



Li's international breakthrough

NATIONAL TENNIS HEROINE MADE HER FIRST BIG STRIDE ON WORLD STAGE AT 2001 BEIJING EVENT

By TANG YUE
CHINA DAILY

SHENZHEN — Everyone knows Li Na now.

This year's French Open women's champion, Li, became the first Asian player to win a Grand Slam.

But it was at the Beijing Universiade 10 years ago where Li shot to prominence, becoming China's greatest tennis hope.

Then 19, she claimed titles in singles, women's doubles and mixed doubles at the 2001 event.

In the women's final, the second-seeded Li fought back after losing the first set and defeated top seed Janet Lee of Chinese Taipei, 4-6, 6-4, 6-3.

She also paired with Li Ting to win the women's doubles title and grabbed the mixed doubles title with Zhu Benqiang. For the first time, China won three tennis gold medals at a Universiade.

All her success aside, Li said she can't shoulder the country's tennis hopes alone.

"If China wants to be a powerhouse in tennis," Li said, "we need more good players, not only me. We should have a group of people support each other and make progress together ... it will be easier for every one of us."

For two years, Chinese tennis fans had to do without Li entirely.

Li, who had won 14 ITF titles, stunned the public in 2002 by quitting professional tennis and returning to be a full-time student at Huazhong University of Science and Technology, where she was a journalism major.

Li said she was bored of life on the pro tour and wanted to concentrate on school. She still played with Jiang Shan — first her teammate, then her classmate and now her husband — on campus but just for fun.

She announced her comeback in May 2004 after 25 months.

Li has repeatedly said she doesn't regret her two years away from the game.

A normal life as a student helped her understand the game, and helped her "become a better individual", she said.

It paid off.

In 2006, she became the first Chinese player to reach the Grand Slam quarterfinals at the All Eng-



ALEXANDER KLEIN / AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Above: China's Li Na holds the Roland Garros French Open championship trophy in front of the Eiffel Tower on June 4 in Paris a few hours after winning the French Open women's final. Li Na made sporting history at the French Open when she became the first player from China and from Asia to win a Grand Slam singles title.

YANG SHIZHONG / CHINA DAILY



Left: Li Na in action during the 2001 Universiade in Beijing. Li, an unknown in tennis circles before the event, shot to international fame by winning three gold medals at the tournament.

land Club, and in 2008, she was the first Chinese player to reach the Olympic semifinals.

She then became the first in the country to rank in the top 10 in the world WTA rankings after she advanced to the semifinals of last year's Australian Open.

And then her real breakthrough came. After losing to Kim Clijsters in her first Grand Slam final in Melbourne, she went to Roland Garros and defeated defending champion Francesca Schiavone.

According to Forbes magazine, Li earned \$8 million from July 2010 to July 2011, ranking eighth among female athletes worldwide.

And she's not lonely on the WTA tour anymore.

Sure Jiang Shan is there, but several other Chinese players are climbing the ranks.

Peng Shuai, Zheng Jie and Zhang Shuai are Grand Slam regulars, with Peng ranked No 17 in the world.

FACT BOX

Birthday: Feb 26, 1982 (age 29)

Birthplace: Wuhan, Hubei province, China

Height: 1.72 m

Turned pro: 1999

Plays: Right handed (two-handed backhand)

Career prize money: \$6,485,082

Career record: 385-143

Career titles: 5 WTA, 19 ITF

Highest ranking: No 4 (June 6, 2011)

Current ranking: No 6

Grand Slam results

Australian Open - final (2011)

French Open - champion (2011)

Wimbledon - quarterfinal (2006, 2010)

US Open - quarterfinal (2009)