SPORTS

PARALYMPICS

PUSHING HERSELF FURTHER

Dedicated wheelchair tennis player looks to finally top the podium in Paris

By **LI YINGXUE** in Paris
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The famous motto of Roland Garros, "victory belongs to the most tenacious," echoed with new significance this summer, as Zheng Qinwen clinched a historic gold medal for China in women's singles at the Paris Olympics.

With her tenacity, Zheng not only secured the first-ever Olympic gold for a Chinese tennis player, but also surpassed Li Na's previous best finish of fourth place at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Now, as the Paris Paralympics approach, another chapter may be written on the same red clay. Zhu Zhenzhen, the runner-up in this year's French Open wheelchair women's singles, is set to carry that spirit forward. Representing China, Zhu is aiming for Paralympic gold, further emphasizing the country's rise in global tennis.

The wheelchair tennis competition at the Paris Paralympics is set to take place at Roland Garros from Aug 29 to Sept 7. It will mark Zhu's third appearance at the Paralympic Games, where she will compete in both the women's singles and doubles competition.

Zhu made her Paralympic debut at the 2016 Rio Games, advancing to the quarterfinals in both singles and doubles. She fondly remembers the experience of exchanging pins with athletes from around the world, a unique and enjoyable tradition that left a lasting impression.

At the Tokyo Paralympics, Zhu reached the singles quarterfinals and placed fourth in doubles. Last year, she claimed silver medals in both singles and doubles at the Hangzhou Asian Para Games, solidifying her position as one of China's top wheelchair tennis athletes.

Already in Paris to begin training, Zhu has set her sights on higher goals for the upcoming Paralympic Games. After a strong performance earlier this year, she is filled with determination to achieve a new milestone on the global stage.

"Everyone has a dream of winning gold," said Zhu, currently ranked sixth in the world. "I want to see the Chinese flag raised to the very top."

Zhu is no stranger to success on these red clay courts. In June, she reached the final of the French Open, narrowly losing to world No 1 Diede de Groot in a hard-fought 2-1 battle.

Despite the loss, Zhu feels the gap between them is narrowing.

"In the past, I couldn't even win a set against her, but this time, I pushed her all the way," she said.

The clay courts of Roland Garros seem to suit Zhu's style of play.

"I'm a hardworking player, particularly strong at chasing down the ball. On clay, that gives me an advantage and creates more opportunities," she said.

With a gold medal dream driving her, Zhu admits she has imagined what it would feel like to reach the highest part of the podium. "Just thinking about winning Olympic gold gets me excited," she said.



China's wheelchair tennis player Zhu Zhenzhen is no stranger to the red clay of Roland Garros, having made the final of the recent French Open, finishing as runner-up. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Determined youth

At 35, Zhu has dedicated 18 years to mastering wheelchair tennis. Stricken with osteomyelitis at two, leaving her unable to fully use her legs, Zhu's passion for sports has remained undiminished.

"I was always active — kicking shuttlecocks, skipping rope, playing with elastic bands and playing badminton," she recalled.

"Even with crutches, I was lively and engaged and playing with other kids.

"For me, a disability in my lower limbs simply means I can't walk. With crutches, I was just like any other child," Zhu stated.

Zhu's journey with wheelchair tennis began at 17. Transitioning from a regular wheelchair to a sports-specific one proved challenging initially, however, her wheelchair has since become an extension of her body.

Today, Zhu moves seamlessly around the court, demonstrating refined control and agility.

"Wheelchair tennis presents unique challenges. Normal players move from side to side easily, but we must navigate turns and control the chair manually," Zhu explained.

"Operating the chair and preparing for a shot requires different skills compared with using your feet."

"For us, coordinating hand movements to control the chair, while simultaneously setting up for shots, is far more complex than for normal players," she added.

Through dedicated practice, Zhu has achieved remarkable success on the court. At the 2011 National Disabled Games, Zhu secured gold medals in both the doubles and team events.

Her notable achievements continued in 2018 at the Jakarta Asian Para Games, where she and her partner Huang Huimin won the women's doubles title, making history as China's first gold medalists in wheelchair tennis at the continental tournament.

As Zhu got to know, through taking part in international tournaments, that wheelchair tennis is featured at the sport's premier events — the Grand Slam tournaments — she saw a broader stage and greater opportunities.

"I aspire to reach higher levels and compete in major tournaments to further refine my skills," Zhu said.

Pioneering player

In 2018, Zhu became China's first professional wheelchair tennis player. Without the resources for a coach, she managed her travel alone, propelling her everyday wheelchair and pushing her suitcase with one hand, while carrying her competition wheelchair with the other.

Handling everything from tournament registrations to logistics, Zhu initially relied on translation apps, but soon improved her English. She can now efficiently plan her competition schedule and manage all the details herself.

However, unexpected issues still arise. During a tournament in Spain, Zhu's luggage went missing.

"I had to buy new clothes and a racket. I borrowed a wheelchair and equipment from the event organizers and other athletes, which allowed me to compete," she recalled.

In her view, winning a match doesn't mean she is free from mistakes, so she continuously works to improve her skills. After a defeat, she analyzes each point to establish what went wrong and then makes adjustments.

"I must keep pushing forward until I win. I am very strict with myself, always looking for what I didn't do well in training and in the match, and trying to fix it," she said.

Dong Fuli, coach of the Chinese wheelchair tennis team, noted that Zhu has shown significant growth through her years of international competition.

"Her vision and perspective have broadened greatly," Dong said. "She is more diligent than most, working hard on flexibility and physical conditioning. She is also brave enough to challenge and surpass herself."

Despite frequent international competitions, Zhu still lacks a stable support team, and sometimes has to look for coaches and training partners at short notice. Although she has secured sponsorship for her equipment, she continues to seek additional financial support.

"To reach the world's top level, a more professional support team is essential, especially a stable collaboration with high-level coaches, to achieve higher rankings," Zhu said.

"I hope wheelchair tennis in China will receive more attention and support. I have a strong sense of mission, and wish to help young athletes, creating better conditions for them, and elevating Chinese wheelchair tennis to a world-class level."

Last October, the International Tennis Federation held a wheelchair tennis ranking tournament in Beijing — a first for China.

"I hope more international-level events will be held domestically in the future, allowing us to accumulate points and improve our rankings at home," Zhu stated. "I encourage young Chinese players to participate in more competitions, gain experience, learn from strong opponents and improve themselves.

"I love being an athlete and having the responsibility of making it possible for everyone to play the sport. I cherish being able to embody the Paralympic spirit of understanding, friendship, solidarity and fair play, and promote these values in my daily life," she said.

Team China targeting a tsunami of swimming medals

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As one of China's flagship teams at the Paralympics, the swimming squad has wasted no time in adjusting to the rigors of competition in Paris. Having battled long flights and jet lag, the team is now settling in, readying itself for the upcoming games.

Set to take place from Aug 29 to Sept 7 at the Paris La Defense Arena, the swimming competition will see China field 46 athletes — 21 men and 25 women — making the team the second-largest contingent after athletics.

Wei Wei, a staff member on China's Paralympic swimming team, said that the team, along with the second batch of the Chinese delegation, arrived at the Paralympic Village in Paris on the evening of Aug 21.

Despite the long-haul flight and having to adjust to the time difference, the athletes have quickly acclimated, and the team is in good overall shape as the athletes prepare for competition.

At the Tokyo Paralympics, China's swimming team delivered a remarkable performance, taking home 19 golds, 19 silvers, and 18 bronze medals. These achievements have heightened expectations for their showing in Paris.

However, Wei noted that, this time around, the team faces greater challenges. Beyond climate, diet and time zone adjustments, classification changes have increased the difficulty for some of the Tokyo gold medalists to defend their titles.

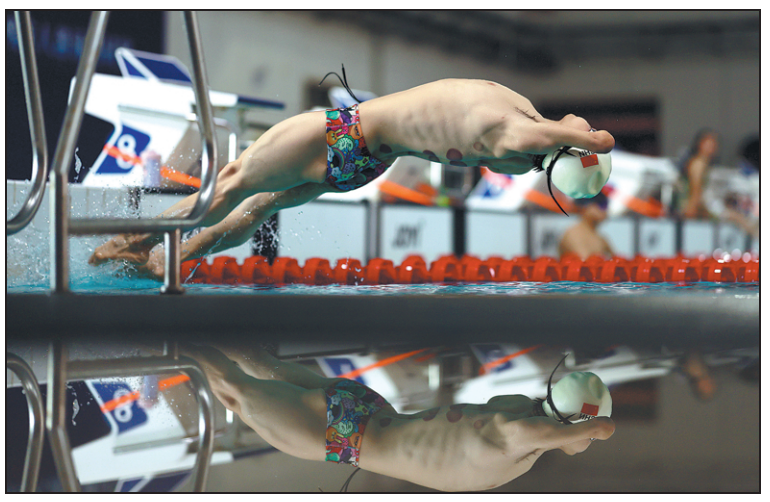
The Chinese swimmers are slated to compete in more than 80 events at the Paris Paralympics. Despite the increased challenges, the team remains determined to overcome obstacles and deliver a strong performance, Wei said.

Veteran swimmer Lu Dong, known as the "armless mermaid", has competed in several Paralympic Games, including London, Rio, and Tokyo, and has won multiple gold medals.

"Having competed internationally so often, I've quickly adjusted to the time difference," Lu said. "I just finished a training session at the gym. Since my events are still a bit of time away, I hope to be in peak condition when the competition starts."

Before coming to Paris, Lu treated herself to a special pedicure. The designs on her toenails include the Paralympic logo, the Chinese flag, and a gold medal — along with blue representing the color of water.

"I hope to deliver my best swim this time and show even more progress than before," she said.



The Chinese swimmers are set to continue to make big splashes during the Paris Paralympics. WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY

The youngest athlete on Team China, 15-year-old swimmer Jiang Hui, will compete in six events. She began training the day after her arrival in Paris, spending up to five hours a day in the pool. Competing in her first Paralympic Games, Jiang hopes to surpass her personal best.

"I don't have much experience in international competitions, and with so many events, my coach just wants me to learn from the experience," Jiang said. She recalled feeling overjoyed and excited when she found out she would be representing China at the Paralympics, immediately sharing the news with her family and friends.

The Chinese team includes both emerging talents like Jiang and seasoned veterans. Tokyo Paralympic gold medalist Jia Hongguang, who only became a swimmer at the age of 21, will compete in his fourth Paralympic Games in Paris.

At 36, Jia acknowledges this may be his final Games and hopes to finish his journey with a strong performance.

Now working in disability-related fields, Jia expressed his desire to inspire more people with disabilities to fully embrace life through his efforts and achievements.

Since preparing for the Hangzhou Asian Para Games last year, the Chinese swimming team has been working on a comprehensive training plan in sync with the upcoming Paris Paralympics.

According to Wei, a scientific research team has been closely involved with the swimmers, assisting with physiological and biochemical testing, physical conditioning and psychological support.

During winter training, a special underwater technical analysis was conducted to ensure the athletes' techniques meet the required standards, providing valuable feedback for the coaches.

In June, the 2024 National Disabled Swimming Invitational Competition was held in Beijing. It served as both a training session, and an opportunity for the athletes to fine-tune their competitive readiness for the Paris Games.