

# Sport growing rapidly

By SUN XIAOCHEN  
sunxiaochen@chinadaily.com.cn

If not for rugby Sevens becoming an Olympic sport, Yan Meiling would have quit the fierce contact sport two years ago and become just another a normal high school girl.

However, with the sport's Sevens format emerging in the global spotlight at the 2016 Rio Olympics, the tough 17-year-old regained her motivation to play on.

"I have been like this (with short spiky hair) for about three years. Strangers think I am a boy at first sight," Yan said after China's first group match against Australia on Sunday.

"It's really a tough sport, particularly for girls, because of its physically demanding nature and high risk of injury.

"However, the chance of making it to the Olympics really inspires us to continue playing. Hopefully our hard work will pay off by leading us to Olympic glory, just like athletes in other sports," said the Nanjing native, who started to play rugby in 2010.

After being excluded from the Olympic program for 90 years, rugby, in its abbreviated form, has made its return to the Olympic fold in Nanjing, where six teams on the boys' and girls' sides are slugging it out for their respective crowns.

Thanks to its Olympic comeback, young athletes around the world, like Yan, now dream of Olympic glory.

"With it becoming an Olympic

sport, it ignites the flame. A lot of girls in Australia have started to take up rugby Sevens," Scott Bowen, coach of the Australian girls squad, said after guiding his team to a 15-12 victory over China.

Despite the popularity of the 15-a-side format in Australia, rugby still needs Olympic exposure to be embraced more internationally, Bowen said.

"It (the Olympic entry) has changed (the participation in the game) in the past couple of years. These girls here, a number of them, have played for a year. I guess they chose the sport purely with the goal of going to the Olympic Games," said Bowen.

Tiana Penitani, a promising Australian player, said the 2016 Rio Olympics have provided a massive opportunity for women's Sevens to grow rapidly throughout the world.

Asked how the Chinese could catch up to the world's elite teams, Bowen said he believes Chinese girls will pick up the game quickly and cited Australia's Emilee Cherry as a prime example.

"The Chinese girls are showing great potential and they will be dangerous after receiving adequate coaching and support," he said.

Cherry, a Queenslander, was named the IRB Women's Sevens player of the year in May after playing the game for just two and a half years.

"She never played any contact sport before. She's a good example of growing with rugby now that it has a presence on that (Olympic) world stage," said Bowen.



Chinese rugby Sevens player Yan Meiling hopes she will appear at the Olympic Games one day. PHOTO BY WEI XIAOHAO / CHINA DAILY

## Photo-finish gold for Brit

By GAO CHANGXIN  
gaochangxin@chinadaily.com.cn

"Over the moon" was how British triathlete Ben Dijkstra felt after referees adjusted a photo finish to give him first place over New Zealand's Daniel Hoy.

After the race "I just lay on the floor, I was just exhausted ... I thought 'What a great race, he is just a great athlete' and congratulated him," said Dijkstra.

"Then it (the scoreboard) changed to my name. I was like wow, I got this medal, fantastic result."

Sixteen-year-old Hoy and 15-year-old Dijkstra were credited with the same time. Hoy was given first place in the photo finish before the result was adjusted to give Dijkstra the gold.

Drizzle on Monday made the closely contested race, with three penalties given, even more demanding. Dijkstra, Hoy and Emil Deleuran Hansen from Denmark battled it out over the final 200 meters and then collapsed after sprinting to the finish line.

"The last 200m was close and the last 100m felt like forever," said Dijkstra.

"It was a super tough race," said Hoy.

Dijkstra's powerful burst in the final minutes might be attributed to the fact he started his athletic career as a runner. He was 14th at the bike-to-run transition but powered home in the 5km run.

Dijkstra started running at the age of four. By the age of eight he had won national titles in cross-country and on the track. Just last month, he claimed 3,000m gold at the English Schools' Championships.

This year is his first season in the multi-sport event and it started with a bang in March when he won gold at the British Elite Duathlon Championships at the Rockingham circuit. He got his ticket to Nanjing by claiming gold at the ITU European Youth Olympic Games qualifier.

For Hoy, coming from New Zealand's winter helped him cope with the tough conditions and he said all he needed was a bit of luck. "It was a very close finish ... I was just beaten by a photo finish," said Hoy. "It's a lot of training and a long way to go, but second is still a good position in a field like this."

# Speedster on fast track to success

By SUN XIAOCHEN  
sunxiaochen@chinadaily.com.cn

For Tiana Penitani, no other sport combines the athletic endeavors she loves most like rugby Sevens.

From a sprint background, the 18-year-old enjoyed running but hadn't combined it with the concepts of team spirit and ball handling until she started to play the game in 2012.

"I played a lot of ball sports growing up. I love team sports and I love running. Sevens just gave me so much room to run and combined everything I love — I like a ball in my hands. It's a lot of fun," Penitani told China Daily after scoring two tries in Australia's comeback victory

over China in the pool stage on Sunday.

Penitani developed quickly from a rookie to one of the most promising talents in Australia despite the fact she has only been fully involved in the game for just more than a year.

"I am still quite new to the game, so I just work hard and try to learn gradually," said Penitani, who carried the Australian national flag as the representative for her country at the opening ceremony on Saturday.

The speedster from the Maroubra women's rugby Sevens club made her name after leading the Australian side to gold at the Australian Youth Olympic Festival in 2013 — an event run by the Australian Olympic Committee.



Tiana Penitani

Boasting exceptional athleticism, Penitani was invited to train with the senior Australian Sevens team and made her senior debut at the International Rugby Board Sevens World Series' Hong Kong leg in March 2013.

A try scoring machine, Penitani became the youngest Australian

Rugby World Cup representative — in either the 15s or Sevens formats.

Now the teenager, who worships Australia's former Olympic 400m champion Cathy Freeman, is looking for her own shot to shine at the Olympics.

"The Youth Olympic Games gives young people an opportunity to be able to strive toward the 2016 Olympics and it also offers a taste of what the Olympics are going to be like. It's only two years away, which is quite exciting," said Penitani.

With the Sevens competition in Nanjing lasting only four days, Penitani and her teammates will have plenty of time to explore local neighborhoods, which intrigues her a lot.