SPORTS

YEARENDER

Zheng enjoys an ace season

Olympic champion leads China's tennis revival in a remarkable year

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Underlined by historic individual performances and surging public interest in the sport, Chinese tennis has celebrated a remarkable year in 2024 with unprecedented success, on and off the court.

Leading the highlights, and arguably all other sporting feats in 2024, was Zheng Qinwen's history-making Paris 2024 campaign, as she defied long odds to deliver Asia's first tennis singles Olympic gold medal, and the second overall, to inspire a nationwide craze for a racket sport that has long been overshadowed by table tennis and badminton in China.

Zheng's Paris heroics, played out on the red clay of Roland Garros in August, built on tennis legend Li Na's trailblazing first major win in 2011 — also celebrated at the iconic French Open venue — convincing fans, retired players and pundits alike that the sport's future is thriving and in good hands 10 years after Li's retirement.

It also marked a full-circle milestone for tennis promotion in a country where Olympic success traditionally outranks achievements at all other events, which began with now retired pair, Li Ting and Sun Tiantian, winning the women's doubles final at the Athens Games in 2004.

Zheng's compatriots Zhang Zhizhen and Wang Xinyu put the icing on the cake by winning a silver medal in mixed doubles, helping the tennis squad stand out among all of China's medal-laden programs at the Paris Games.

Zheng got her breakout year off to a flying start Down Under, with her first major final appearance at the Australian Open, followed by a strong second half that saw her claim two titles at the WTA250 event in Palermo, Italy, and in the WTA500 in Tokyo.

She carried her Olympic momentum deep into the season, as she reached her first WTA1000 final at home in Wuhan, before fighting her way to the championship match in Riyadh on her WTA Finals debut, finishing the year at a career-high world No 5.

The 22-year-old also led all women on the Tour in total aces served (445) and most three-set wins (21). She was also announced as the WTA Fan Awards' favorite singles player of the year on Dec 19, proving her growing popularity worldwide.

Given that it was just her third full season competing on the pro circuit, Zheng left fans assured that her fruitful 2024 is just the beginning of something greater.

Other female players who had a year to remember include China's second-highest ranked woman Wang, at No 37, who reached two semifinals on the tour to go with her Olympic mixed doubles silver, and resilient veteran Zhang Shuai, who snapped a disheartening 24-match losing streak to revive her storied career.

Zhang clinched her first singles win in 603 days, following a Tour record 24-match victory drought, with a straight-sets win over McCartney Kessler of the United States in her opening-round match at the China Open in Beijing, before fighting all the way to the quarterfinals of the WTA1000 event.

"Chinese tennis has achieved huge breakthroughs this year," Zhang, a 35-year-old two-time major doubles winner, said on Thursday in Perth, Australia, while representing China at the United Cup, an 18-country mixed-team tournament.

"A lot of kids have grown interested in tennis and started to practice the sport. Whereas in the past, they probably would choose table tennis or badminton, now they are picking up tennis rackets. So, I think we all did a good job."

The soaring popularity of tennis in China, inspired by the impressive results at the elite level, has drawn a massive number of new fans to tournaments during the pro season's "China Swing", turning events across the country into hot holiday destinations.

As Asia's only men's and women's combined tournament, the China Open, which took place from Sept 23 to Oct 6, attracted nearly 300,000 visitors, marking a 50 percent increase from 2023, with its total ticket sales setting an all-time record at 80 million yuan ($11 million).

Sales of the tournament's new mascot, a tennis-ball-shaped doll named "A Zhong", were particularly strong, up 50 percent compared to last year's mascot sales.

Restaurants, cafes and snack bars at the event also saw a significant uptick in business this year, with revenue of on-site catering services exceeding 10 million yuan, marking an annual increase of over 30 percent, according to the tournament organizing committee.

Following the Beijing tournament, this year's Rolex Shanghai Masters, a top-flight ATP1000 event, also set a new attendance record of more than 228,000 during its two-week run, despite mid-tournament rain delays. It also achieved all-time high revenues from sponsorship, ticketing and merchandising.

"The turnout this year far exceeded our expectations, thanks to the booming tennis market in China," said Yang Yibin, chairman of Shanghai Juss Sports Development Group, organizer and promoter of the prestigious Shanghai tournament.

"Bigger crowds and wider broadcast coverage helped enhance the tournament's appeal, bringing in more sponsorship revenues that will contribute to greater investment in more development projects associated with the tournament.

"We've built such a healthy and consistent business model that empowers us to constantly improve the quality and service of the tournament for sustainable success," said Yang.



Leading the charge in China's tennis revival on the women's side were Zheng Qinwen (below), veteran Zhang Shuai (above) and rising star Wang Xinyu (below left).
WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY AND XINHUA



Chinese men make a racket in 2024

By SUN XIAOCHEN

The 2024 season has seen Chinese tennis emerge as a true force to be reckoned with on the international stage.

And, it's safe to say, for the first time ever, its men have contributed just as much to that world-elite status as their female compatriots.

Led by world No 45 Zhang Zhizhen, three Chinese men, including No 50 Shang Juncheng and No 65 Buyunchaokete, have ended the 2024 season ranked within the top-100, realizing Chinese fans' long-cherished dream of cheering for their own at the top of the men's game, as they have for their women's stars for decades.

In a series of "firsts" for Chinese men's tennis, between them, the trio have reached five semifinals and two finals on the highly competitive ATP Tour, with the youngest Shang, a 19-year-old sensation, winning his first and Chinese men's second tour-level singles title at the ATP250 event in Chengdu in September.

As the first Chinese to lift an ATP singles title in Dallas, Texas, in February 2023, injury-plagued talent Wu Yibing, a former world No 54 and 2017 US Open boys' champion, also capped off the 2024 season on a positive note after fighting into the third round at the ATP1000 Masters in Shanghai in October, showing some promise for a healthy return.

With three direct entries via rankings, and two wildcards, five Chinese mainland players entered the singles main draw at this year's Shanghai Masters, making it the biggest ever Chinese representation at any professional tournament on the ATP Tour.

And Zhang hopes this strength in numbers will only continue to grow, given the sport's surging popularity in the country, driven by a hugely successful year.

"If people are watching us do something and then trying to follow us, that's great news for us," Zhang told atp.com on the eve of Team China's United Cup opener against Team Brazil in Perth, Australia, last week.

"Most Chinese people are watching table tennis or badminton at the Olympics, not tennis, but suddenly they're watching (our) final live on TV," said Zhang, who won a mixed doubles silver medal at Paris 2024 with partner Wang Xinyu in August.

"Right away, more people know who we are, and more people are trying to play, trying to learn. That's really good."

Despite a month-long season break, Zhang's momentum shows no sign of slowing down, as he breezed past Brazil's Thiago Monteiro 6-3, 6-0 in just 54 minutes in a men's singles match on Friday to help China beat Brazil in a group tie at the United Cup, an 18-country mixed-team tournament.

Zhang's female counterpart Gao Xinyu got Team China off to a scintillating start by stunning Brazil's world No 17 Beatriz Haddad Maia in a three-hour and 22-minute, three-set win in the women's singles opener, which ended up being the longest women's match in tournament history.

Already a strong baseline hitter and tough defender, Zhang made the work look easy on Friday by winning 87 percent of his first-serve points against Monteiro, thanks to a solid offseason training program particularly focused on improving his serving motion.

The 28-year-old Shanghai native, the oldest among China's top-three, hailed the healthy competition with his younger compatriots as a strong motivation.

"I always see this pressure in a good way; they're pushing me," said Zhang, who started the 2024 season as China's only top-100 man.

"For sure, they are going to overtake me one day, but they're also pushing me forward. They give me a more positive way to look at these things.

"More energy is coming through. As an athlete, you want to keep the highest status for as long as you can, (whether it) be Chinese No 1, or even world No 1.

"This year, 2024, has been really good, really successful. I'm quite happy with what I'm doing, and also with my team."



Zhang Zhizhen (above), Shang Juncheng (far left) and Wu Yibing had an outstanding year in 2024, raising the men's game in China to new levels of success.
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