SPORTS

WINTER SPORTS

READY FOR AN AERIAL BATTLE

China's veterans look to lay down Olympic marker on home snow against a strong field



Anchored by Xu Mengtao and Qi Guangpu, Team China, boasting a mix of depth and promise, will be looking for a golden sweep on home snow when the aerials World Cup takes flight at Chongli, Hebei province, over the weekend. WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA AND XINHUA

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An Olympic gold, seven world championships medals, 30 World Cup wins and still counting — China's veteran skier Xu Mengtao looks set to redefine longevity in aerials with this week's home Cup leg setting her up for a fifth Winter Games in Italy.

With skiers taking off skyward from a giant ramp to perform multiple somersaults before landing on the buffer slope, the challenging discipline of freestyle aerials is vaguely reminiscent of the aquatic sport of diving, as are the conversations about medal contenders at the Olympics.

China's freeski aerials team, with athletes literally plunging into a landing pool at summer training camps, will remain among hot favorites for all the three gold medals up for grabs in men's, women's and team events at the upcoming Milano-Cortina Winter Games, even relying on an aging core roster led by Xu.

Having thrown down the gauntlet to her international rivals by winning the FIS World Cup season opener in Ruka, Finland on Dec 6, the 35-year-old Xu is primed for another podium finish at the Cup series' second event, to be held in Chongli, Hebei province, over the coming weekend — a chance to fine-tune her tricks while securing qualification for her fifth Winter Games.

When the women's qualification run kicks off on Saturday, Xu will be looking to get a little extra lift from her past triumphs on the slope at Chongli's Yunding Snow Park, where she realized her long-awaited Olympic dream of winning her first title on home snow at Beijing 2022.

The 12 best qualifiers, in each of the men's and women's individual events, advance into the final round, where only the top six from the first final run reach the second, or the superfinal, run to decide the medal winners and the Cup leg's eventual standings.

Anchored by Xu and men's reigning Olympic gold medalist Qi Guangpu, the host squad — boasting a mix of depth and promise in a strong roster that also includes Chen Meiting, the women's bronze winner in Ruka, women's 2023 world champion Kong Fanyu and men's 10-time Cup medalist Wang Xindi — will be looking for a golden sweep at its home event.

The international field in Chongli will be stacked as well, with Australia's three-time overall World Cup season winner Laura Peel and Xu's archrival Ashley Caldwell of the United States leading the charge on the women's side.

Switzerland's back-to-back world champion Noe Roth and the US Olympic mixed-team gold medalist Christopher Lillis are expected to pose a serious threat to the host in the men's event.

With the whole world progressing quickly in the technically demanding discipline, Xu insists her strength lies in the razor-thin margin she gains at each and every Cup test, as well as the support of her team.

"This World Cup win in Finland was really a tough one, but I did it again," Xu wrote in a post on her Weibo account, celebrating her record-extending 30th World Cup individual title in Finland.

"Braving the snow and wind, and prevailing in the mist, it was the power of my team's support that helped me surpass a new milestone of my career."

As one of very few dynamic triple-throwers still competing into their 30s in the women's field, Xu's quality and consistency were highlighted during the first Cup meet's superfinal, where she landed a "back full-full-full" — three full rotations with spins in the air — despite challenging weather conditions, to score 89.29 points and clinch the season-opening win.

As a veteran on the circuit, Xu has proved she always delivers in high-stakes moments, with a will as steely as the screws pinned into her left knee.

That will has been honed by the small margins that led to her biggest career falls at previous Olympic Games.

The native of Liaoning province, who began her athletic career as a junior gymnast, looks primed to go for the highest possible finish at her fifth Games, having recovered from injuries to both her knees.

"I've been producing good quality and good landings on my triples (after the offseason training). My goal is to do my best at the Olympic Games in Milan," Xu told fis-ski.com after her victory in Ruka.

The home Cup event will offer men's star Qi, one of the most entertaining stuntmen in the high-flying discipline, a chance to redeem his disappointing season opener in Ruka, where he started slow in the qualifying run and missed the top-12 final cut.

The defending Olympic champion and last season's overall Cup winner will have to execute his multi-twist triple jumps as neatly as possible to edge out ambitious international contenders and get his season back on track.

His major threat Roth has been preparing to spoil the party, though.

"Training this summer was really good for me," Roth, who has finished on the podium at the past four worlds, told fis-ski.com.

"I had a very good summer. Just pushing a little more on the degree of difficulty now and we're good, ready and really excited."

"For me, for now, four twists, then we'll see how we go. Maybe five in China, or something like that. But, for sure, I'm going to be ready with five for Italy."





'Many lessons to be learned' from 2026 Games preparations, says ski chief

PARIS — Johan Eliasch, president of the most powerful winter sports federation, has told reporters that less than two months before the Milano-Cortina Winter Olympics there are "many, many lessons to be learned".

The 63-year-old head of the International Ski and Snowboard Federation (FIS), which is responsible for more than half of all events at the Winter Games, admitted "it is a great challenge to have everything ready on time".

He added: "There are many, many lessons to be learned from these Games in terms of planning and execution and event delivery."

His comments come after Andrea Varnier, CEO of the 2026 Winter Olympics organizing committee, conceded earlier this month "there is a lot of finishing to do around the venues" ahead of the opening ceremony on Feb 6.

Organizers are not the only ones in a race against the clock.

Three Russian and six Belarusian skiers are seeking to qualify after a ruling by the Court of Arbitration for Sport overturned an FIS ban, imposed since the ongoing conflict in Ukraine began in February 2022.

If they qualify, they will compete under a neutral flag, just as they did at the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics.

The return to the sporting fold for both countries — Belarus is regarded as an ally of Russia — also received a boost last week when the IOC urged sports bodies to fully reintegrate their athletes into junior competitions and allow them to compete with their national flag and anthem.

Eliasch, who has been president of FIS since 2021, said he agreed with the recommendation.

"My position is that you cannot be held accountable for where you are born," he said.

Nevertheless, Eliasch, who refers to himself as Anglo-Swedish as he has spent more time in Britain than his country of birth, said the debate over the issue could have benefited from a "more precise definition of political neutrality".

"The term 'politically neutral' clearly means different things to different people, and the room for interpretation is too wide," he said.

"The sports movement would benefit greatly from a more precise definition of political neutrality.

"It is not only about not taking sides, but how decision-making governance operates with political neutrality as a guiding principle."

'Stamp her mark'

Eliasch is, however, against the IOC expanding future Winter Games to include sports more associated with summer pursuits.

IOC president Kirsty Coventry set up a working group on the Olympic sports program, tasked with studying the possible inclusion in the 2030 Winter Games in France of disciplines such as trail running or cyclocross, which fall under international federations involved in the Summer Olympics.

The IOC is expected to make a decision in June next year.

"The position is that we need to focus on making the existing product better, not adding complexity and cost," said Eliasch.

"It is all about quality, not quantity. We need to have the best athletes, best formats and best sports.

"If the (Winter Olympics) become a sort of aggregation of sports you can do during the winter, it becomes a different type of Winter Games without a distinct identity.

"It will lose traction. It says in the Olympic Charter winter sports are on snow and ice. Running on snow is not really a sport."

Eliasch ran against Coventry in the election to succeed Thomas Bach in March, garnering just two votes.

However, he said he had "no regrets" and that it was "mission accomplished", because it had given him the chance to meet all the IOC members in a matter of months.

Far from being a sore loser, he said he admires what he has seen from two-time Olympic swimming gold medalist Coventry.

"I have seen a change of style of leadership from her side, more listening than before, and I think people feel this is a refreshing different leadership style," he said.

"I have the highest respect for Thomas Bach and what he did, but equally I have the highest respect for Kirsty.

"She is trying to stamp her mark in the way of running things."

AFP





Left: Construction continues at the Palaitalia Santa Giulia ice hockey arena, which will host the hockey and para hockey competitions at the 2026 Milano-Cortina Winter Olympics, in Milan, Italy, on Dec 1. **Right:** A view of the athletes residences at the Olympic Village. REUTERS