

SPORTS

WINTER OLYMPICS

GEARING UP FOR ITALIAN JOB

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As the countdown clock strikes 100 days, athletes start to feel the heat

With their final preparations gaining traction on ice and snow, Chinese athletes have hit the home stretch, gearing up for Milano-Cortina 2026 in high spirits and aiming to prove their success at Beijing 2022 was more than a flash in the pan.

Laced up and pumped up — China's ice and snow sports contingents have gone all out on their final push toward the 2026 Winter Olympics, with established champions and young hopefuls seeking to fine-tune their respective crafts as the 100-day countdown to the Feb 6 opening starts on Wednesday.

The 2026 edition features 116 medal events — seven more than Beijing 2022 — to be contested at 13 venues spread out from Milan's urban area to Italy's northern mountain regions, including Cortina d'Ampezzo, Bormio and Livigno, all renowned Italian Alps resort clusters.

As an emerging winter sports contender, backed up by its record nine-gold campaign at its home Games, the Chinese delegation is expected to continue demonstrating its progress in expanding its

strength from a limited number of ice events to more snow disciplines, led by reigning Olympic champions such as freeski star Eileen Gu, snowboarding phenom Su Yiming and aerials veteran Xu Mengtao.

Another impressive Olympic campaign, following the pinnacle of Beijing 2022, is very much needed to maintain the country's surging momentum in winter sports, with over 300 million people engaged in ice and snow activities. Since Beijing won the bid to host the 2022 Games, public consumption of winter sports and tourism packages has emerged as a key contributor to the growth of China's overall sports industry.

"Our teams should push ahead with their preparations (for Milano-Cortina 2026) with perseverance and resilience, carrying on the fighting spirit from Beijing 2022," Gao Zhidan, president of Chinese Olympic Committee, said during his recent visit to the national winter sports training center.

"I hope our athletes will cherish the opportunity to compete for national pride, with unwavering confidence in their ability to show-

case the strength, spirit and image of our country."

A shift in strength

A traditional powerhouse in ice events such as short-track speed skating and figure skating, in recent seasons, Team China has seen its competitive edge tilt toward snow, after several of its national skating programs hit a patch of rough ice due to stagnant talent development and the surging progress of international opponents.

The country's most decorated winter sports team, the short-track speed skating squad, has already felt the heat from tougher international races entering the Olympic season, underlined by its subpar performances from the first two legs on the 2025-26 ISU Short Track World Tour earlier this month.

The once top-notch team, which has contributed 12 Olympic gold medals to China's all-time haul of 22 since 1980, struggled to keep up with the scintillating pace of red-hot powerhouses Canada and South Korea at the two legs in Montreal, where it only managed to claim one gold from the mixed 2,000m relay during

the opening leg on Oct 9.

With the tour resuming action on Nov 20 in Gdansk, Poland, the team will attempt to step it up a gear, sparing no effort in trying to rise to the ultimate challenge in Milan, said defending men's 500m Olympic champion Liu Shaolang.

"It's a good lesson for the Olympics. I'm very happy with the results, especially that I had a teammate in the final," Liu said after winning a silver medal in men's 500m final A at the second leg in Montreal on Oct 18, followed by teammate Sun Long at third.

"We want the same in Milan, to get to as many finals as possible together, because that will help us earn better shots at the medals," said Liu, who helped China win the mixed relay at the opening leg with a last-lap pass.

China's figure skating team is, perhaps, the program struggling the most across all ice disciplines, having to count on the returning pair of Sui Wenjing and Han Cong, who last week made a strong comeback from indefinite retirement by finishing third at the ISU Grand Prix Cup of China, to bolster its

chances in Milan.

Some inspiring progress elsewhere on ice has kept fans intrigued, though.

The Chinese women's curling team, captained by Wang Rui, unexpectedly beat world No 1 Canada 7-6 to win the Pan Continental Championships title on Sunday in Virginia, Minnesota, finishing the warm-up tournament with a clean 9-0 record all the way from the round-robin stage to back up its medal ambitions in Milan.

All eyes on Livigno

The Livigno Snow Park, located on the Alpine plateau in Lombardy, is expected to become the focus of Chinese fans in February, with the majority of the country's elite freestyle skiing and snowboarding contenders, led by Gu and Su, are expected to land more jaw-dropping tricks and medals at the resort cluster.

Despite an injury she suffered at a training camp in August in New Zealand, freeski superstar Gu, who won two golds in big air and half-pipe in Beijing — her mother's home city — remains the only runa-

way leader across all disciplines in China's snow sports legion.

Her appearance, refreshed, sound and healthy, at a fashion show last week in Shanghai has reassured fans of her readiness for the Olympics, as the 22-year-old 18-time World Cup title winner also confirmed on social media that she's fit enough for the final push.

"Warming it back up," Gu posted on her Weibo account on Sept 19 with a video showing her complete a string of tricks on rails, pipes and slopes during a training session in New Zealand.

The other snow star to watch has to be Su, who recently set the snowboard community abuzz by posting video proof of him landing back-to-back 1980s in one run during a training camp in Switzerland.

The sequence, posted on Oct 9, saw the reigning Olympic big air champion execute a clean backside 1980 with a melon grab, immediately followed by another 1980 from his opposite stance with a tail grab, becoming the world's first snowboarder to pull off the dual trick in one run.

"Just keep unlocking new tricks," Su posted on Weibo, rekindling confidence that he can defend his gold in Livigno.



Led by Olympic and world champions on ice and snow, Team China is preparing to rise to the challenge of delivering another impressive Winter Olympic campaign at Milano-Cortina 2026. XINHUA / GETTY IMAGES

100 DAYS
COUNTDOWN
TO

MILANO-
CORTINA
2026

By SUN XIAOCHEN

Legend Yang says ‘focus on the moment, not the result’

With Milano-Cortina 2026 fast approaching, China's first-ever Winter Olympic gold medalist has just one simple message to the current generation of Olympians that are busy tuning up for the tall task ahead.

"No matter how challenging it is, just focus on what you can control and do your best. That makes you a champion already," retired short-track skating legend Yang Yang offered as advice to the athletes during a recent event unveiling the Li-Ning-manufactured award ceremony attire for the Chinese delegation at the 2026 Games.

"Especially those veterans who've

come back to compete, overcoming physical challenges to make their way back to the Olympic stage, they are already heroes in my heart," said Yang, who's racked up 59 world titles throughout a 23-year athletic career to become China's most decorated winter sports athlete.

Yang's career culminated on the Olympic track in 2002, when she won China's first and second Winter Olympic gold medals in women's 500m and 1,000m at the Salt Lake City Games in Utah, paving the way for the country's future generations



Yang Yang

embraced multiple administrative roles since retiring from the sport in 2006, from an IOC member to the chair of Beijing 2022 athletes' com-

mission, and now serves as the vice-president of the World Anti-Doping Agency, about to begin her third and final three-year term in the post.

Having almost seen it and done it all at the highest level, as both an athlete and an organizer, Yang said the key for delivering under pressure on the Olympic stage is to enjoy the moment without getting carried away by focusing too much on the result.

It was a lesson she herself learned the hard way, after struggling to cope with the nerves and high expectations in her debut at the

1998 Games in Nagano, Japan, where she was disqualified for rule violations in two of her three individual races.

"From an athlete's perspective, I think it's better not to focus entirely on the final outcome," said Yang, who established the China Champion Foundation in 2011 to support the education and career development of retired athletes.

"Of course there will be intense media attention and discussions about the results, but we should try and create a less-stressful environ-

ment to protect our athletes."

Looking ahead to Milan, Yang said she would pay more attention on the veterans on Team China and, of course, her own discipline — short-track.

"The unrelenting love for their sports, and their inspiring stories of fighting against physical challenges, will absolutely be the highlights at the Games," Yang said of China's senior Olympians.

After witnessing the short-track team get the delegation off to a flying start at Beijing 2022 by winning the mixed 2,000 relay, Yang said she has confidence that the squad can stand tall again for the country in Milan.