

SPORTS

WINTER OLYMPICS

Barely a silver lining

Team China’s meager medal haul in short-track speed skating sets alarm bells ringing for most decorated winter program

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Even the nation’s biggest medal haul at an overseas Winter Games wasn’t enough to mitigate Team China’s huge disappointment on the ice in Milan.

As China’s most decorated winter sports program on the Olympic stage, the country’s short-track speed skating team ended up as the national delegation’s damp squib, with its barren campaign at Milano-Cortina 2026 ringing alarm bells for the future.

As the curtain fell on all the short-track action on Saturday, the Chinese squad’s meager return of just one silver in Milan, won by Sun Long in the men’s 1,000m on Feb 12, marked its worst-ever result since the 1998 edition of the Games, when the Chinese program opened its Winter Olympic medal account with five silvers and one bronze.

Since retired legend Yang Yang delivered China’s first-ever Winter Olympic gold medal in any sport with victory in the women’s 500m in 2002, the short-track contingent, once dubbed the “Ice Daggers” by fans, hadn’t missed out on a gold medal across six straight Games until the current team, coached by Zhang Jing, snapped that proud, 24-year streak in Italy.

Setting aside some unexpected, almost unavoidable errors, due to the not-so-ideal, but fair-to-all, ice conditions at the Olympic rink, Team China has no excuse for its performance flop at the Milano Ice Skating Arena, where its first major blow came on Feb 10, when Sun’s late stumble in the 2,000m mixed relay final cost the quartet the chance to retain its title.

A similar slip by two-time Olympic champion Liu Shaoang, partially due to a lack of grip on the ice, on his dash to the finish in the men’s 5,000m relay semifinals denied the squad a berth in the medal-deciding final of another team event that it was expected to win.

Sun’s 1,000m runner-up finish on Feb 12, secured by a strong, come-from-behind effort, delivered individual redemption for his final-lap error in the mixed relay, but proved nowhere near enough to cast off the gloom overshadowing the rest of the men’s team’s performances.

“You need to learn from the setbacks and come back stronger, so that you can approach the following races as competitively and confidently as you can,” the 25-year-old Sun said of the lessons he had learned at his second Olympics.

“I made a mistake in the mixed relay when I got impatient and lost control. So I told myself to stay as calm as possible, and it worked out



One highlight of Team China’s Olympic campaign came in the speed skating, when Ning Zhongyan clinched gold in the men’s 1,500m with an Olympic record, breaking the century-long dominance of European and North American skaters in the event. WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY



Left: Sun Long (second left) won China’s sole short-track speed skating medal at the Milano-Cortina 2026 Olympics, when he finished second in the men’s 1,000m final. **Right:** China’s Fan Kexin and Michelle Velzeboer of the Netherlands crash during the short-track speed skating women’s 500m B final on Feb 12. WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY / AP



today,” said Sun, after winning his silver medal.

Liu, who was born in Budapest to a Chinese father and Hungarian mother, has opted to remain positive after capping off his third Olympics, and the first representing China, empty-handed.

“It is meant to be a bumpy road with a lot of ups and downs,” said the 27-year-old, who switched

nationality in 2023 to represent China internationally after his longtime Team Hungary mentor, Zhang, returned to coach her native country’s national squad.

“We were a bit unlucky during the Games here, but this is short-track speed skating where anything can happen. We might have suffered a drop in results this time, but I do believe we will bounce back in the

future,” said Liu, who helped the Hungarian men’s team win the 5,000m relay at Pyeongchang 2018 before taking the 500m individual gold at Beijing 2022.

The women’s team fared even worse, failing to win any medals for the first time in 34 years since short-track’s Olympic debut in 1992.

Veteran sprinter Fan Kexin’s Olympic farewell at her fourth

Games was tinged with regret, reaching only Final B in the 500m, while teenage skater Yang Jingru’s fourth-place finish in the 1,500m was Team China’s best result across any of the women’s events.

The short-track team’s Milan slump drew concerns from former athletes and pundits, who are calling for more effort in developing young homegrown talent, better

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Liu Shaoang, stays upbeat after a barren Olympic campaign

analysis of international opponents and more pragmatic tactics at major events.

“The results are obviously disappointing, and there should be a lot to reflect on,” said Ren Ziwei, men’s 1,000m gold medalist in 2022 who missed out on Milano-Cortina 2026 due to injury. “We really have to start sending more youngsters to be tested on the World Tour.”

Four-time Olympic gold medalist, Wang Meng, who competed at Turin 2006 and Vancouver 2010, suggested that Team China should embrace a more open approach, sending its skaters to train in Europe with powerhouses such as the Netherlands.

This year, China sent its largest-ever delegation to an overseas Winter Olympics, fielding 126 athletes in 91 events across 15 disciplines. The team finished with five golds, four silvers and six bronze medals, marking its best result at an overseas Winter Games and equaling its overall medal count from Beijing 2022.

The ice in Milan did yield one highlight of China’s campaign. Ning Zhongyan clinched gold in the men’s 1,500m speed skating, breaking the century-long dominance of European and North American skaters in the event.

“Ning has fought extremely hard,” said Tong Lixin, deputy head of the Chinese delegation. “He kept his focus and took the lead in a sport long dominated by Western athletes, helping China break new ground in an event where we previously had little chance to compete for medals.”

Tong said China’s medal haul of 15 consolidated the medal-winning structure established at Beijing 2022 and will sustain balanced development across ice and snow disciplines, noting that the pool of China’s winter sports talent continues to deepen.

Living up to her promise, ‘brave’ Gu makes history again

LIVIGNO, Italy — Gu Ailing had a gold-medal image as her phone wallpaper before Sunday’s women’s freeskier halfpipe final.

The 22-year-old Chinese freeski star delivered on it, successfully defending her Olympic halfpipe title on the final day of the Milano-Cortina Winter Games to add to her silvers in slopestyle and big air.

It was her sixth Olympic medal across two Games, making her the most decorated freeskier by both gold medals and total medals on the Olympic stage.

“That’s something that I am so proud of, it’s unbelievable to me, still surreal,” Gu said. “Going six (medals) for six (starts) is pretty crazy.”

The victory was not straightforward. In her first run, Gu lost speed and momentum after landing her opening 900-degree spin.

She rebounded in the second run, landing back-to-back 900s cleanly and executing the rest of her routine without fault to post 94.00 points and move to the top of the standings. In the final round, she improved her score to 94.75.

Reflecting on her ability to bounce back after her first-run troubles, Gu said: “It is easy to doubt yourself. Little things may trigger your self-doubt and, over time,

make you afraid to try.”

She said the power of sport lies in its honesty, offering what she called “evidence over affirmation” — proof built through repetition rather than self-talk.

“You don’t tell yourself: ‘I can handle the pressure, I’m so great,’” Gu said. “You just do it, time and time again.”

Proud to contribute

Gu and teammate Li Fanghui made it a one-two finish, taking the country’s medal tally at the Games to five golds, four silvers and six bronzes, its best result at an overseas Winter Games, surpassing the previous 5-2-4 mark set at Vancouver 2010.

“I’m especially proud and happy,” Gu said when asked about her contribution to the team’s performance.

“Winning one Olympic medal is already incredibly difficult. To win six consecutive medals, a 100 percent medal rate, that’s an unimaginable standard to set for myself. I wouldn’t have dared to say that before coming here.”

Halfpipe, she said, has a special place in her repertoire. While she started in slopestyle and embraced big air as “the new and exciting thing,” Gu said she feels she brings “unique flavor” to halfpipe.



Six-time Olympic medalist Gu Ailing of China celebrates winning gold in the women’s freestyle skiing halfpipe at the 2026 Winter Olympics in Livigno, Italy, on Sunday. WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY

“I’m a slopestyle skier coming into halfpipe,” she explained. “I grab differently. I have different axis on my cork. It’s very personal to me.”

Gu arrived in Livigno having not trained in halfpipe for two months while preparing for slopestyle and big air. She called her decision to compete in all three events “a big gamble.”

“I’m not a betting woman, but I took a pretty big bet on myself,” she said. “There was a chance that everything could go wrong, and I

would walk away with nothing. But, in my head, even if everything crashes and burns, I tried. I will never regret trying.”

Gu described the past weeks as “a marathon at sprint pace.”

“I’ve been giving 100 percent of myself every single day,” she said. “I can’t slack any day. Every day is the Olympics, and you have to do it three weeks straight.”

She described long, sleepless stretches in the build-up to competi-

tion days, and said that once one event ends, the focus immediately shifts to the next.

Building legacies

For Gu, the medals are only part of the story. She said she wants to use her platform to grow the sport, particularly among young girls, and to create opportunities for other athletes.

“A big part of it is participation in the sport; the number of people who have heard of freeski — especially girls — and who dare to try,” she said. “The second thing is recognition within the industry. A rising tide raises all boats. With more eyeballs on the sport, it benefits literally every other athlete too. They get more viewership, they get to have their own platforms, they get more sponsorship.”

She cited estimates that around 300 million people in China have engaged in winter sports since Beijing 2022, and said she has seen rising interest from sponsors and investors.

“As a competitor, I think we yearn for a worthy opponent,” Gu said. “It’s not about beating other people, but about healthy competition. That’s what sportsmanship is. That’s what the Olympics are about. What’s exciting is that, year after year, we get to see the progression of a sport. Every-

body is contributing to that growth.”

A pledge completed

The news conference was nearly over when Gu picked up the microphone one last time. She said she owed everyone an explanation for running late.

“The reason I was late is that I just found out that my grandma passed away,” her voice trembled. “She was a really big part of my life growing up and someone I looked up to immensely.”

Gu described her grandmother as a fighter who refused to simply cruise through life. She said she knew death was a possibility, but she did not promise victory. Instead, she said, she made a different pledge.

“I didn’t promise her that I was going to win, but I did promise her that I was going to be brave, like she has been brave,” Gu said.

Gu said that promise became the through-line of her Olympic campaign, fueling her willingness to take risks and to compete in three events.

“It actually goes back to that promise that I made to my grandma,” she said. “And so I’m happy that I was able to uphold that and hopefully do her proud.”