



# 'Iron Hammer' hits her home courts

VOLLEYBALL LEGEND LANG PING GLAD TO BE BACK TO CHINA — THIS TIME AS A TORCHBEARER

By LU YUN  
CHINA DAILY

**BEIJING** — Chinese volleyball legend Lang Ping still has a special place in her heart for the sport that made her a star.

It all started at the University Games 30 years ago.

In 1981, Lang, as a 21-year-old and the ace spiker of the team, helped the Chinese women's volleyball squad win its first international championship at the Summer Universiade in Romania, beating Cuba in the final.

The breakthrough opened a new era for Chinese women's volleyball. Since then, the Hall of Famer helped China land four world titles in the 1980s, making herself a household name in China as the "Iron Hammer".

Three decades later, Lang is back at the Universiade again — not as a player or a coach but as a torchbearer for the 2011 Shenzhen event.

"The Universiade is a platform for cultural exchange," said Lang. "It's an opportunity for university students all over the world to explore China," she said.

Lang has a long-time connection with college sports. While studying for her master's degree in sports management at New Mexico State University after retiring from the national team in 1987, "Jenny" Lang covered her tuition fees by being an assistant coach for the college team.

"When I first began to work, it seemed the only thing I told the students was 'you shouldn't do it like this,'" Lang wrote in her autobiography. "But the head coach always said the opposite: 'Great move!' or 'Try this again. You can do better!'"

Initially shocked by the cultural differences, Lang gradually learned to appreciate the way Americans do things.

"In China we play for glory, but in the US, it's merely for fun," Lang said.

In 2005, Lang accepted the post as head coach of the US national team. At the beginning, she found herself coaching a group of college players as the most experienced athletes were playing in Europe.

"At first I tried to be strict with them, but those young kids just



KAZUHIRO NOGI / AGENCY  
FRANCE-PRESSE

**Lang Ping hugs Kim Willoughby as they celebrate the team's victory over Italy at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games on Aug 19, 2008.**

could not understand," Lang said. "Instead, they told me to relax. They said playing volleyball should be full of joy.

"Then I suddenly realized that volleyball was not their entire lives — not like me. No matter how they played, I always tried to encourage them with my biggest smile."

The US team's first international appearance under her coaching was the Pan-American Championship in 2005. In the semifinals, the US met the host, the Dominican Republic, which had beaten it a year before at the Athens Olympics, prompting Lang to warn her players of the

toughness of the matchup.

"There were local fans beating drums and throwing hats," Lang recalled. To her astonishment, a player came to her and said: "Don't worry Jenny. We love to play in these conditions."

The US team lost in four sets, but the young squad remained positive.

"In China, players would feel sorry for a loss for several days," Lang said. "But these American kids would just shrug it off and say: 'We had a bad day.'"

While coaching them with "Chinese-style" skills and tactics, Lang also found herself turning into an "American-style coach",

who used a more relaxed and humorous approach.

In 2008, she led the team to her hometown of Beijing to vie for an Olympic medal. She was surprised and moved by the thousands of Chinese spectators who cheered for her and her US side, though the Americans beat China 3-2 in a preliminary match.

Among the spectators was Lang's daughter, Lydia, also known as Bai Lang, who was a US citizen living in California.

"I felt so proud to hear people all round screaming and shouting my mom's name!" Lydia said.

Lydia, who is taller than her mother now, is also an ace spiker

## FACTBOX

**Date of birth:** Dec 10, 1960

**Birthplace:** Beijing

**Height:** 1.84m (6 feet)

### Player career

Known as the "Iron Hammer", Lang Ping was an ace spiker with the Chinese women's team from 1978-1985 and 1990. She began playing for the Chinese team at age 18. Starting her international career with a bronze medal at the 1978 Asian Games, she was the driving force behind the ascent of the Chinese side in the early 1980s.

### Major titles

World Cup 1981 (gold)

World Championship 1982 (gold)

Los Angeles Olympic Games 1984 (gold medalist)

World Cup 1985 (gold)

### Coaching career

Assistant coach at the University of New Mexico from 1987-89 and 1992-93

Head coach of the Chinese national team 1995-98

Head coach of Modena women's volleyball team, Italy, 1999-2004

Head coach of US national team 2005-08

Head coach of Evergrande women's volleyball team, China, 2009-present

### Major honors

Chinese Top Ten Athletes of the Year, 1981-86

FIVB Coach of the Year, 1996

Italian women's volleyball coach of the year, 1999-2000

Volleyball Hall of Fame, 2002

for her school team, Stanford University.

When asked if she can reach her mother's level, the 20-year-old girl said: "Is there anyone in the world who can reach her level?"

Lang resigned as US coach after the Olympics. One year later, the Iron Hammer came back home to coach Guangdong province-based Chinese club Evergrande.

"It feels good to be back," Lang said. "I have gone a full circle on the volleyball court and now I want to bring something new to my home country."

After playing and coaching for 38 years, the 51-year-old appears ready for new challenges.