

PROFILES



Olympic champion Yang Yang (left) of China and Angela Ruggiero, a four-time US Olympian, discuss the importance of career planning after athletes end their careers in sports at the Youth Olympic Games in Nanjing. PHOTO BY WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY

Glory after the Games

Ex-Olympians discuss challenges athletes face after sports and the importance of planning

By SUN XIAOCHEN

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Former Olympic champions met with and spoke to the young Olympians at the Nanjing Games about how they transitioned to life after the Games at a career-planning event hosted by Coca-Cola on Wednesday.

Despite how high each Olympian climbed or how much they achieved in their sports careers, many of the athletes on Wednesday said they had to start over after retirement. Many rediscovered themselves in an unfamiliar world as they started a second career away from sports.

Some disappeared from the limelight, while others regrouped and embraced a new life. Four-time Olympian and ice hockey player Angela Ruggiero from the United States said many athletes become confused and depressed after their sports careers are done.

"When the cameras go down, spectators go home and the games are over, the athletes are like 'Now what?'" Some ... don't know what to do," Ruggiero said in Nanjing on Wednesday. "Most

of the federations or sports governing bodies don't look at them when they are done or help them for the day when they retire. To me the responsibility should be on the parents, the coaches and the federation to encourage them to get involved (in post-career education)," said the 34-year-old Michigan native.

Launched by Coca-Cola and the Champion Foundation, which was founded by Olympic champion speed skater Yang Yang in 2011, Yang and Ruggiero shared their experiences alongside five newly retired Chinese athletes.

Ruggiero, elected the vice-chairwoman of the International Olympic Committee's Athletes' Commission in February, said the event's purpose perfectly matches the YOG spirit of inspiring young athletes to explore possibilities

beyond sports.

"At one point an athlete will always retire. To help them understand what they want to do after sports (is important)," Ruggiero said.

During her 16-year career with the US women's ice hockey team, Ruggiero won a gold medal at the 1998 Winter Olympics, silver medals in 2002 and 2010 and a bronze in 2006. She also competed in 10 World Championships, bagging gold four times.

She is now chairing the Coordination Commission for the 2016 Youth Olympics while also serving on the Entourage Commission. Ruggiero said her smooth transition didn't happen by chance. She said she planned ahead while getting her education.

"I tried to think about my career before I retired. The earlier we can think about that, the better, because it will allow us opportunities and time outside sports to understand what we want to do afterward," said Ruggiero, who graduated from Harvard University.

Ruggiero also hailed the collegiate athletic program in the US, which combines higher education and athletic development, for its established career support system.

"The blend of education and sports sends a strong message to children about the importance of both," said Ruggiero.

In China, youths are drafted and developed into athletes in a State-run system without ample educational pathways. In the era of the planned economy, the State-run system runs separately from the education system to push athletes on a single-minded quest for physical excellence.

As one of the products from the system, Yang knows full well the struggle of putting an end to her glittering sports career without knowing what to expect next.

"I was stuck in anxiety and confusion for about one year after retiring (in 2006)," said Yang, who rose to fame by winning China's first Winter Olympics gold medal in the women's 500m short-track speed skating event in 2002.

But she has been active after sports. She was elected an IOC member in 2010 and in 2013, and co-founded the Feiyang Skating Center, a commercial double-rink skating club.

The Champion Foundation raises money to provide job training and career-planning guidance for more than 1,000 retired athletes. It has thus far helped more than 20 find new jobs.

Chinese parents disapprove of rugby

By ZHENG XIN

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Pauline Tikoisuva can't understand why many Chinese parents don't want their daughters to play rugby Sevens.

"The seven-a-side game is perfect to boost your muscle tone, energy levels and stamina," said Tikoisuva, the mother of Jojo Tikoisuva, an 18-year-old player for the United States.

"With entire tournaments played over a single weekend, it is highly demanding," said Tikoisuva.

"As far as I know, many of the rugby players ... run and sprint almost constantly for 14 minutes.

"I don't see why the parents hold back their children, boys or girls," she said.

Despite cheering on the Chinese Sevens teams, most parents, when asked if they were willing to let their children participate in the demanding game, shook their heads.

And the parents of girls said "never".

"It's too much dash and bumps, way too much for a girl," said Yuan Jinhua, the parent of a 17-year-old girl in Nanjing, who took her family to the finals of the Sevens on Wednesday.

"Practicing rugby is far too foreign and unacceptable."

Due to cultural and physical differences, most Chinese parents are reluctant to let their children play rugby despite its growing prosperity abroad.

"It is going to take a long while for the fierce sport to prosper and thrive in China," said Tikoisuva.

China claimed the women's bronze medal at the Youth Olympic Games with a 12-0 victory over the US at the Nanjing Sports Park on Wednesday.

"It is going to take a long while for the fierce sport to prosper and thrive in China."

PAULINE TIKOISUVA
Mother of a US rugby player