

China's time to shine in the ring

HOST SQUAD FAVORED TO DOMINATE WOMEN'S BOXING; ZOU FACING TOUGH CHALLENGE ON MEN'S SIDE

GUANGZHOU — China has its sights set on at least two gold medals when the Asian Games boxing starts on Tuesday, with women's bouts making their debut.

Regional powerhouse Uzbekistan topped the boxing medal standings four years ago in Doha, where several countries and regions emerged as legitimate contenders.

One of those was China, and there is growing interest — even beyond Asia — in the fast development of the sport in the country, that now boasts some top-class amateur pugilists.

China shocked traditional regional powers Kazakhstan, Thailand and the Republic of Korea by finishing second last time around after bagging two gold medals through Zou Shiming (light flyweight) and Hu Qing (lightweight).

The Chinese followed that up with a surprise four medals at the 2008 Beijing Olympics including a first-ever gold — for Zou — and the sport continued to grow in the country since.

In October, China's national team beat the United States 6-5 in an amateur tournament in New York as Beijing medalists Zhang Zhilei (super heavyweight) and the highly talented Zou both pounded out wins.

Coach Zhang Chuanliang said his team "is capable of winning at least two gold medals" in the southern Chinese metropolis of Guangzhou.

But he cautioned the lightning-quick Zou, 29, considered the finest

in the world in his class, is not at his devastating best.

"Zou's training is not systematic and his response and fitness have therefore declined," Zhang told Xinhua news agency.

Zou's major opponent to defending his Asian Games crown is Purevdorj Serdamba of Mongolia, who lost to Zou in the final in Beijing in 2008 but went on to win the world amateur championships the following year.

Host China has a team of 13 boxers at the games, including women.

But it is not all about the Chinese, with India's Vijender Singh hoping to put the disappointment of last month's Commonwealth Games behind him after he crashed out in the semifinals on home soil.

Singh, a national celebrity in India, is the No 1-ranked amateur middleweight in the world and won Olympic bronze in Beijing.

International Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge is a strong advocate of women's boxing, and he pushed through the decision to make it an Olympic sport in 2012.

The Asian Games and the Olympics will have three categories for women: flyweight (48-51kg), lightweight (56-60kg) and middleweight (69-75kg).

Chinese women picked up one gold, three silver and three bronze at the recent world championships in Barbados and are the heavy favorite here.

In the flyweight final in the Caribbean, Ren Cancan made Chinese history, becoming the nation's first two-time women's world champion.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE



JACQUES DEMARTHON / AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

China's Zou Shiming fights France's Nordine Oubaal during their 2008 Olympic Games light flyweight (48 kg) bout in Beijing.



PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Two of the prophetic pandas.

Pandas take leaf out of oracle octopus' book

By ZHENG CAIXIONG
CHINA DAILY

GUANGZHOU — Twelve giant pandas, which are predicting the results of the Asian Games' competitions, have become major attractions at the Xiangjiang Safari Park in Guangzhou's Panyu district.

The pandas draw many curious onlookers when they start 'predicting' results, with the help of the park's animal keepers.

However, the pandas have been unable to emulate the feats of Paul

the Octopus, who correctly predicted World Cup soccer results earlier this year. The pandas have tended to favor Chinese athletes.

Before the opening ceremony, Panda Bo Si was asked to predict the winner of the Games' first gold medal, with a bamboo shoot representing a Chinese winner and an apple for an overseas winner.

Yuan Xiaochao, the Chinese wushu expert, won the games' first gold medal on Friday.

Bo Si picked the bamboo shoot, leading some cynics to

suggest the result was predictable and the experiment poorly thought out as pandas exist on a bamboo diet.

However, Huihui surprised onlookers by picking a red rocking horse representing China's Zhang Lin when asked to "name" the winner of the men's 200 freestyle on Sunday. Republic of Korea's Park Tae-hwan, represented by a green toy the panda ignored, went on to win the event.

"The pandas are expected to help the park attract more tourists

during the Asian Games," said a park staff member.

Chen Wenzhi, a white-collar worker, said she would definitely bring her seven-year-old daughter to see the pandas make their picks.

"The pandas are really cute," Chen told China Daily.

All the pandas, including six babies, arrived in Guangzhou on Oct 28 from Sichuan province.

They have formed an "Asian Games Panda Group" to spread luck and happiness.