

Nantong looks forward to London Games

City famed for producing athletes has high hopes for this year's Olympics

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With the 2012 London Olympics under way, a city in East China's Jiangsu province is expected to once again rise to fame, given the excellent performance of its athletes in a number of international and national events in the past, local sports officials have said.

Nantong in Southeast Jiangsu has nurtured 17 athletes who have won a total of 80 gold medals in international competitions since the late 1970s, when China first appeared in the global sports arena.

And the number of world champions from the city has been on the rise over the past three decades: four in the 1980s, five in the 1990s and eight in the 2000s.

Since the Barcelona Olympics

in 1992, Nantong's athletes have taken home 10 gold medals in five straight Olympics.

"They performed particularly well at the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008, where they won four gold medals, with three of them taken in a single day," said a local sports official.

Nantong owes its achievements mainly to its trailblazing approach to cultivating young, promising athletes, said Liu Peng, head of the country's General Administration of Sport.

"It has a system that integrates training with education for young students interested in sports, and this method has proven effective and fruitful," Liu said.

The city has nine part-time sports schools, where more than 1,550 primary and middle school students receive after-

school training in games that interest them, including table tennis, badminton, diving, swimming and fencing.

Another popular method is to send coaches to ordinary schools so that they can provide professional instruction for students in the schools' sports teams.

In this manner, coaches can spot students who have great sports potential without affecting their academic performance, a local sports official said.

This also helps dismiss many parents' worries that training might cause their children to lag behind in academic studies.

Thanks to such methods, young sports geniuses can choose professional teams where they can receive further training and compete for medals, while students who are unlikely to perform well in sports will still have the opportunity to go to college or at least vocational schools, he added.

Century-old tradition

In addition to this training and selection mechanism, local

government leaders also attribute Nantong's success to its century-old sports tradition.

In 1903, when sports facilities were somewhat of a rarity in the ancient country, the Rugao Normal School in Nantong built a 300 square meter indoor sports facility for its students.

Two years later, local schools organized the city's first modern athletic contest.

In 1913, the city government, with funds contributed by local entrepreneurs, established Nantong's first public stadium.

In 1922, two students at the city's normal school went to Japan for the Far Eastern Championship Games and returned with a bronze.

This long-running legacy has helped result in almost universal enthusiasm for physical fitness among students as well as local citizens.

Official statistics show that more than 4 million residents, over half of the city's population of 7 million, take part in sports on a regular basis.

Sports centers have been built in all 115 of its towns, and residents in all its 1,789 villages also have convenient access to sports facilities, said the city's sports officials.

The city's largest comprehensive sports facility, the 160,000 sq m Nantong Sports and Exhibition Center, began operation in 2006.

Costing 1.1 billion yuan, the complex comprises a stadium, an exhibition center and an indoor swimming pool.

In recent years, Nantong has hosted a number of major sporting events, including the Asian Fencing Championships, which have also helped fuel the development of local sports.

Booming industry

The local people's rising enthusiasm for sports and the increasing number of events in the city have also created a big market for the sports industry.

More companies and firms are now engaged in the production of sports equipment, offering sports-related services, operating sports facilities, organizing competitions and selling sports lottery.

The sports industry accounts



Young players take part in a citywide football league.



Local students receive training at one of Nantong's part-time sports schools.



The universal enthusiasm for physical fitness shown by locals is the basis for the city's fame in sports.

Athletes continue tradition of excellence

Editors note: Over the past three decades China has grown into a heavyweight player in the global sports arena. And athletes from Nantong have made a special contribution to the nation's rising fame in international sports. The following are some of the heroes whom local people take pride in.

Chen Qi (Table Tennis)

Born in 1984, Chen began training in 1990. He became a member of the provincial team at the age of 12 and joined the national team three years later. Chen won the gold

medal in men's doubles at the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, becoming the youngest male ever to hold this title at the age of 20. In 2007, he claimed the gold medal in men's doubles at the World Table Tennis Championships in Zagreb, Croatia. Chen was also a member of the Chinese teams that won gold medals at the World Table Tennis Championships held in 2005 and 2007.

Chen Ruolin (Diving)

Born in 1992, Chen started training in 2001. She joined

the provincial team in 2004 and the national team in 2005. She won gold medals in women's 10-meter platform and 10-meter synchronized platform at the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. In the 2011 World Aquatics Championships held in Shanghai, Chen won two gold medals for women's 10-meter platform and 10-meter synchronized platform.

Chen is the first Chinese female diver who claimed all the gold medals in women's platform events in the Olympic Games, World Cup and World Championships.

Ge Fei (Badminton)

Born in 1975, Ge is a former badminton player. Joining the national team in 1993, she was a frequent winner of gold medals in world competitions, including two Olympic gold medals, two IBF World Championship gold medals in women's doubles, and a World Championship gold medal in mixed doubles. Ge was also a member of the Chinese teams that captured the Uber Cup in 1998 and 2000.

Huang Xu (Gymnastics)

Born in 1979, Huang is an artistic gymnast specializing in pommel horse and parallel bars. Beginning training in 1983, he joined the national team in 1993. In 1997, Huang won his first gold medal in the 33rd Artistic Gymnastics World Championship held in Lausanne, Switzerland. He was also a member of gold-medal-winning Chinese teams at the 2000 and 2004 Summer Olympics.

Lin Li (Swimming)

Born in 1970, Lin began her training as a swimmer in 1976. Lin competed at the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona, where she won a gold medal and set a world record in 200-meter individual medley, becoming China's first world champion in swimming.

Wu Jianqiu (Badminton)

Born in 1962, Wu is a retired female badminton player. After joining the national team in 1981, she won the gold medal



Former world champion Lin Li teaches kids how to swim.

in women's singles at the Danish Open in 1982 and the gold medals in women's doubles at the All-England Open in 1983. Wu was also a member of the Chinese teams that won the Uber Cup in 1984 and 1986.

Zhao Jianhua (Badminton)

Born in 1965, Zhao is a former badminton player who competed internationally from the mid 1980s to the early 1990s. He is a two-time winner of the gold medal in singles at the All-England Open in 1986 and 1990 and was a member of the Chinese teams that won the Thomas Cup in 1988 and 1990. Zhao also won the gold medal in singles in the IBF World Championships held in Copenhagen, Denmark, in

for almost 1 percent of the local GDP.

The booming industry has also boosted the development of sports in the city.

About 4 billion yuan worth of sports lottery was sold last year, offering enough funds for local

sports and other social undertakings.

In addition, local businesses have increased their investment in building sports facilities and running sporting events.

For example, the Nantong Sports and Exhibition Center

as well as the Nantong branch of the China Sports Museum and a number of other training facilities have all used funds from non-government investors.

Ding Congrong contributed to the story



Former world champion Lu Bin instructs young gymnasts during a training class.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

NANTONG ATHLETES FOR THE LONDON OLYMPICS

Zhong Man: men's saber fencing
Chen Ruolin: women's 10 m platform and synchronized platform
Wu Penggen: men's beach volleyball
Zhang Xi: women's beach volleyball
Ma Jin: badminton mixed doubles
Yao Lei: badminton (on behalf of Singapore)