

SPORTS



Tracking Success delivers the inside story for global sports fans, exploring what makes elite performers tick, and providing insight into their biggest and most intriguing moments on and off the field of play.

VOLLEYBALL



Former captain of the Chinese women's national volleyball team, Hui Ruoqi (center, both pictures) celebrates with her teammates after winning the gold medal at the 2016 Rio Olympics. WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY

By LI YINGXUE
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Former captain of the Chinese women's national volleyball team and Olympic gold medalist Hui Ruoqi is embracing a vibrant new chapter in her life.

As a volleyball match commentator, recent PhD graduate and charity fund initiator, Hui is seamlessly transitioning into her multifaceted post-retirement roles. Adding to her impressive portfolio, the 33-year-old is set to become a teacher at Nanjing Normal University.

Hui, a key player in the Chinese women's volleyball team's triumphant Rio Olympics journey, holds a deep-seated belief in the team's core values: unwavering patriotism, steadfast teamwork, relentless perseverance and an indomitable spirit.

These principles have become the beacon guiding her career, influencing every venture she undertakes — be it commenting, teaching or spearheading charitable initiatives. Hui said her journey continues to inspire her, reflecting the enduring spirit of excellence she championed on the volleyball court.

Last month, Hui celebrated a significant milestone at Nanjing Normal University's 2024 graduate commencement ceremony, earning her PhD in sports humanities and sociology from the School of Sports Science.

As a student-athlete, Hui has always believed that playing sports and academic studies complement each other — both can be improved through rigorous training and practice. She emphasized the importance of moving forward with curiosity.

"For many questions I had on the court, I found the answers in books," Hui shared, likening her various post-retirement volleyball endeavors to "job rotation".

She said she is a hands-on person who feels that, by deeply experiencing something, she can better identify issues and then find answers through systematic analysis.

"As a beneficiary of volleyball, I feel responsible for helping the sport develop, and this is my passion," she said.

Courting future stars

Former volleyball champion looks to give back to the game she loves



Hui Ruoqi plays volleyball with local children on a makeshift court in Chaodeng Mongolian township, Zhaoyuan county, Daqing, Heilongjiang province, in December last year. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Hui's doctoral thesis, which explores the professionalization and reform of volleyball, represents more than just a milestone in her academic career. With over 200,000 words, she hopes her work will be a significant contribution to the volleyball industry and inspire scholars, coaches and athletes to delve

into the sport's deeper issues.

During the FIVB Volleyball Nations League tournament in Hong Kong, Hui took on a new challenge, serving for the first time as an assistant technical delegate. She described this role as being "a pair of eyes" for the FIVB, overseeing every detail of the competition venue's

management.

Hui explained that the job involves a lot of responsibility. "We conduct pre-event research at the host site, inspect its preparations, and complete match reports afterward. If any emergencies arise, we also assist in resolving them," she said.

"During my career, I thought vol-

leyball was just what I saw every day. After retiring, I've come to see its far-reaching impact. It's a force that transcends time and space, inspiring generation after generation," Hui remarked.

Last December, Hui played a volleyball game with local children in Chaodeng Mongolian township,

Zhaoyuan county, Daqing, Heilongjiang province, braving temperatures as low as -30 C.

"Our court was nothing more than a small hollow in the ground, a net, and a few volleyballs. But, it held a unique charm unlike any other place I have played before," Hui recalled.

"From the harsh winters to the scorching summers, this humble volleyball court remains the favorite spot for local children to unwind after school."

In 2023, her Hui Foundation charity team launched the "100 Courts in 100 Cities" initiative. Through this program, they have built volleyball courts and organized village volleyball tournaments in places like Hotan prefecture, Xinjiang, and Zhongshan, Guangdong province. According to Hui, this initiative not only provides a stage for students and enthusiasts interested in volleyball, but also promotes the sport's development with follow-up training services.

The Hui Foundation also donated a volleyball court to the children of Chaodeng. Despite the challenging construction, due to the local topography and conditions, the children voluntarily joined the construction team, helping the workers carry sandbags and set up the net.

"I promised them that next time, we would play another game there. I hope that this court, along with others we will build in the future, will carry the volleyball dreams of many more children, fostering their physical health and instilling a spirit of perseverance."

With the Paris Olympics approaching, she wholeheartedly wishes all Olympians and China's women's volleyball team the very best.

"I hope they showcase their talents and savor every moment of competition. I also hope that our stories of perseverance on the court will inspire more people to boldly chase their own dreams."



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TENNIS

Palermo win prepares Zheng for Paris

By SUN XIAOCHEN
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China's top ace Zheng Qinwen has thrown down the gauntlet to her fellow Olympic competitors after defending her WTA 250 title in Palermo, boosting her medal prospects in Paris in the process.

A proven world-class competitor on clay, Zheng lived up to her pre-event billing as a hot favorite in Palermo, outplaying Karolina Muchova of the Czech Republic 2-1 in Sunday's final to successfully defend her title on the Italian island of Sicily — while regaining her winning momentum in time for the Olympic tournament on the same surface.

"It was a really tough match, because I think she's an amazing player," Top-seed Zheng said after beating Muchova, the No 2 seed, 6-4, 4-6, 6-2 in nearly three hours on Sunday.

"I think I gave her a lot of opportunities in the second set. I didn't play aggressively enough," said Zheng, who lost to former No 8 Muchova in their only previous encounter at the Madrid Open in 2022.

"It was a really tough match because she's an amazing player. She volleyed very well and had a tough drop shot for me. There were



Zheng Qinwen holds the trophy after defending her Palermo clay-court title on Sunday with a three-set win over Karolina Muchova. XINHUA

a lot of ups and downs. I was trying to be more aggressive in the third set, and I'm happy that it worked out."

It was Zheng's third career WTA singles title, following her first on home soil in Zhengzhou last year,

and secured a career-high ranking of No 7, as she heads into the Olympic tournament at Roland Garros next week as the sixth-seeded ace.

Zheng now has an 11-1 career win-loss record in Palermo. She conceded her only loss at the tournament to Jaqueline Cristian in the second round in 2022, but avenged that defeat to the Romanian in this year's quarterfinals.

"I feel that this place has been really special for me," Zheng said of her winning streak in Palermo. "I've had a lot of great performances here."

Zheng made this week's championship match without losing a set, reaching her first final on the WTA Tour since her maiden Grand Slam final appearance at this year's Australian Open.

With just a week before the all-important Olympic tournament, Zheng's title finish in her final tune-up prior to Paris has proved that she's managed the unusual, sudden surface switch midway through the season well enough for a deep run on her Olympic debut.

"I took a couple of days to rest, repair and refresh myself mentally, to recharge my energy, and to get ready to be back on the court,"

Zheng said of her adjustment, after suffering a consecutive first-round elimination at this year's Wimbledon Championships.

Although starting out on China's hard courts in her junior years, Zheng has developed an aggressive, yet resilient, game by training regularly on clay at her overseas base in Barcelona since turning professional in 2021. She has proved her competitiveness on the surface by reaching the round of 16 at the French Open in 2022.

"Clay is a completely different game from grass. We have done a lot of work on physical (training) to prepare for the Palermo tournament and the Olympic Games," said Zheng, who will represent the Chinese delegation in women's singles and, perhaps, mixed doubles with men's world No 31 Zhang Zhizhen in Paris.

"It means a lot to me to represent China. Of course, there will be a lot of pressure, but I hope I can handle it well," said the 21-year-old Hubei province native.

"Making it to the Olympic Games has been a dream of mine since childhood, and I really hope I can do something great for Chinese tennis."

Mao Yixun contributed to the story

Nadal beaten in first tour final for 2 years

Rafa Nadal suffered a setback in his Paris 2024 Olympics preparations on Sunday, as he was beaten 6-3, 6-2 in the Swedish Open final by Portuguese seventh seed Nuno Borges.

The 38-year-old Spaniard was playing his first title match since his 2022 French Open triumph, but saw his serve broken five times in the one hour and 27-minute contest, as Borges won his maiden tour final.

Making a first appearance at the ATP Tour 250 event since winning the singles as a 19-year-old in 2005, Nadal was warming up for his tilt at another Olympic medal at the Paris Games.

"Many congratulations to Nuno. You've been playing great during the whole week, so you deserve it more than anyone else here. It's always special winning a title," the 22-time Grand Slam champion said.

"I have been here for the week enjoying this amazing place. I really had fun on court, played some very long matches. Today wasn't my best day, but all the credit to Nuno. He played very well and it was so difficult for me, so well done."

Nadal missed almost all of 2023 with a hip problem, and his comeback earlier this year was stalled by a muscle tear, before small physical issues affected his preparation for the French Open, where he suffered a first-round exit.



Nuno Borges

The record 14-time French Open winner then skipped Wimbledon to prepare for the Olympic tennis tournament, which will take place at Roland Garros from July 27 to Aug 4. Nadal won an Olympic singles gold medal in Beijing in 2008 and doubles gold at Rio 2016.

He will team up with four-time major winner, 21-year-old Carlos Alcaraz, in the doubles at Paris 2024.

Borges, 27, sealed a maiden career title in his first-ever match-up against the former world No 1 with an ace.

"I don't know what to say. I think I was wishing for this moment for a while already," said Borges in his post-match interview.

"It's crazy, in tennis it doesn't happen when you expect it, sometimes. I know we all wanted Rafa to win, a part of me wished that, too, but something even bigger inside of me really pushed through today. I'm just really happy. I really don't know what to say, I'm very emotional."

AGENCIES