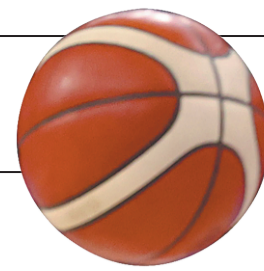


PAGE TWO

Dongguan: Where shooting stars light up the sport, fans



From page 1

The city has become a magnet for talent, drawing promising players from across the country while also exporting its own to leagues and programs nationwide — whether the national team, the CBA, or the Chinese University Basketball Association (CUBAL).

In Dongguan, professional basketball and grassroots games enjoy equal popularity. The city's stable economic growth supports sustained investment in sports, while private capital continues to flow back into basketball programs — passion and professionalism drive one another forward.

At the National Games, Guangdong swept all three five-on-five men's titles — senior, U22, and U18 — thanks in large part to Dongguan's talent pipeline.

Senior team mainstays Hu Mingxuan, Xu Jie, and Du Runwang all developed their skills at Dongguan Sports School.

Yumiti Saidake, a standout in the U22 team originally from the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, was spotted by grassroots coaches and brought to Dongguan's Guangming High School before turning professional.

The U18 team is made up largely of young players developed by Dongguan Basketball School and Dongguan Sports School.

Dongguan's influence extended well beyond its own representatives. In the men's U22 bronze-medal game, Beijing beat Shanghai 71-64 to earn its first basketball medal in 42 years.

With two minutes left, Beijing's Shi Kui hit a crucial three, then grabbed a steal and scored a layup to seal the win. "At the final moment of the game, you just feel a sense of responsibility," Shi said. "Even though I missed a few threes earlier, I knew I had to keep shooting and trust myself."

Born in Dongguan in 2003, Shi grew up playing in local school leagues. In the 2017 Dongguan middle school league final, he scored 60 points to almost single-handedly carry Tung Wah Junior High School to the championship. He is now captain of Tsinghua University's men's team, with two CUBAL titles.

Club, city in unison

That steady flow of talent — whether toward universities, the CBA, or the national team — can ultimately be traced back to the same source, a city where the professional club and the grassroots system have grown side by side for decades.

"If you want to truly understand Chinese basketball, you must go to Dongguan," former Chinese Basketball Association vice-chairman Li Yuanwei once said in an interview. The city pairs one of China's most successful pro clubs with one of its most vibrant grassroots cultures.

Nearly every resident feels a sense of identity anchored to the sport, which has become woven into the city's fabric.

The Guangdong Southern Tigers, founded in 1993 by Dongguan entrepreneur Chen Lin as China's first privately owned professional basketball club, lie at the center of this rise.



Above: Players from the Guangdong (left) and Sichuan teams stand on the podium during the medal ceremony for the men's basketball final at the National Games on Nov 12. **Left:** Middle school students train at Dongguan Basketball School on Nov 12.

Below left: Visitors try shooting hoops during a basketball-themed exhibition at Dongguan Exhibition Center on Nov 12.

Below right: Cui Yongxi trains at Dongguan Basketball School. A mural of ex-NBA player Jeremy Lin serves as motivation for aspiring young players.

PHOTOS BY WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY

Guangdong player Hu Mingxuan (center) passes the ball during the men's basketball final at the National Games in Dongguan, Guangdong province, on Nov 12. Guangdong triumphed over Zhejiang province with a commanding score of 101-65. WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY



seventh Chinese player to appear in an NBA regular-season game when he debuted for the Brooklyn Nets. After an injury in December, he returned to China in August to join the Southern Tigers.

Registered with Guangdong's U22 team for the National Games, he stayed behind to rehab — splitting his time between team practices and strength sessions at his old school in Dongguan.

"My muscle size and strength are back to about 90 percent, but my nerve reflexes and explosiveness are around 70 to 80 percent," he said. "Of course I want to return to the court as soon as possible, but I have to wait until all the test results are clear."

Cui first arrived at the school in 2015 as a 12-year-old from the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region. "It was my first time away from home. At first, I felt free — training and living with other students was tiring but fun."

Li remembers persuading Cui's parents to send him to Dongguan. He still takes Cui to the United States annually for specialized training. "Even if they're already national team players, they must continue improving to build better careers," Li said.

For Li, his own childhood dream was just competing at the National Games. And when Cui appeared in the NBA last year, Li watched almost every game.

"The most important thing is that he's given hope to Chinese kids — showing that even without the physical gifts of Yao Ming or Yi Jianlian, you can still reach the world's biggest stage. You can make up for less-ideal physical attributes through effort and truly meet the NBA standard. That message is crucial."

Deep integration

Li also emphasized the key role of investor Liang Zhibin, a well-known Dongguan entrepreneur, in the development of the sport.

Over three decades — and now playing in the NBA-standard Dongguan Basketball Center, which was completed in 2014 — the team has won 11 CBA titles, the most in the league's history.

"The growth of basketball in Dongguan has always paralleled the city's overall development," said Wang Chenzheng, who has spent more than a decade covering the Guangdong Southern Tigers for Dongguan Daily media outlet.

Dubbed the "world factory," Dongguan's rapid economic growth helped fuel its basketball boom. Conversely, without the club's national titles generating citywide excitement, the basketball culture might not have become so strong. "If there weren't grassroots fans who loved basketball this much, the club wouldn't have been able to take root here," Wang said.

From the start, the Southern

Tigers recruited top young talent nationwide. As the pioneering generation retired, the club built a youth system in partnership with the Guangdong Provincial Sports Bureau. This structure produced stars such as Zhu Fangyu, Du Feng, and Yi Jianlian — names that define modern Chinese basketball.

"At the National Games, many players representing Guangdong may not have been born here, but almost all were developed here," Wang said.

Youth development

For Wang and many others, the presence of the Southern Tigers is the source of Dongguan's basketball talent production line.

After retiring, many players stay in the city and return to grassroots communities as coaches. The professional and amateur scenes feed off each other.

Much of this ecosystem can be traced back to Li Qun, principal of Dongguan Basketball School. Originally from Heilongjiang province, Li joined the Southern Tigers as a player in 1995 and became head coach in 2006. He eventually shifted his focus to youth development, founding the school in 2011 to train players aged 12 to 17.

"Children start receiving systematic, high-level training from a very young age," he said. "Our goal has always been to develop professional players."

The school has sent athletes to the national team, the CBA, the CUBAL, the National Collegiate Athletic Association in the US, Australia's National Basketball League and beyond — including Cui Yongxi, former CBA No 1 pick Ou Junxuan, and several current CBA players.

In September, Cui became the

"The school isn't a business project in the traditional sense — commercial operations cover basic expenses, but profit isn't the goal. It's about passion and nurturing talent," he said.

"For us, producing top-level players who can serve the nation or the province is the greatest honor."

Liang also owns the Shenzhen Leopards, a CBA club founded in Dongguan, whose youth system is built around Dongguan Basketball School, continuing the flow of talent to the CBA.

Beyond specialized academies, public schools support the city's "closed-loop" pipeline. Dozens of basketball-focused schools — including Dongguan No 4 High School and Guangming High School — offer integrated training and competition opportunities.

Partnerships such as that between the Southern Tigers and Guangdong Experimental High School further refine the city's model of sports-education integration. Standout street basketballers and academy-trained players form a multilayered talent pool.

To strengthen this system, Dongguan Sports School, Dongguan Basketball School, Dongguan No 4 High School, Guangming High School, and the Dongguan Exhibition Center recently launched a collaborative platform combining training, competition, education, and cultural immersion.

Dongguan's basketball identity now extends into culture, art, and urban life. Since 2021, the city's iconic basketball-themed sculpture "Laura" has received a makeover each year — reflecting its dual identity as both a "national basketball city" and "China's trendy toys capital."

In Dongguan, basketball intersects with youth culture, intangible cultural heritage, philanthropy, rural vitalization, talent development, and innovation.

"In Dongguan, everything can connect with basketball," Wang said.

By LI YINGXUE in Dongguan

When 27-year-old Cao Jinghao walked into the basketball-themed exhibition at Dongguan Exhibition Center with his parents, he was wearing a Guangdong Southern Tigers' T-shirt commemorating 10 of the club's CBA titles.

The showcase dedicated to the Tigers' championships was his first stop. With Dongguan hosting the men's basketball competition of the 15th National Games, Cao had taken leave from work and traveled from Jiangmen, another city in the province, to watch the Guangdong men's team in the final. It was the first time he had attended a game in the Southern Tigers' arena after following them on TV for years.

The team rewarded him by reclaiming the National Games gold after a 12-year wait.

"Dongguan's basketball culture is really strong," he said. "It's also my first time at a basketball-themed exhibition. There are lots of interac-

tive things like photo areas and stamping stations — it's quite fun."

Inside the exhibition, visitors stopped to photograph memorabilia such as a first-generation basketball gifted by FIBA, China Basketball Hall of Fame badges, and ceremonial uniforms. At an interactive area equipped with a hoop, adults and children lined up to take shots.

Marking the 130th anniversary of basketball's arrival in China, the exhibition used the National Games as a backdrop to trace the development of Chinese and Guangdong basketball and Dongguan's unique growth alongside the sport. The exhibition is free to the public and runs through Dec 30.

According to exhibition center staff member Wen Lei, the displays begin with the invention of basketball, its spread into China, and the rise of the professional game.



Visitors explore the basketball-themed exhibition at Dongguan Exhibition Center on Nov 12. WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY

It shows how basketball took root in the Lingnan area after 1909 and became central to Guangdong's regional culture. The final section

highlights Dongguan's own story, from early schoolyard games to a citywide passion that now defines its identity.

Exhibition highlights historical roots of game

In 2004, Dongguan was named "national basketball city" by the General Administration of Sport of China. Today it hosts over 5,000 games annually and has nearly 7,000 courts.

Exhibition curator Wang Chenzheng said Dongguan's basketball history mirrors the development of Chinese basketball itself — from school teams and community tournaments to youth training systems and professional clubs.

A milestone came in 1984, when Dongguan Changping's men's team and Shunde Jun'an's women's team both won titles at the first national farmers' Harvest Cup.

"This was a remarkable achievement," Wang said. "You could think of this tournament as the earliest prototype of today's village BA (Basketball Association) games."

Today, Dongguan's village-level tournaments and citywide competi-

tions continue to flourish. Every Spring Festival, nearly every village hosts its own basketball tournament, a folk tradition deeply rooted in local life.

At this year's National Games, the Dongguan Changping men's team, representing Guangdong in the 45-60 age group, won another championship, extending the city's grassroots legacy.

Dongguan's subtropical climate also helps contribute to its nonstop basketball culture; outdoor courts can be used year-round, unaffected by the winters that freeze courts in northern regions. "This gives Dongguan the perfect environment for a 'basketball for all' atmosphere," Wang said.

Du Feng, who arrived in Dongguan in 1996 as a young Southern Tigers player and is now head coach of the team, said the exhibition captures the city's passion for the game.

"It's very meaningful," he said. "It lets fans experience basketball in more ways and understand why the sport is so popular here."