

Jeremy Wilson talks: China

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World Champion Zhang Jike, World number one Ma Long, Women's World Champion and number one Ding Ning

Jeremy Wilson writes in his first piece about China's dominance in the world of table tennis and how their chances fare for the Olympics:

It is doubtful where there is another major sport in the world just now that is more dominated by one single nation. With an estimated 300 million players and an unrivalled programme of elite development, China have assumed a stranglehold on the sport that has been broken only sporadically over the last 30 years.

They have provided every singles champions in the women's events since table-tennis was introduced into the Olympics in 1988 and have prevailed in the men's singles in three out of the last four tournaments. In Beijing, China actually won a clean sweep of gold, silver and bronze in both the men's and women's singles while also winning both team events. Indeed, since table-tennis became an Olympic sport in 1988, China have won 20 of the available 24 gold medals and won 41 of all the available medals.

As we approach next summer's Olympics, there is little sign of any real threat, At the 2011 World Championships in Rotterdam, both the men's and women's singles finals were all Chinese. Zhang Jike prevailed in the final of the men's singles against Wang Hao while the women's world champion is Ding Ning who beat Li Xiaoxia in the final.

The qualification system for London, however, will prevent China from winning every medal in the singles. The rules state that the top 28 men and top 28 women players in the world rankings will automatically qualify, but there is also the stipulation that no one country can have more than two entrants in each singles event. In the men's rankings, China currently have eight players in the world's top 28 while in the women they have nine players. It all means that the selection process to get into the Chinese team could be almost as significant in deciding who eventually wins the singles medals as the matches in London.

One player who will have a particular motivation is Wang Hao, who is currently at the top of the world rankings, despite losing in the final of the last two Olympic Games.

The second Chinese player to be selected for the singles is likely to be either Jike, the current world champion or Ma Lin, who is the defending Olympic Champion. As of September 2011, they were rated third and fourth in the world respectively but will be pushed hard by Ma Long, Wang Liqin and Xu Xin, who are all also in the world's top 10. Liqin was the bronze medallist in the past two Olympic singles' events.

Competition to get into the Chinese women's team will be equally fierce. Zhang Yining, the singles gold medallist both in Beijing and Athens, has now retired, while Wang Nan, previously both a silver and gold medallist in the singles, is also unlikely to make the Chinese team. The top two players in the world are currently Ning and Xiaoxia, the two World Championship finalists.

In the World Championships of 2011, seven of the eight women's quarter-finalists were Chinese.

One interesting fact for next year is that the Chinese players have been taking lessons in English in order to communicate with the media while in London. It has been a compulsory addition to their intensive preparations and is expected to make the Chinese more integrated with the table-tennis world. "If they communicate in English then the entire world will listen, which is an exceptionally positive step and adds an extra dimension to the global appeal of our sport," said Adham Sharara, the president of the International Table Tennis Federation.

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