" of handicapped swimming in China, has been the coach of the national team for two decades.

In London, he will be attending his sixth Paralympics. "At the Barcelona 1992 Paralympic Games, the whole of China's delegation had only 34 athletes," Zhang recalls.

In 1992, China won 11 gold medals and was ranked 11th on the medal tally. In 2008 at the Beijing Paralympics, China won 89 gold medals and topped the ranks.

"Our improved performance reflects China's growth in the promotion of welfare for people with disabilities," says Wang Weiping, the general director of CASPD.

Over the past two decades, these changes are most visible in Zhang and his swimming team.

"In 1996, we couldn't afford to rent an indoor swimming pool to prepare for the Games, so we found an outdoor pool even though it was winter," Zhang says.

"We covered the pool with plastic sheets like a green house, and boiled water to generate steam to keep warm."

Now, the natatorium at the training center includes a standard pool with world-class facilities such as an electronic timing system, a LED screen and a pressure-sensitive starting platform.

There is an underwater observation window, another training pool beside changing and shower rooms and technical analysis rooms.

Better facilities for training means better chances at winning, Wang says.

Li Duan, a professional basketball player before he went blind and lost two fingers in an accident 1996, is a veteran champion of the long jump and the triple jump events at various sports competitions for the disabled.

"Sports was once my life and still is," says Li, who has



A disabled swimmer trains at the natatorium of the CDTC in Beijing.

GIVING THE DISABLED THE BEST FACILITIES

The China Disabilities Training Center is spread over an area of more than 24 hectares, with facilities in the campus including an athlete's dormitory, a multi-sports training gym, a natatorium, a hall for ball games, an indoor athletic arena, a fitness gym, a tennis hall and an outdoor athletic field with a grandstand. To better facilitate the athletes and their special needs, the campus is barrier-free. Apartments in the athletes' quarters are also designed to fit those with different disabilities.

Since it started operation in 2007, the center has been involved in the training not only for the Chinese delegations, but also for 15 teams from

different countries and regions as they prepare to participate in a series of games and sports meets such as the 2008 Beijing Paralympic Games.

China first took part in the Paralympic Games in 1984 at the Seventh Paralympic Games held in Long Island, New York. Four years later, the China Disabled Persons' Federation was established to promote the rights of people with disabilities, including the organizing and financing for sports.

In 1994, the Sixth Far East and South Pacific Games for disabled sports men and women was held in Beijing — the first time many Chinese got to know about the existence of such games.

been training at the center since March with his coach Jin Fan for the upcoming Paralympics.

Recalling his winning moments, he says: "I can't see the national flag rising, But I can hear the national anthem."

For Fu Yongqing, 33, playing basketball has opened up a completely new world. The mother of two lost both legs in a traffic accident in 1995 in her village in Yunnan, Southwest China.

The center of the national team of women basketball for the disabled says she did not know anything about the game when she was talent scouted in 2006.

"I thought somebody had to push the wheelchair while I played," says Fu, laughing.

Fu was recruited into the national team in 2007. She played in the 2008 Beijing Paralympic Games and also

participated twice at the World Wheelchair Basketball Champions in United Kingdom.

Xu Yuanshen is a former player with China's national basketball team in the 1970s. He has been coaching Fu and her teammates since 2006.

Working with them, he not only plays the role of mentor and coach, but often, their logistics officer.

"We have 12 players, each of them has a normal wheelchair and a special one for basketball. So whenever we play abroad, we are traveling with 24 wheelchairs," says Xu, who needs to look after both players and wheelchairs.

"It is a tough job, but seeing how basketball has injected vitality and courage into their lives and given them confidence ... that's enough for me."