

SPORTS

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The Chinese shooting team is loaded with confidence to get the delegation off to a flying start at the Olympics again by claiming the first gold medal up for grabs in Paris.

The team is preparing for an intense competition at the Chateauroux Shooting Centre, located 270 kilometers outside the French metropolis.

With the 10m air rifle mixed team event kicking off on the morning of July 27, the shooters will miss the grand opening ceremony on the Seine. However, this youthful and dynamic squad is primed and ready to continue the nation's winning streak on the Olympic stage.

Winning the first gold medal at the Olympics has always been a top priority for Chinese athletes. In Paris, the first gold is expected to be awarded in either the 10m air rifle mixed team shooting event or the women's synchronized 3m springboard diving event, with the shooting event the most likely candidate.

The Chinese shooting team, with a full quota for the mixed team air rifle event, will field the duo of Huang Yuting and Sheng Lihao alongside that of Han Jiayu and Du Linshu as a "double insurance" strategy to clinch Team China's first gold and continue the proud tradition of the Chinese shooting team.

Historically, it's awarded in the women's 10m air rifle event, a traditional stronghold for China. Du Li at the 2004 Athens Olympics, Yi Siling at the 2012 London Olympics, and Yang Qian at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics all secured the first gold medal for the Chinese delegation.

The 10m mixed team air rifle event, introduced in Tokyo, saw China's Yang Qian and Yang Haoran win gold. This year, the duo did not make the roster, with Huang and Sheng now the nation's top sharpshooters.

Huang and Sheng have excelled throughout the current Olympic cycle, winning at the World Cup, the World Championships and the Hangzhou Asian Games. In 2021, in the men's 10m air rifle final at the Tokyo Olympics, Sheng won the silver medal with a score of 250.9 points, becoming the youngest medalist in Olympic shooting history at the age of 16 years old.

His experiences during the Paris cycle have honed his psychological and technical skills to a mature and stable level. Meanwhile, 17-year-old Huang has shown rapid growth and consistent performance. Their partnership has become highly coordinated, making them a formidable team.

The other Chinese pair, Han and Du Linshu, are also young talents. Throughout the current Olympic

ROAD TO OLYMPICS

Editor's note: With the Olympic stage set, and golden glory beckoning, Chinese athletes have been going all-out to ensure it will be a medal-laden campaign at Paris 2024.

SHOOTING STRAIGHT TO THE TOP

Team China's young guns aim to be first on the Olympic podium

cycle, they have excelled on the tournament circuit and both athletes are versatile shooters, competing in the mixed team event, as well as each respectively competing in men's and women's 10m air rifle, and men's and women's 50m rifle three positions.

Xu Haifeng, China's first Olympic gold medalist, told Lightning Sports: "As with previous Olympics, the responsibility for the first gold medal in Paris falls on the shooting events. I feel that there should be a gold medal for China on the first day, and I hope the Chinese delegation will achieve good results."

Youthful powerhouse

Shooting remains a cornerstone of China's Olympic prowess, with an impressive tally of 26 gold medals across nine previous Games appearances. At the Beijing Olympics, the Chinese shooting squad captured five golds, two silvers and one bronze. In Tokyo, it excelled, with four golds, one silver and six bronzes, marking its best international performance, and the best performance of any nation at that year's Games.

As it prepares for Paris, Team China continues to showcase for-

midable strength. It has topped the medal tables at the last two world championships. At the same time, it has undergone a generational shift, with a wave of talented young athletes poised to make their mark on the global stage.

Featuring a blend of experience and youth, with veterans like Li Yuehong, competing in his third Olympics, and Tokyo champion Jiang Ranzin being joined by rising stars such as Huang, Han, Du Linshu and Li Xue, many of whom were born after 2000.

The youngest, 17-year-old Liang Xiaoya, earned her spot with an impressive performance in the Olympic trials and will compete alongside Zhao Nan in the women's 25m pistol event.

Tokyo veterans Jiang and Zhang Bowen will lead the charge for China with the air pistol, competing in both the individual and mixed team 10m events. They will be joined by rising stars Li Xue and Xie Yu, both born in 2000 and making their Olympic debuts in Paris.

Li Yuehong, at 35 years old, has previously secured two bronze medals in his two previous attempts. At the 2023 World Shooting Championships in Baku, Azerbaijan, he set a new world record in the men's 25m rapid fire pistol final. In Paris, he will team up with Wang Xinjie, aiming to secure China's first Olympic gold in the discipline.

The shooting competitions will take place from July 27 to Aug 5, and will see 170 male and female shooters, respectively, competing across 15 events.

It won't be an easy task, as China will face tough competition. India poses a formidable challenge in several events, while the United States, South Korea, Germany and host France each has its own strengths across multiple disciplines.

During the team's departure ceremony, Huang Wenhong, coach of the national pistol shooting team, promised: "Our coaching team will approach the Paris Olympics with calm minds, a pursuit of excellence, and meticulous preparation to help our athletes display their best competitive form and spirit on the field."



Nation's fencers are prepared to prove their point in Paris

By SUN XIAOCHEN
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Though it's not quite a top contender yet, China's up-and-coming fencing squad is striking out with courage and pride to break the Western stranglehold on the Olympic piste in Paris.

With improving strength collectively in the team events, such as women's epee and foil, Team China is gearing up to grab the world's attention in Paris, with its target set on podium finishes in both team and individual disciplines.

Sun Yiwen, reigning Olympic champion in women's individual epee, remains Team China's sharpest competitor and its biggest medal hope, three years after she got the whole delegation off to a golden start by winning the country's first Olympic title in the discipline on the first day of competition in Tokyo.

With her narrow 11-10 victory over Romanian veteran Ana Maria Popescu in the Tokyo final hailed as an instant classic, Sun has reset her focus on achieving another feat — to become the first woman in the world to defend her Olympic gold in the event since Hungarian great Timea Nagy did so in 2004.



China's reigning Olympic champion Sun Yiwen

Shaping up for her third Olympics at the age of 32, Sun believes she's as lethal and motivated as all her younger opponents, and is pushing ahead with her Olympic ambition.

"The goal for the Paris Olympics is, naturally, the gold medal. I want to rewrite the history in which no woman has defended the epee Olympic title in nearly 20 years," Sun told Beijing Youth Daily before she left for Paris on July 14.

"The athlete's desire to win is

instinctual, because it is not only a personal achievement, but also the glory of bringing honor to her country. At the same time, I am also keen to transcend my own limitations."

To outperform all opponents, and particularly herself, Sun has adopted a radical change in her attacking technique since the beginning of this year, becoming more aggressive in scoring, which proved successful as she led young teammates Yu Sihan and Tang Junyao to a runner-up finish at the FIE World Cup's Nanjing leg in March, losing only to top team Italy in the final, after beating world No 2 South Korea in the quarterfinals.

Sun's individual pursuit of a golden repeat in Paris will start on the second day of the Games, after the July 26 opening ceremony, with host favorite and reigning world champion Marie-Florence Candassamy and six-time World Cup medalist Alberta Santuccio of Italy posing the biggest threats to Sun's ambition.

The Chinese women's foil team, bolstered by a series of impressive international results over the past year, has emerged as another promising medal hope in the team event, with its young core of Chen Qingyuan and Huang Qianqian "en garde" to

achieve personal breakthroughs.

Led by Chen, winner of the Paris leg of the World Cup in January, and Huang, an individual winner at last year's Asian Games, the squad, also including Wang Yuting, beat tough rivals Japan and South Korea to claim its second Asiad team gold in women's foil in 29 years in Hangzhou.

Speaking about the reasons for the team's resurgence, coach Lei Sheng attributed the progress to the growing inner strength of his young fencers.

"The Chinese women's foil team has long been in a disadvantaged position, mainly because the athletes felt that the world championship was unattainable. I first helped them to break this psychological barrier, set ambitious goals and then work together to approach these goals step by step," said Lei, who delivered a first individual fencing gold for China's men in foil at London 2012.

"Once technical ability and tactical understanding reach a certain level, breakthroughs become an expected result," he said.

Taking advantage from foreign coaching, men's foil fencers Mo Ziwei, Chen Haiwei and Xu Jie have also been making consistent



China's rising saber star Shen Chenpeng

progress up the world rankings, with their unexpected silver-medal finish in the team event at last year's world championships in Milan, beating traditional powerhouses France and the United States on the way, serving up a major confidence boost.

"The performance at the worlds has significantly lifted the morale of the men's foil team for the Olympics. Yet we still have some catching up to do in the final preparations,"

said Wang Haibin, a formidable member of China's gold medal-winning men's foil team at Sydney 2000, and president of Chinese Fencing Association.

In the men's saber, Shen Chenpeng will be the delegation's sole representative, while Yang Hengyu will carry the women's hopes. Completing the lineup, Wang Zijie will compete in the men's epee.

The fencing competition at the 2024 Paris Games will take place in the heart of the city, at the Grand Palais on the iconic Avenue des Champs Elysees.

The competitions, both individual and team, will adopt a single-elimination, bracket-style format, where fencers win head-to-head bouts in individual disciplines to advance to the next round. Each bout is contested over nine minutes, evenly separated into three periods, with the first fencer to score 15 points, or the leading fencer at the end of the bout, declared the winner.

If fencers are tied at the end of the nine minutes, a one-minute, sudden-death tiebreaker is contested, in which the first fencer to score wins.

Mao Yixun contributed to the story