

15th NATIONAL GAMES

The nation's all-conquering divers lay down a solid marker for Los Angeles 2028

By ZHENG CAIXIONG in Guangzhou and SUN XIAOCHEN in Beijing

China's diving "Dream Team" will likely remain the dominant medal collector at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, backed by its deep talent pool and the divers' world-class performances at the National Games.

With a legion of multiple-time Olympic and world champions clashing at one meet, the diving program in Guangzhou, has, perhaps, outranked all other international events in terms of the quality of the field, making it, arguably, the toughest competition in the careers of China's best divers.

Athletes representing their respective home provinces, or municipalities, had to beat more world-champion-caliber opponents at the 15th National Games than they ever normally face at international events, to reign supreme in each of the 14 individual and team disciplines.

After winning the women's 10m platform gold on Monday, four-time individual world champion Chen Yuxi said she's even more pleased to see the collective rise of the younger generation than claiming her maiden National Games individual title.

"For competitive sports, having a steady stream of talent is more important than being strong alone in promoting the event's development," said Chen, representing Team Shanghai at the Games, which are being held in Guangdong province and the special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macao.

Chen also won a gold medal in the synchronized 10m platform alongside diving partner Zhang Minjie last week.

According to official statistics from the 15th National Games, eight of the 12 athletes who competed in women's individual 10m platform were born after 2010, with the youngest, Liu Zihan, just 11 years old, demonstrating China's deep talent pool in the sport.

"To be able to compete with so many experienced and decorated older sisters, and finish on the podium together with them, I am just happy," Liu, who won bronze in 10m platform, said while looking up at Chen during the post-final news conference.

For the 20-year-old Chen, her own regret of having not claimed an individual Olympic gold yet, and only winning at the National Games this year, largely came down to the dominance of her national teammate, the seemingly invincible Quan Hongchan, who had been sidelined for almost half a year by multiple injuries, before making an impressive return in Guangzhou.

The 18-year-old diving prodigy drew loud cheers from a capacity crowd at the Guangdong Olympic Sports Center's swimming and diving hall on Nov 2, when she helped the



CLASH OF THE TITANS

Wang Zongyuan from Hubei province in action on his way to winning the men's 3m springboard title at the 15th National Games in Guangzhou on Monday. **Inset:** Chen Yiwen of Guangdong executes a routine during her third-place finish in the women's 3m springboard. **Below:** Gold medalist Chen Yuxi (left) of Shanghai takes a selfie at the award ceremony for the women's 10m platform, which included the discipline's youngest competitor, 11-year-old bronze medalist Liu Zihan (right, front row), on Monday. XINHUA



Guangdong squad win the women's team discipline at the Games in her first official competition since May.

The teen master of the "splash-disappearing technique", referring to her deft body control that keeps the splash to a minimum when she enters the water, delivered once again, suggesting that she's not done yet, even having won back-to-back individual 10m platform Olympic titles by beating Chen both times at Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024.

"I still believe I am competing well enough that I could complete a full set of dives with quality," Quan said after finishing fifth with Wang Weiying in the synchro discipline on Nov 5.

"I am not at my best now, but I am happy, and really enjoying the competition."

Chen, Quan's gold-winning synchro partner in Paris, welcomed the return of her friend and biggest individual rival, saying she expects

Quan to return to her peak form soon, as their healthy competition always helps bring out the best in each other.

Women's reigning Olympic 3m springboard champion Chen Yiwen, 26, had to settle with a bronze in the individual final on Tuesday, beaten by her fellow Guangdong teammate and eventual gold winner Lin Shan and runner-up Chen Jia, representing Sichuan province.

"All the other divers have done



China's diving team builds on its tradition that each generation passes on to the next, in order to always stay competitive... For the younger guys, I just hope they stay mentally strong to withstand the grind of hard training every day. Perseverance is the key to success."

Lian Junjie, men's synchro 10m platform Olympic champion

teammate Huang Bowen.

The duel between Shandong's Lian Junjie and Beijing veteran Cao Yuan on the 10m platform, where Lian won his national title by beating Cao on Tuesday, is expected to continue sharpening the pair's skills in the buildup to LA28.

"I am still a climber, in terms of achieving my career goal at the LA Olympics," said the 25-year-old Lian, who won his sole Olympic gold in men's synchro 10m platform with Yang Hao in Paris.

"China's diving team builds on its tradition that each generation passes on to the next, in order to always stay competitive and on top of the world."

"For the younger guys, I just hope they stay resilient and mentally strong to withstand the grind of hard training every day. Perseverance is the key to success."

China's world-beating diving squad swept all eight gold medals at Paris 2024, after collecting seven out of eight at Tokyo 2020.

Zhou Jihong, who came out of retirement to return as head coach of the national team in June, has sent a strong signal that the program will go all out on its journey to LA28, with its sights firmly set on another golden sweep.

Notably, it was Zhou who won the country's first-ever Olympic diving gold at Los Angeles 1984.

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Games mascots steal the spotlight with their athletic fin-esse

By XING WEN in Zhuhai, Guangdong xingwen@chinadaily.com.cn

Through their headspins, high jumps and playful antics, the mascots Xi Yangyang and Le Rongrong, inspired by the Chinese white dolphin, have become the unexpected stars of the ongoing 15th National Games, stealing the show at venues across the three host regions.

Their design was led by Liu Pingyun, the mind behind the beloved Beijing Winter Olympics panda mascot, Bing Dwen Dwen. Liu explained the evolution: "Bing Dwen Dwen's barrel-shaped body, with no defined waist, limited its range of motion. This time, we gave Xi Yangyang and Le Rongrong a two-heads-tall proportion, which allows for much smoother and more dynamic movement." He noted that the new duo represents a clear step up in athletic expressiveness.

This design refinement not only makes the mascots more versatile in graphic depictions of various sports, but also grants the live performers inside the costumes far greater flexibility.

This enhanced mobility is on full display at venues like the Dongguan

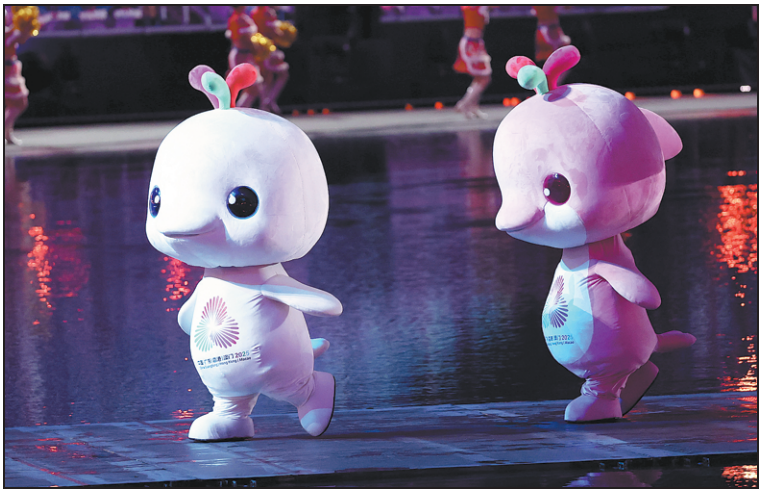
Basketball Center where, during timeouts, the mascots erupt with energy the moment the hip-hop music drops. They trade break dancing moves, rapid tail spins and even headstands, driving the crowd into a frenzy of cheers.

Videos of their antics have gone viral on social media, with many online declaring them the most energetic mascots they have ever seen. Photos of the mascots have been turned into memes in both Mandarin and Cantonese, sparking widespread speculation about who brings the characters to life with such infectious energy.

The answer, in part, lies in a group of 23 performers from the Foshan Huangfeihong International Martial Arts School, who were selected to bring the mascots to life during the opening ceremony.

"A solid martial arts foundation helps them adapt to the physical demands of mascot performance," explained Zhang Yingyan, the school's vice-principal. She added that the selection process emphasized not only martial arts skills, but also discipline and teamwork.

To prepare, the team began training as early as late July, practicing



Dolphin mascots Xi Yangyang and Le Rongrong have become the unexpected stars of the ongoing 15th National Games. XINHUA

spins, jumps and arm movements to ensure their portrayal of the dolphins felt natural and lively.

When asked about the mascots' sudden internet fame, Zhang seemed pleasantly surprised. "We were completely caught off guard by it," she admitted. "We never expected them to become this popular."

The mascots' biological inspiration carries profound symbolic

meaning. The Chinese white dolphin is a resident of the Pearl River Estuary, known as the "giant panda of the sea" and classified as a grade 1 national key protected species.

Adult Chinese white dolphins are typically white when calm, but turn pink when active due to increased blood flow — inspiring the dual color scheme of the cuddly duo.

Liu explained that the dolphin

symbolizes the maritime culture of the host region — the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area.

"Chinese white dolphins are social animals that live and move together, reflecting the spirit of unity, perseverance and endeavor seen in athletes," he said.

He further emphasized the cultural resonance that the dolphins' annual return to the Pearl River Estuary symbolizes a profound connection to their homeland, reflecting the deep-rooted bonds among the people of Guangdong province and the special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macao.

This symbolism proves particularly relevant given the Games historic joint hosting, representing a new era of regional cooperation.

"In choosing a representative for the Games, we deliberately selected a creature less familiar in daily life," Liu explained.

He noted that the Chinese white dolphin, residing in the ocean beyond our usual reach, perfectly symbolizes the innovative thinking and future-oriented vision of the Greater Bay Area.

"Our challenge was to transform

this unfamiliar marine creature into approachable, engaging characters through design."

The mascots' final design depicts dolphins with rounded bodies, human-like limbs, and distinctive blue, green and yellow adornments atop their heads representing water spraying from their blowholes.

Yet, their appearance has sparked a wave of online humor, with many people affectionately dubbing them the "great bay chickens" — also a lighthearted nod to the chicken's revered role in Cantonese cuisine and culture. The nickname has since taken hold locally, further fueled by the Cantonese pronunciation of "chicken," which sounds similar to the word for "good fortune" and carries positive symbolism.

The mascots have inspired extensive creativity, appearing in fan-made videos, memes and cultural products.

Liu embraced the reinterpretation with openness and good humor.

"This kind of grassroots rebranding makes the mascots more approachable," he said.

"By tapping into the local affection for chickens, it draws people in and helps them connect more deeply with the cultural and athletic spirit the mascots represent. I appreciate that," Liu said.