SPORTS



Members of the Chinese team celebrate after Liu Shengshu and Tan Ning (inset) defeat South Korea's Baek Ha-na and Lee So-hee in their women's doubles match at the Sudirman Cup Finals in Xiamen, Fujian province, on Sunday. AFP AND XINHUA

BADMINTON

Smashing success

Young stars shine, as China claims 14th Sudirman Cup

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Its record 14th mixed team title for sure deserves all the plaudits, but it's the maturing of a younger generation that has left China's badminton program feeling good entering the new Olympic cycle.

Despite losing its seeming invincibility in some individual events, the Chinese badminton team has again proved that its collective might, in both genders, remains beyond the reach of its rivals, as it celebrated winning its fourth straight Sudirman Cup Finals in Xiamen, Fujian province, on Sunday.

The battle for the throne at the biennial world mixed team championship has turned out to be, arguably, the least unpredictable across all of sport's major tournaments after Team China collected a record-extending 14th title on home soil at the Cup Finals' 19th edition. Only two other nations, South Korea and Indonesia, have ever touched the trophy in the championship's 36-year history.

China's stranglehold on the mixed team title, secured by a 3-1 victory over South Korea at Xiamen's Phoenix Gymnasium, came down to the national program's consistency and depth, which the country's badminton chief Zhang Jun feels particularly proud of.

"I think this victory speaks volumes about the success of our talent development, especially the growth of our younger generation," Zhang, president of the Chinese Badminton Association, said at the tournament's closing news conference on Sunday.

"It shows that Chinese badminton has built quite a solid development system. We have young players emerging from the junior team, promoted into the national reserve team and then thriving in the senior team.

"We've established a complete multi-tier talent program, so, I think our future on the world stage looks quite good," said Zhang, a two-time Olympic mixed doubles champion alongside his partner Gao Ling (Sydney 2000 and Athens 2004).

In a rematch of the championship's 2023 final, the host squad leaned on its battle-tested blend of youth and experience to deny South Korea a fifth title, improving its head-to-head final record against its East Asian neighbor to 5-2 since the two nations' first meeting in 1997 in Glasgow.

To the excitement of an electrifying home crowd, China's young mixed doubles pair Feng Yanzhe and Huang Dongping got the host off to a scintillating start by beating the South Korean duo Seo Seung-jae and Chae Yu-jung 21-16, 17-21, 21-15.

The reigning women's singles Olympic champion and world No 1 An Se-young, however, proved too strong for China's world No 2 Wang Zhiyi, who put up a gusty fight, but was outplayed over 57 minutes, and in straight sets, by the mighty An.

An's almost flawless performance, underlined by her finishing the tournament without dropping a game, has seen her rack up 11 victories out of 15 total meetings against Wang.

"Regardless of the result, it was a great learning curve for me," the 25-year-old Wang said of the loss.

"A veteran and champion like her, they always prevail in problem-solving, decision-making and in dealing with the pressure. This is where I think I need to improve as well," she said.

The glimmer of hope for the South Koreans, provided by An, was soon dimmed by China's own veteran, as a rampant men's world No 1 Shi Yuqi restored the host's advantage by routing Jeon Hyeok-jin in straight sets in the decisive third rubber.

The attacking game of Shi, who'd won all three previous meetings against Jeon before Sunday, proved too much for the South Korean, as the 29-year-old Chinese star maintained the recent momentum that saw him win his second career All England Open title in March.

Once hailed as the successor of the legendary Lin "Super" Dan, Shi suffered a series of setbacks early on in his career, including three surgeries and a disciplinary suspension, which had threatened to ground his career before it fully took flight.

The spell of misfortune, however, has simply proved to merely be a test of character on his path to something great, as his newfound momentum is building at just the right time.

"First of all, Shi Yuqi, because he's in very good condition and he takes better control of his game now than he did," Zhang replied when asked which player had stood out for him throughout the tournament.

Although twice failing to go beyond the quarterfinals at the Olympics, Shi, who was stopped by Danish two-time Olympic champion Viktor Axelsen and Thailand's Kunlavut Vitidsarn at Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024, respectively, remains steadfast in his ambition to break through on the ultimate stage.

"I appreciate the team's trust in me, because I was not at my best before this championship," said Shi, who was banned for 10 months by the CBA due to his "unsportsmanlike" behavior when he chose to retire abruptly from his 2020 Thomas Cup semifinal match against Japan's Kento Momota.

"Hopefully, I can use my takeaways from this week in Xiamen to better prepare for future tournaments," he said.

With the Xiamen crowd on their feet, roaring their side on, China's world No 1 women's pair, and Paris 2024 silver medalists, Liu Shengshu and Tan Ning delivered under pressure, beating Baek Ha-na and Lee So-hee 21-14, 21-17 in 55 minutes to seal the championship for the host.

"Liu and Tan also played well in the women's doubles, showcasing their heavy smashes and strong attack," said Zhang.

Liu, 21, and Tan, 22, are expected to help Team China maintain its tight grip on women's doubles at major international tournaments leading up to the Los Angeles Games in 2028.



Shi Yuqi celebrates his win over South Korea's Jeon Hyeok-jin in their men's singles rubber on Sunday. AFP

BASKETBALL

Knicks storm back to force OT, take down Celtics

Jalen Brunson and OG Anunoby each scored 29 points as the visiting New York Knicks earned a 108-105 overtime victory against the Boston Celtics in Game 1 of the Eastern Conference semifinals Monday night.

The Knicks overcame a 20-point deficit in the third quarter and sealed the win when Mikal Bridges stole the ball from Jaylen Brown after Boston inbounded the ball with three seconds to play.

"This team has fought all year, and been a pretty good road team," Knicks coach Tom Thibodeau said. "It's one game. There's a lot of emotional highs and lows in the playoffs, but no matter what happens, you have to keep moving forward."

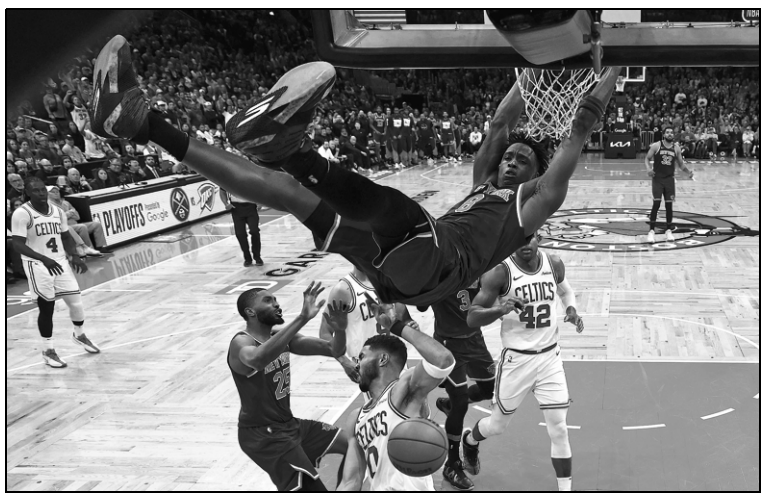
During the fourth quarter, Brunson tied the game at 89 with a 3-pointer and 91 on two free throws, before giving the Knicks their first lead since the second. His 3-pointer put them up 94-91 with 4:07 to play, and his third triple of the period extended New York's advantage to six points, but Boston responded with a 7-0 run to take a 98-97 lead.

It was 100-100 when Brunson missed a layup with two seconds left. After a timeout, Jayson Tatum missed a 21-footer at the buzzer. The game went to overtime, where Anunoby's dunk and foul shot, and Bridges' 3-pointer, gave the Knicks the cushion they needed to finish the comeback.

"Your defense, your toughness, your teamwork — I think that's paramount in a playoff game," Thibodeau said.

Karl-Anthony Towns was in foul trouble for much of the game, but had 14 points and 13 rebounds in 31 minutes.

Josh Hart had 14 points and 11 boards, and Bridges recorded eight points, seven assists, six rebounds and three steals while playing 51 of the possible 53 minutes.



OG Anunoby of the New York Knicks swings on the rim after dunking the ball against Jayson Tatum of the Boston Celtics in Game 1 of the NBA Eastern Conference second-round playoffs at TD Garden on Monday in Boston, Massachusetts. GETTY IMAGES VIA AFP

Brown and Tatum each tossed in a team-high 23 points for Boston. Tatum also had 16 rebounds, and Derrick White put up 19 points and 11 rebounds.

Kristaps Porzingis was scoreless in 13 minutes during the first half, and didn't play in the final two quarters with what the Celtics called an "illness". Boston's Sam Hauser also went to the locker room with an ankle injury with 28.5 seconds remaining in the third quarter and didn't return to the game.

"Obviously it impacts the game with (Porzingis') ability at both ends of the floor. Hopefully he's ready for Game 2," Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla said.

Boston led 26-25 after one quarter, and outscored New York by 15 in the second to take a 61-45 halftime lead.

Towns was called for his fourth foul and went to the bench with 7:07 left in the third quarter, but the Knicks made a strong run without him. New York was within six points before Al Horford made a 3-pointer with 6.2 seconds remaining in the quarter, which gave the Celtics an 84-75 lead entering the fourth.

"We left some of their good shooters open, so some personnel stuff, and they were able to get out in transition after some of our misses," Mazzulla said of the Knicks' comeback. "It's detail stuff that we need to be better at."

Game 2 in the best-of-seven series will be played Wednesday in Boston.

"The biggest challenge in the playoffs (is) dealing with the emotions of the playoffs," Thibodeau cautioned. "If you feel too good about yourself, you won't be ready for Game 2."

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