

Tough singles draw for China's Li

Former French Open champion could meet Serena in the quarterfinals

By AGENCIES
in London and Beijing

China's main hope for a singles medal in tennis at the London Olympics, Li Na, has received a brutal draw for the event, which will serve off at Wimbledon on Saturday.

Li, the 2011 French Open champion and world No 11, faces a tricky first-round match-up with world No

33 Daniela Hantuchova and, if she gets past the Slovakian, has a potential third-round clash with former world No 1 Caroline Wozniacki of Denmark and then a possible quarterfinal against recently crowned Wimbledon champion Serena Williams of the United States.

Her compatriots, Zheng Jie and Peng Shuai, hardly fared better in Wednesday's draw.

Zheng will face world No 19 Nadia Petrova of Russia in her opening match on the famous grass courts while Peng will meet Chinese Taipei's Hsieh Su-wei first up and then could face a second-round encounter with 2011 Wimbledon champion and world No 6 Petra Kvitova of the Czech Republic.

On the men's side of the draw, reigning Wimbledon champion and world No 1 Roger Federer will meet Colombian Alejandro Falla, who pushed Federer to five sets before losing in the first round at Wimbledon in 2010.

"He is the favorite whenever he plays," said Falla, who describes this season as his strongest yet. "I know him well and he knows me well, too."

"I'm going to have to play my best tennis if I am going to have a chance to win, but he's Roger and he's just won Wimbledon for the seventh time here."

Second-ranked Novak Djokovic of Serbia, the bronze medalist at the Beijing Games in 2008, was drawn into the same half as Wimbledon finalist Andy Murray, meaning the pair could meet in the semifinals. Djokovic plays Fabio Fognini of Italy

in the first round, ahead of a possible second-round match against American Andy Roddick.

Olympic gold medalist Rafael Nadal pulled out because of a knee injury, leaving No 4 seed David Ferrer as the highest-ranked Spaniard in the Olympic draw.

Tennis, with the exception of the mixed doubles event, returned to the Olympics at the 1988 Games in Seoul, South Korea, after a 64-year hiatus. Mixed doubles is being reintroduced at the London Games.

CHINA DAILY-AP

Love: The games they play off the courts

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badminton championship and you the rhythmic gymnastics one.' Those conversations can motivate you."

Several pairs of shuttlers have tied the knot in recent years. World No 1 and London Games title favorite Lin, who will defend his gold medal, and his wife, former world No 1 Xie, are the best known of the sport's couples.

It's hard to argue with results. Li's team is one of the most successful in the nation.

If Zhang and Zhao bring home a gold medal for China, it'll provide further evidence that romance can be a positive for athletes.

Changing attitudes

Other sports seem to be following suit.

Beijing Olympics shooting champions Du Li and Pang Wei got married after the Games and had a baby in 2010.

There was a rumor Du planned to retire because she expected to be kept off the Olympic roster. But the team supported the relationship, and the couple will compete in London as reigning champions.

To keep Du on track after the birth, head coach Wang Yifu even allowed the couple to take the baby to the training center.

Wang said such a decision would have been unthinkable in his own era. "To see athletes training with their children would have been impossible when I was an athlete," said Wang, who joked that he has had to become a babysitter.

"I think it was necessary to manage them in a way that differed from traditional ideals. I think they did a great job during training, and we are all in great condition for the London Games."

The 30-year-old Du, a two-time Olympic champion in Athens and Beijing, said marriage and motherhood improved her determination and her ability to stay calm under pressure.

"Every time I see the baby's smile, I tell myself I can get through all the agony and injury," Du said. "I've performed more consistently since having a child. For the first time, I feel really relaxed and I enjoy every moment of competition."

In gymnastics, Beijing Olympic champion Chen Yibing and individual trampoline winner He Wenna's romance made headlines. Fans loved it, thanks at least in part to their striking good looks.

Though they broke up last year, head coach Huang Yubin encouraged the relationship while it was happening.

"I do not think it needs to come as a surprise when athletes fall in love," he said. "It's natural."

Even the table tennis team, which has traditionally been very conservative on the subject, seems ready to accept that things are changing.

"Young players now are open-minded and unwilling to be restricted," said China's Vice-Minister of Sports Cai Zhenhua. "They should be allowed to have a personality."

In 2004, the table tennis team dismissed four players for romantic relationships. One was 19-year-old Bai Yang, who dated then world No 1 Ma Lin. Another was 17-year-old Fan Ying, the girlfriend of rising star Wang Hao. Also booted from the team were world No 9 Li Nan, 21, and her boyfriend, Hou Yingchao, 21.

Track and field coach Ma Junren asked his female athletes not to have any contact with men, leading to a boycott from star runner Wang Junxia — a former world and Olympic champion — and some of her teammates.

Wang later wrote about it in her biography.

"A soldier can be killed but won't be humiliated," she wrote. "As long as I am still alive, I will let you know we have dignity."

Cai, a former table tennis coach known for a stern attitude toward love affairs during his tenure, said times are different now.

"During my time, we were all focused on Olympic gold medals," he said. "But now, we have to take more into consideration. It's normal that players fall in love at their age. They should have their ways and room to make friends from the outside and expand their horizons. I'm not against that as long as they are not distracted during training and competitions."

REPORTER'S LOG | SUN XIAOCHEN

Not just athletes having a hard time

What a mess. I guess the first time doing something is often the hardest — especially when you're covering the planet's largest sports event.

As a rookie sports reporter, who has only been on the beat for about two years, I had no clue how tangled the Olympics could be — that is, until the journey began.

The heaviest downpour in Beijing in 61 years delayed our flight, and I arrived at London's Heathrow Airport on Sunday at midnight — after the last train to downtown.

After a bumpy two-hour bus ride, I was lost in central London. I wandered the dark streets, hunting for the apartment I was supposed to — and eager to — sleep in.

That was just the start.

I soon discovered a greater problem was trying to cover more topics than I was assigned — and I had been assigned a lot.

The pre-Games plan said I should be focusing on feature profiles and in-depth stories about Chinese athletes and relevant topics with international appeal.

But I was swept up in the daily information deluge — the organizing committee's updates, different NOCs' conference calls and events briefings flooded my schedule in the first days. It was distracting.

I tried to grab quotes from athletes and coaches at the training sessions but discovered this was tricky because most venues weren't completed.

The construction made it difficult to access the competition areas, news conference rooms and mixed zone locations.

And some training sites are too remote to reach by public transport. The shuttle buses from the Main Press Center to venues weren't scheduled to run until the event's kickoff.

After four days of overcoming the mental and physical stress, I've just managed to handle the daily reports while approaching more in-depth pieces.

But I guess, after all, the Olympics is all about pushing yourself to your limits — and then beyond them.

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JAPAN STUNS SPAIN

PHOTO BY DAVID MOIR / REUTERS

Japan's Yuki Otsu fights for the ball with Spain's Martin Montoya (partially obscured) during their men's Group D soccer match at the Olympic Games in Hampden Park, Glasgow, Scotland, on Thursday. Japan produced a major shock by beating medal favorite Spain 1-0. Forward Otsu broke away from his marker during a corner in the 34th minute and the ball landed right at his feet for a simple tap-in past Manchester United goalkeeper David De Gea.



ALL SMILES SO FAR

PHOTO BY BEN CURTIS / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Jamaican sprinters Usain Bolt (left) and Asafa Powell speak to fans and media at a news conference on Thursday in London.

Mayor: Johnson welcomes Chinese

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It is hoped the Games will leave a legacy for London's relatively run-down West End area, particularly in the Olympic boroughs of Greenwich, Hackney, Newham, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest.

New housing units have been built in those boroughs and transport upgrades in the surrounding areas are hoped to attract more business investments.

Another goal of the Games is to encourage more Londoners to play sports, and Sport England is charged with ensuring that one million more

people participate three or more times a week by 2013.

Although London's Olympics took seven years to prepare, Johnson said the climax of "a Himalayan range of excitement" for him came when the Olympic flame arrived in the UK in May for the torch relay.

When the plane landed in Cornwall, in Southwest England, it was greeted by a huge crowd.

"I think anthropologists are trying to decide what it is about us that makes us so excited about a flame," he said.

"It's moving people in a very deep way. I think it's about pride. That

they love their city, their country, it's a moment for them to show off. So that idea of being at the center of the world for the time being is very exciting."

Johnson said he is proud to welcome the Chinese delegation to his city.

"I wish to welcome the Chinese delegation and (say) how much we admired what Beijing did and wish you good fortune in the competition," he said.

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