

HAPPY TO BE BACK



Li Na celebrates a winning point against Chang Kai-chen of Chinese Taipei in the women's team final on Tuesday.

NICOLAS ASFOURI / AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

By YU YILEI
CHINA DAILY

GUANGZHOU — For Li Na, everything was fun when she took the court for Team China on Tuesday.

The world No 11 had not played for China since the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, where she reached the semifinals and made national tennis history.

Since then, the Wuhan native has focused on pro tour and not answered China's call to join the Federation Cup lineup.

"It's absolutely fun competing as a national team member, and different from the feeling of being a professional player on the tour," Li said after helping her team defeat Chinese Taipei 2-1 to win the women's team title at the Guangzhou Asian Games.

While the pro tour means moving from city to city and hotel to hotel with a fixed support team, inclusion on the national team provides joys such as doing everything with teammates, and even sharing girls' talk with roommates.

"I lived in the Athletes' Village and shared an apartment with Han Xinyun (a younger teammate)," said Li, who will not take part in the singles event and left the village on

Tuesday night. "We exchanged a lot of girl talk at night."

On court, Li admitted she was not accustomed to instructions from the team's head coach, Jiang Hongwei, throughout the match.

Her coach, Swede Thomas Hogstedt, and her husband, Jiang Shan, were sitting in the stands while head coach Jiang was next to the court.

However, the first people Li looks to for inspiration are Hogstedt and her husband, as she frequently looks up to them after losing a point. And she appeared a bit impatient when coach Jiang tried to talk to her during a break.

"I could not help it (looking at Hogstedt and Jiang)," she said. "I am not used to talking to a coach at every break because there is no such on-court instruction on the professional tour."

After starting the season with a semifinal finish at the Australian Open and ending with an Asian Games gold medal, Li has had her best pro season so far; one in which she also broke into the world top 10. Now all she needs is a good rest.

"This was a very long season and I want to have a good rest before thinking about what I will achieve next season," she said.

Chinese coach laments dearth of young talent

By YU YILEI
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GUANGZHOU — Chinese coach Jiang Hongwei was overjoyed at reclaiming the women's tennis team gold in Guangzhou, but he worries that winning the battle may have cost his country the war in terms of securing future success in the sport.

Grand Slam semifinalist Li Na and former world top 30 player Peng Shuai met little resistance en route to defeating Chinese Taipei 2-1 in the final this week, and grabbing an Asiad title that eluded the country for 24 years. Its last win was at Seoul in 1986.

However, China's reliance on its aging stars means that younger players aren't getting a chance to acquaint themselves with the pressure of performing at such a pressurized event, a trend that Jiang thinks will see China suffer when the old guard retires.

"I am certainly overwhelmed at having led the team to this long-awaited win, but one of the goals of the Asian Games is to push the youngsters to take over the baton," he told China Daily. "I don't think I've achieved that."

Jiang was an instrumental part in China's move to adopt professional training methods in the sport after the 2004 Athens Olympics.

After adopting the mantle of women's head coach in 2005, he raised eyebrows by allowing national players to keep more of their prize money from the professional tour, and having their boyfriends and husbands tag along with the coaching team.

Before this, spouses and partners were banned, and the Chinese Tennis Association took the majority of its stars' winnings to help cover the costs of coaches, facilities and traveling fees.

Jiang helped build his reputation by showing he was able to tame Li Na, a former firebrand who quickly butted heads with each new coach.

Li and Peng represented half of a quartet of top players including Yan Zi and two-time Grand Slam semifinalist Zheng Jie who left the state-supported system and self-managed their careers after the Beijing Olympics under Jiang's guidance.

The problem is that, in the interim, he has been unable to get the next generation on the same track.

"The young players are stuck at a certain level and I don't know what's going wrong," he said. "They are provided with better con-



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JIANG HONGWEI
WOMEN'S TENNIS COACH

ditions, but they have not managed to acquit themselves on the international stage.”

Apart from Li, Peng and Yan (Zheng is out with a wrist injury), the Chinese team includes world No 91 Zhang Shuai, aged 21, and Han Xinyun, 20. Neither of the youngsters played in a singles match in Guangzhou.

"They are unable to face the challenge like their older teammates and, frankly speaking, I am worried about their future," said the coach.

Zhang played four doubles matches with Yan, but it was Li and Peng who sealed victory for China with their singles wins.

Zhang and Han are considered the cream of the crop of China's new tennis talent, but they were criticized recently by China's tennis chief, Sun Jinfang for not working hard enough and lacking fighting spirit.

"If things do not improve, we will shift our attention to new players," Jiang said.

The coach feels China will have its back against the wall at the 2012 Olympics in London.

"The Asian Games is like a mid-term exam and a tune-up for the Olympics," he said. "If our young players are not able to deliver here, then clearly our chances at the Olympics are going to be fairly slim."