SPORTS

BASKETBALL



'Intern' puts in the work for Team China

Emergence of Wang Junjie at the Asia Cup has injected fresh confidence in the rebuild of the nation's men's team

Wang Junjie, the 20-year-old prospect who plays for the University of San Francisco in the NCAA, delivered some notable performances during the FIBA Asia Cup in Saudi Arabia earlier this month. XINHUA

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A cool "summer internship" has propelled Wang Junjie to the forefront of Chinese basketball, with the young prospect's breakout Asia Cup campaign bringing new vitality to the rebuild of the men's program.

A little-known, soon-to-be-junior at the University of San Francisco before the summer, Wang had no clue where his international debut with Team China at the FIBA Asia Cup in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, would take him — certainly there was no inkling that he'd end up as one of the tournament's poster boys after helping China achieve a runner-up finish, its best result in a decade.

Boasting a combination of size, touch and mobility, the 20-year-old forward put up an impressive performance, scoring 13 points, shooting 56.1 percent from the field, to go with 4.2 rebounds and 1.3 assists in 23.5 minutes per game as he stood tall for Team China in the absence of higher-profile teammates Yang Hansen, Portland Trail Blazers' star rookie, and NBA prospect Cui Yongxi and former Houston Rocket Zhou Qi.

After overpowering all its opponents on its way to the final, Team China was narrowly edged out 90-89 by world No 7 Australia in the gold-medal game on Aug 17, settling for silver in its first final at the continental showpiece since its 2015 title run.

Despite the agonizing near miss, the emergence of the bold and fearless next generation, underscored by Wang's unexpected rise, has breathed new life into the struggling team at international level.

More importantly, the intriguing background of Wang, known as Barry in the United States, who developed his game in China's school system all the way to joining the NCAA D1 program, has offered a fresh take on talent cultivation for Chinese basketball.

Dubbed as the "strongest intern" on Team China's summer assignment, Wang shrugged off the hype around his overnight breakout, stressing that it all came down to the hard work that nobody sees.

"Life is like a book. Some chapters are long, some short, filled with stories — many of them painful, unseen by others," Wang, who was selected into the tournament's All-Star Five, told The Paper in a recent interview.

"But what people end up seeing is only the polished version of me under the spotlight."

Born in Xuzhou, Jiangsu province, Wang started basketball training at four years old and soon flourished in the country's budding school system, overseen by his father, a PE teacher, as he helped Hailiang Junior High School claim the national U15 championship in 2020 and was named the final MVP for scoring 31 points and 19 rebounds.



Wang Junjie (left) and Hu Jinqiu were selected in the FIBA Asia Cup All-Star Five, alongside Australia's Jaylin Galloway and Jack McVeigh, and Iran's Sina Vahedi. XINHUA

A different path

His natural gifts of size and athleticism, coupled with hard work sharpening the fundamentals, helped Wang shine on the global stage after he was enrolled in the NBA Global Academy in Canberra in 2022 to train under veteran Australia National Basketball League coach Marty Clarke along with top international prospects.

At NBA's Basketball Without Borders Global Camp in February 2023, Wang stood out from a strong field that included current NBA stars Josh Giddey (Chicago Bulls) and Dyson Daniels (Atlanta Hawks), turning scouts' heads and earning offers from seven DCAA D1 college teams.

He eventually signed with the San Francisco Dons in April 2023 to become the first NBA Academy alumni from China to sign with a D1 program.

"Barry possesses great size and a skillset that gives him a chance to be an instant fan favorite here on the Hilltop. His work ethic, personality and high basketball IQ will make him a huge asset, both on and off the court," the Dons' head coach Chris Gerlufsen said in 2023 of Wang's arrival.

The road to the top, however, was a steep climb that has tested Wang's resilience to the limit.

"I barely felt pressure from my peers in China," Wang admitted in The Paper interview.

"Then I went from being the best to nearly the worst overnight. I felt tiny as dust. From starter, to almost the last man on the bench, it was frustrating."

After a season of struggle in his freshman year, where he earned only 7.5 minutes per game as a sub, Wang rose to the occasion in his sophomore season by earning an average 20.1 minutes in 33 games, including 24 starts, and contributing 6.2 points and 3.3 rebounds.

His always strong self-confidence, stemming from hard work, and improving overall game drew attention from Team China head coach Guo Shiqiang during a US scouting trip in January to draft talent for his Asia Cup roster.

To the surprise of even some of the squad's die-hard fans, the unheralded Wang suited up in red for the first time in Team China's Cup opener against the host on Aug 5, and the rest is history.

"Opportunities are rare. They don't come every day. When they do, you have to grab them tightly," said Wang.

"It (the one-point loss) proved we belong on the same level as the world's best. It gave us hope. If we keep pushing, keep working on our details, why can't we beat them one day?"

Now that he's taken another step up the ladder, Wang is looking further upward.

"Perhaps next year, I will sign up with the NBA Draft to try my chance at the professional level. Should I go undrafted, I will continue seeking opportunities to ply my trade in overseas leagues and look to elevate my game in higher-level competitions after graduation."

Yang Hanchu contributed to this story.

FITNESS

Visually impaired masseurs turn their hands to Hyrox

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Left: Zhao Zhe (left), his guide Han Yue (second from left) and fellow triathlon club members pose with their medals. **Right:** Jiang Qi rows as his guide Cui Cui watches on. MICHAEL RHYS CARD / CHINA DAILY

For Beijing-based massage therapists Jiang Qi and Zhao Zhe, who are visually impaired, the world of athletics has always reached them through sound and touch. From their treatment table, they've listened to clients recount finishes at marathons, personal bests in triathlons and new benchmarks in CrossFit. Then one day, a new word entered their vocabulary — Hyrox.

The fitness competition Hyrox blends running with functional exercises, a one-kilometer run followed by a workout station, repeated eight times.

Since its inception in Germany in 2017, Hyrox has evolved into a global phenomenon. It wasn't until November 2024 that the event made its Chinese mainland debut at the National Agricultural Exhibition Center in Beijing.

Notably, the competition allows adaptive athletes with partial or complete loss of vision to participate with the assistance of guide runners.

Han Yue, a triathlon enthusiast from a local club named Longyuan, recalled that the club's members often chatted on Zhao and Jiang's massage tables after training.

"Zhao and Jiang would curiously ask what we trained that day and whether we were tired. You could tell it wasn't just professional habit — there was a sense of yearning in their voice."

That yearning was quietly noted and remembered by their attentive clients.

When they learned that Hyrox — which includes singles, doubles and relay divisions — would return to Beijing on Aug 23, Han thought perhaps the club could bring Jiang and Zhao into the mixed relay.

"All the time we hear clients talk about the excitement of crossing the finish line, the joy of breaking personal records and all the ups and downs of training. If I said I didn't envy them, that would be a lie," said Zhao.

"We also crave challenges and that feeling of working together toward a goal," added Jiang, who once played blind soccer.

"Since we work in sports rehabilitation, we want to better understand under what circumstances people are more prone to injuries. And we also wanted to try it ourselves," said Jiang.

On Saturday, the fitness competition drew 4,700 participants and nearly 3,000 enthusiastic spectators to the capital city, energizing the China National Convention Center.

Zhao and Jiang teamed up with members from Longyuan triathlon club, forming two four-person teams in the mixed relay division. Zhao, guided by Han, completed a two-kilometer run, alongside a 50-meter sled push and rowing one kilometer, while Jiang, under the guidance of Cui Cui, performed a 50-meter sled pull alongside the rowing and running.

Zhao had to push a 152 kg sled for 50 meters, and he struggled to keep it moving in a straight line, at one point appearing utterly exhausted. Han, standing next to him, and spectators and fellow athletes cheered him on loudly from the sidelines — shouting encouragement and advice.

"I heard everyone cheering for me," recalled Zhao.

"The race was more exhausting than I imagined, and I wasn't fully prepared, but I'm very grateful for my teammates' help and the inclusive and friendly atmosphere for us visually impaired people," he added.

Cui, whose wrist was joined to that of Jiang by a green tether, said that Jiang was particularly excited at the start of the race and ran very fast.

"I could feel Jiang was really excited and happy, running so fast that I almost couldn't keep up. The track was very wide, making it perfect for him to run freely," she recalled.

Cui reminded Jiang to maintain a steady pace. During the one kilometer rowing segment, she continuously called out the remaining distance to encourage him and boost his confidence.

Both teams successfully completed the race and they hugged, high-fived and proudly held up their medals for photos.

"I feel more confident and more curious than before," said Zhao. "I used to think many things were impossible, but now I feel, maybe, I can give them a try."