

Another brutal setback for Chinese gymnastics

Teng forced to withdraw with injury; Guo will be replacement

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Just because it's bad for China doesn't mean it's good for Japan.

Japan, which won the team silver at the 2010 and 2011 World Championships behind China, wasn't cheering after Teng Haibin's last-minute withdrawal from the London Games.

Instead, head coach Tomita Hiroyuki asked his athletes to remain focused.

"(I do not care) who is injured and pulls out of the Games. What we should do is focus on the competitions," Hiroyuki said.

"There are not many differences between Japan, China and the US, so it comes down to eliminating mistakes in the team competition. The Japanese team won the gold medal in Athens in 2004, and it feels the same here."

It was a dramatic turn of events for Teng and his replacement, Guo Weiyang, as their worlds were upended just two days before the opening ceremony.

Teng, the 2004 Olympic pommel horse champion, was forced to withdraw after suffering a pulled muscle in his forearm. Guo, a 2011 World Championship team winner, fell into the vacated slot.

Teng and his teammates were in tears.

Teng wrote on his micro blog that he was grateful for the support and had tried to hold on until the last moment.

"Thank you for your support and encouragement, thank you my brothers for all your comfort, thank you to the leadership for your trust in giving me the opportunity so I can fight for the dream with the last vestige of my strength," he wrote. "Rest assured I will be strong. I will be fuel for my brothers! I will stand together with you, fighting with you!"

Guo wrote one sentence on his own micro blog: "London, I'm coming."

Guo was training in Northern Ireland when he got the news.

He said he has remained in good shape.

"I have been systematically training in Northern Ireland and kept in good form," he said. "I have no problem competing. I will try my best to deliver something for the men's team."

Some former teammates were regretful.

"It's big loss for everyone," said former women's Olympic and world champion Liu Xuan. "I watched him train before they left for London. It should have been his third Olympic Games. It's not easy for him. He and the other veteran ath-



China's Teng Haibin prepares to practice during a training session at the London Olympics on Wednesday. Teng, the 2004 Olympic pommel horse champion, was replaced by Guo Weiyang after he injured his left arm.

letes shouldered China's gymnastics hopes the past 12 years. Let's give him a big hand."

The loss of Teng is a blow to the Chinese men, who will be in a tough battle to defend their Olympic team competition title. Teng, the 2003 world champion and 2004 Olympic champion on the pommel horse, was expected to contribute strong scores in that event and the parallel bars.

Teng famously performed disastrously during the team finals at the 2004 Olympics in Athens, where China finished out of the medals. He failed to make the team in 2008, but returned to help China win the 2010 and 2011 Worlds.

According to a public poll on Sohu.com, 53 percent of respondents said they trusted Guo, believing he is as competent as Teng.

Only 22 percent said they were not confident in his abilities and are concerned about the team's prospects.



"I have no problem competing. I will try my best to deliver something for the men's team."

GUO WEIYANG, MEMBER OF THE 2011 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS TEAM TITLE WINNER, ON HIS SUDDEN INCLUSION IN THE OLYMPICS

Sun's got the talent, but does he have the heart?

By REUTERS in London

Proud and patriotic, China's Sun Yang is a worthy successor to distance swimming great Grant Hackett, but will find out in London whether he has the Australian's famed mental toughness, his coach Denis Cottrell said.

Cottrell, a shaggy-haired surfing enthusiast from Australia's Gold Coast, was the mastermind behind Hackett's Olympic gold at the 2000 Sydney Games in the 1,500 meters freestyle and his successful title defence four years later in Athens.

Cottrell now stands on the brink of another coaching triumph, with 20-year-old world champion Sun the hot favorite to win the 1,500 in London, and a leading contender to upset reigning South Korean champion Park Tae-hwan in the 400 freestyle.

Despite Sun's credentials, Cottrell feels nervous for his swimmer and reluctant to talk too much, both for fear of adding to the massive pressure already on his shoulders and for upset-

ting his Chinese paymasters.

He cannot help but lavish praise on the rangy pin-up boy of Chinese swimming, however, describing him as big kid "with a bit of cheek."

"There's a lot of Hackett in Sun," a tired Cottrell said in a phone call from his flat in the Athletes' Village.

"He has a lot of passion for the sport and a passion for speed.

"We'll see whether he can be as tough as Grant. He's superior technically, but toughness is a rarer quality.

"You didn't get tougher than Grant — all the great swimmers like Alex Popov and Pieter van den Hoogenband, will attest to that.

"(Sun's) got races ahead of him that will define his character further."

Cottrell's legacy as a principal architect of Australian dominance in the 1,500 — the grueling iron-man event of the pool — is assured, but his new role in Sun's corner has not been universally cheered in his home country.

The Australian watched his swimmer

smash Hackett's decade-long 1,500 world record in the World Championship final in Sun's home pool at Shanghai last year. Hackett lamented the record as Australia's loss.

Australia's achievements in the pool are part of the country's Olympic folklore, but the swim team is expected to struggle to win more than two titles in London and could post their worst medal haul in decades.

Sun-led China, however, is on the rise with the help of foreign coaches, which have included American Mike Bottom, who trained 200 butterfly specialist Wu Peng to a bronze at the World Championships.

"To a little degree you could say (the criticism is) fair," said Cottrell, who has welcomed dozens of Olympic hopefuls to his Miami Swimming Club on the Gold Coast.

"I'm prepared to coach people who turn up and are prepared to do the work. It's a tough program.

"Training Sun and the Chinese has kept

me interested in the Games. It's re-affirming that my program is still valid and that it can still produce results."

Sun will bid to become China's first male swimmer to win Olympic gold but has yet to perform on the biggest stages overseas, with his two greatest titles coming in home pools.

He announced himself with a blistering swim to win the 1,500 gold at the 2010 Asian Games in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, before trouncing all comers at the Shanghai World Championships last year.

A gold or two away from the comforts of home would be the ultimate validation for Sun and also for Cottrell, who has taken comfort from his swimmer's assuredness in the leadup to the biggest event of his life.

Sun pepped up his teammates with a fiery speech before they left for London, saying: "I feel like a tough warrior, with shield in hand, I am about to go all out!"

Sun was no "hard core" mature kid, said Cottrell, who painted a picture of a

offtrack ...

EASY RIDER

A Chinese farmer said on Thursday he spent two years riding nearly 40,000 miles (60,000 kilometers) through 16 countries on a rickshaw to reach London in time for the Olympic Games.

Chen Guanming, 57, said his goal had been to "spread the Olympic spirit" on his journey through war zones, floods, and extreme temperatures in countries including Turkey and Iraq.

"During this rickshaw journey, I've travelled through 16 countries, and a distance of more than 40,000 miles," Chen told AFP in London's central Soho district, a day before the Games begin.

"I wanted to arrive on time for the opening ceremony. I had to face both floods and very hot and dry conditions."

He added: "Londoners are very welcoming, the city is welcoming the whole world in a very nice way."

It was not possible to independently verify his account of his journey or how he managed to go through so many countries.

But the BBC showed footage of Chen displaying a passport filled with visas allowing him entry to countries along the route, as well as pictures of him with his three-wheeled vehicle at several international landmarks.

You Tube footage also appeared to show him in Rome in May.

He told the BBC he was inspired to make the journey while watching London Mayor Boris Johnson accept the Olympic flag from inside the Bird's Nest stadium in Beijing at the 2008 closing ceremony.



LATE-NIGHT FIREWORKS

It was a midnight Olympic light show — unexpected and free — for residents of London's Stratford area.

A technical rehearsal for the opening ceremony wrapped up past midnight with two minutes of fireworks early on Thursday over the Olympic Stadium, a spectacular (if loud) treat for the neighborhood that adjoins Olympic Park. On Stratford's High Street, people making their way home stopped, looked up and oohed and ahhed.

Will it offset the expected gridlock they're girding for in their community? Maybe not. But it was a nice late-night gift for those out and about late.

RISE AND SHINE

Lots of visitors were up and at it early. But then again, it was easy to be fresh in the morning.

Why? Because most pubs in London close between 11 pm and midnight — far earlier than much of the world is used to.

That's old news to the locals, but it was a bit of a bummer to visitors who were just getting warmed up at that hour.

Maybe it was a blessing, though. With the Olympic torch hitting central London on Thursday and due to pass many landmarks, navigating was sure to be tricky and probably best done without a pounding headache.

MINISTERS BET

Britain's sports minister will be forced to put on an Australia hockey shirt and knock a ball around central London if the host nation fails to win more gold medals than its former colony at the Olympics, his Australian counterpart said on Thursday.

Kate Lundy, Australia's sports minister, told a news conference at Olympic Park that she had made a bet with Hugh Robertson on which of the nations would finish higher on the medal table.

"It's all in good humor, of course, both of us play a little bit of sport and so if we come out on top, he will don a Kookaburra shirt and a hockey stick and dribble a ball around Australia House right in the center of London," she said.

"If the result goes the other way, I have to wear a Stella McCartney Union Jack T-shirt and row a length of the lake at the Olympic venue at Eton Dorney."

At the last Olympics in Beijing, Britain (fourth) finished above Australia (sixth) on the medal table for the first time since the 1988 Seoul Games.



Sun Yang, Chinese swimmer

goofy teenager with a penchant for horseplay when he came to the Miami club after the Beijing Games.

"Although he seems to be becoming a little more mature in the last couple of months.

"He seems to be taking pride in being a groundbreaker — he likes to be the groundbreaker and he's enjoying the opportunity to be that person. He seems to be relishing the challenge.

"He certainly doesn't seem to be fazed by the position he is in."

China has sent swimmers to Cottrell for a number of years. His first involvement with the team was with Zhang Lin, who he helped guide to a silver medal

behind Park at Beijing.

Cottrell has picked up enough Mandarin to conduct basic training sessions, but relies on translators to help communicate the deeper messages to his swimmers.

The Chinese train in the same lanes as Cottrell's Australian proteges, which include two London Olympians in fast-improving 20-year-old Thomas Fraser-Holmes, a medal chance in the 400 individual medley, and Jade Neilsen, who will compete in the women's 4x200 freestyle relay.

Cottrell scoffs at perceptions of Chinese athletes being ultra-focused robots manufactured by the state, and says his swimmers and their Chinese coaches operate in a light-hearted and often irreverent atmosphere.

"On a personal level, they're great and they have a passion for their sport and a serious commitment to striving to be the best. They also have great pride in their country."