

SPORTS



Tracking Success delivers the inside story for global sports fans, exploring what makes elite performers tick.

FACTFILE

Name: Wang Manyu
Age: 25
Height: 176 cm
Birthplace: Qiqihar, Heilongjiang province
Talent: Table Tennis
Hobbies: Listening to music, cooking, cycling, bullet journaling
Achievements:
Women's singles title at 2018 Jakarta Asian Games
Women's doubles title at the 2019 World Championships in Budapest
Gold in women's team event at Tokyo 2020
Women's singles and doubles titles at 2021 Houston World Table Tennis Championships
Gold in women's team event at Paris 2024



TABLE TENNIS

FOR THE LOVE of THE GAME

Champion paddler Wang Manyu is redefining her relationship with table tennis



On her way to glory, Wang Manyu said she had been used to putting all her emotions into table tennis, and that her joy, her anger, her sorrow and her happiness were all tied to the sport. XINHUA

By XING WEN
xingwen@chinadaily.com.cn

The buzz in the Infinity Arena reached a fever pitch as the WTT Finals Fukuoka 2024 barreled toward its grand finale.

Fans filled the stands, their excitement palpable, as they awaited the showdown for the season-ending honors.

The current world No 2 Wang Manyu continued to dominate, stealing the spotlight as she stormed into the women's singles final in Japan.

The final on Nov 24 was a nail-biter. After an intense hour and eight minutes, Wang outlasted her compatriot Chen Xingtong, clinching the women's crown with a 4-3 victory.

It's Wang's first WTT Finals women's singles title.

"This is a breakthrough for me. We both brought 100 percent to the table and I'm very happy to have won. I didn't set any goal for this tournament, I just hoped to play my best," said Wang.

The Finals win is Wang's third singles title on the WTT Series circuit this season, adding to her victorious Singapore Smash campaign in March and WTT Champions Frankfurt 2024 crown on Nov 10.

Although Wang got the spoils at the year-ending tournament for the top eight players, 2024 has still been a roller coaster for her.

At 22, Wang got the chance to play in the team event at the Tokyo Olympics because of Liu Shiwen's withdrawal due to an elbow injury.

She, along with teammates Chen Meng and Sun Yingsha, won the women's team gold.

A little over a month later, at the 14th National Games held in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, she swept Sun Yingsha 4-0 in the wom-

en's singles final. Following that, in November, at the 2021 Houston World Table Tennis Championships, she lifted both the singles and doubles titles.

In the Paris cycle, Wang aimed for one of the two Olympic women's singles spots for the Chinese team.

However, in May, a loss shattered her hopes.

The World Table Tennis Saudi Smash 2024 was the final battle to determine who would qualify for the Paris Olympics women's singles. In the second round, Wang fell 1-3 to India's Manika Batra.

According to the national women's team selection criteria, each loss against a player from another association is a deduction of 3,000 points.

The loss cost her a place in the singles competition in Paris. It was a heavy blow for Wang.

"After facing so many difficulties and getting this far, to lose here felt really frustrating," she recalled at the time.

She was deeply saddened, but had to adjust her mindset to prepare for the women's team competition in Paris.

On August 10, Wang, along with Sun and Chen, retained their Olympic crown, overwhelming Japan 3-0 in the final.

Going through so many emotional ups and downs during that period, Wang said, made her rethink her relationship with table tennis.

"I used to put all my emotions into table tennis. My joy, anger, sorrow and happiness were all tied to it," she confessed in a recent interview with China Daily.

She said that, as a child, practicing a few more strokes, or learning a new technique each day, made her happy and gave her a sense of achievement. But now, winning championships has become the norm for her,



I believe the first thing is to maintain a passion for the sport. With passion, there is motivation, and with motivation, I can have a better mindset to continue on the path ahead."

Wang Manyu, women's world No 2 from China



Online
Watch the video by scanning the code.

and she once felt that only winning Olympic gold, and completing a prestigious "Grand Slam" — collecting titles at the World Championships, World Cup and the Olympics — would be considered true success.

"This grand goal made it difficult for me to feel the joy of table tennis in my daily routine.

"I used to be overly eager for success, almost treating the dream as something I must achieve. But now, I believe the first thing is to maintain a passion for the sport. With passion, there is motivation, and with motivation, I can have a better mindset to continue on the path ahead.

"Otherwise, training every single day would

get really tough. So, I need to find that pure love for table tennis I had when I was a kid."

The prodigy first got involved with the sport at the age of five, when her aunt suggested to her mother that Wang should learn a special skill.

Han Liangui, a local coach in Qiqihar, took Wang under his wing. Han still remembers the first time he met her.

"Wang stood half a head taller than her peers," he recalled.

"After training, other kids would be noisy and playful, but she would either continue practicing on the court, or just sit quietly on the sidelines, showing maturity beyond her years."

In Han's view, the reserved girl displayed an "uncommon talent" for the sport.

"She learned quickly, was determined and trained with intense focus. Sometimes, if I asked her to hit 20 balls to practice a particular tactic, she wouldn't accept hitting even one less," he said.

After coaching Wang for 15 months, Han sent her to the Qiqihar Sports School.

"I hoped she would have a better environment for learning the sport. Such a promising talent shouldn't be wasted," said Han.

Liu Xiaodong was among Wang's coaches at the sports school.

He recalled that Wang's supportive family always ensured she attended training on time, regardless of the weather, never missing a single day.

"One time, even with a fever of 38 C, she came to train. Seeing such self-discipline and determination in a six-year-old was truly touching," Liu said.

Back then, Wang relished competing, especially when she triumphed over older or more experienced players.

"At that time, I was generally happy. More often, people noticed a kid that had talent, a

kid that was progressing quickly. For me, it was more about building confidence and growing a love for table tennis," said Wang.

"Even when I lost, I found it interesting, because the challenge helped me improve."

Now, as a world-class player, she finds that being overly focused on achieving her dreams, and struggling with how to improve, can put a strain on her relationship with the sport.

"I'm trying to find a life outside my career, to enrich myself," she said.

From what she posts on the short-video platform Douyin, which includes her first attempts at cooking, going for bike rides and taking walks by the sea, it's clear that she has recently been enjoying her life.

She was particularly fond of her recent travels to the Aranya seaside community in Hebei province.

"Being there with friends, especially by the sea, I felt incredibly relaxed," she said.

"Previously, I rarely went out with friends, if at all, so enjoying those carefree moments felt precious to me."

Wang added that her focus has shifted from achieving specific dreams or accomplishments to her own personal growth.

"The hardest part is overcoming some inner challenges and finding the best version of myself. Once I do, many things will naturally fall into place," she said.

After the Paris Games, Wang missed several international competitions due to injury and family matters. Following a period of rest, she returned to the international stage at the WTT Champions Frankfurt, securing the women's singles title on Nov 10.

Just two weeks later, she repeated her triumph at the WTT Finals Fukuoka.

Having reassessed her relationship with table tennis, and reconciled it with her own personal goals, Wang is now poised to begin a new chapter in her career.



Left: Fans cheer Wang Manyu during the 2024 World Table Tennis (WTT) China Smash at the Beijing Shougang Industrial Park during the recent National Day holiday. Right: Wang Manyu (far right) celebrates with teammates Chen Meng (left), Sun Yingsha (second left) and head coach Ma Lin after winning the Paris Olympics women's table tennis team gold in August. XINHUA

