

Tall order for host hoopsters

WITHOUT ITS NBA STARS, CHINA FACING A TOUGH STRUGGLE RETAINING ITS CROWN

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BEIJING — Coming into the Guangzhou Asian Games without NBA players Yao Ming and Yi Jianlian and burdened by the shame of an ugly melee with the Brazil team, China men's basketball side will find it difficult to dominate its regional foes.

Led by former NBA player Wang Zhizhi and Yi, China won the most recent Asian Games title in Doha four years ago, but has struggled in continental competitions of late: highlighted by a humiliating final loss to Iran at last year's Asian Championships.

Rising nations like Iran, Jordan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) have made rapid progress over the past few years and the gap is closing — particularly when China plays without NBA all-star center Yao.

Head coach Bob Donewald Jr, who was fined and warned by the Chinese Basketball Association after his role in the brawl between China and Brazil during last month's friendly, is aware of the significance of lifting the trophy on home soil to boost the morale of a much-weakened China team.

Sharpshooter Zhu Fangyu is just back from an injury, which forced him to miss the Worlds, while on-court leader Wang is 33 years old and no longer as competitive or athletic as four years ago.

The veterans will seek help from former Los Angeles Laker Sun Yue, point guard Liu Wei and sharpshooter Wang Shipeng.

"We have some strong opponents at the Asian Games," said Donewald. "Iran is the Asian champion and the trophy is still in its hands."

"The ROK is a strong team and it will be very competitive for the championship. Also, Jordan has played high-level basketball over the past few years."

"It's going to be a tough tournament for us. It will be high-level and highly competitive. But I'm looking forward to a great event."

Donewald also urged his squad to fill the void left by Yi and Yao and get back on track after a dis-



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The Chinese men's basketball team will face an uphill battle to win the gold medal in Guangzhou.

appointing World Championship in September.

China, which finished eighth at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, did not show any signs of improve-

ment under the new coach at the Worlds in Turkey and only managed to dig out one tough win, over African minnow Cote d'Ivoire.

"Without Yi and Yao, we need

other boys to help the team in Guangzhou," said Donewald.

Slumping women

China women's basketball

PAST RECORD >> ASIAN GAMES

MEN	
2006	Gold
2002	Silver
1998	Gold
1994	Gold
1990	Gold
1986	Gold
1982	Silver
1978	Gold
1974	Bronze

WOMEN	
2006	Gold
2002	Gold
1998	Silver
1994	Bronze
1990	Silver
1986	Gold
1982	Gold
1978	Silver
1974	Bronze

team was once one of the world's powerhouses and finished fourth at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.

But due to the waning physical condition of the team's veterans and a lack of emerging stars, the side suffered a huge blow at last month's World Championships, finishing in a worst-ever 13th place.

Although China has been a traditionally dominant force in continental tournaments, including winning the titles at the past two Asian Games, local fans are concerned the team may not be able to hold off challenges from neighboring rivals Japan and the ROK, which both advanced to the final 12 at last month's World Championship.

Head coach Sun Fengwu has decided to call up a number of promising young guns for the Asian Games, hoping they will provide more energy and enthusiasm.

"We used a number of veterans at the World Championship and the result was not so good. Relying on old players is not in accordance to the international tendency," said Sun, whose team won four straight warm-up games leading into the Asiad. "I made some changes in the recent warm-ups and will give more chances to the young players."