

## SPORTS

## OLYMPICS

## A FRENCH CONNECTION

China's golden freestyle skiing couple aims to repeat their double delight in 2030

By SUN XIAOCHEN

sunxiaochen@chinadaily.com.cn

Even with their names already enshrined in the sport's history together, China's golden couple Xu Mengtao and Wang Xindi have refused to rest on their laurels.

Fresh from becoming the sport's first couple to respectively win individual Olympic gold at the same Games — and in the same discipline — in Italy, Xu and Wang have already set their sights on repeating their double delight in freestyle aerials in the French Alps in 2030, despite facing stern challenges from maturing international competitors and the risky discipline's unpredictable nature.

"Our shared plan is to keep going," Xu told the audience during a recent open lecture at Beijing Sport University.

"Our target is clear: the 2030 Winter Olympics in the French Alps. Olympic glory is not the finish line, it is a fresh start for our ongoing journey," Xu said, her voice steady and resolute.

Xu and Wang, both alumni of BSU, shared their arduous gold-winning journey at Milano-Cortina 2026 with hundreds of students as part of the university's "Face-to-Face with Olympic Champions" lecture series on Thursday.

The 35-year-old Xu, a five-time Olympian, and Wang, who's five years Xu's junior, detailed years of injury struggles, sacrifice and mutual support that carried them to the pinnacle of their sport in Livigno, Italy, where Xu became the world's first skier to successfully defend an aerials Olympic title and Wang achieved his own breakthrough by winning a first Olympic gold on his third attempt.

The couple's decision to extend their competitive careers, despite the wear and tear of another four years, stems from their mutual inspiration and company on and off the snow.

"We train together, review runs together and lift each other up through every setback," said Wang, who always describes his wife as not just his role model as the sport's most dominant female athlete, but also as his fiercest cheerleader.

"To try to defend the Olympic title alone is hard, while doing it together makes it more meaningful. That's why we are so motivated to set such a tall task as our target for the next Olympic cycle so early."

That strong bond has seen them



China's Xu Mengtao (right) and Wang Xindi share an embrace during the freestyle skiing aerials team event at the 2026 Milano-Cortina Winter Olympics in February. The pair went on to add the team bronze to their individual golds. XINHUA

overcome their respective struggles to meet at the top of their sport in Italy, and is, naturally, expected to fuel their ambition for an encore in France.

Their love story started to build in 2007, when Wang, a junior gymnast at 12, joined the freestyle skiing program as a cross-sport talent.

The two young teammates spent almost the next two decades together, building a camaraderie that, back then, neither could have imagined would blossom into a romantic relationship.

It was during arguably the darkest period of Xu's career, after she injured her knees in a false final-run landing that cost her potentially a



Children from a kindergarten affiliated to Beijing Sport University pose with Xu Mengtao (left) and Wang Xindi. WANG YI / FOR CHINA DAILY

first Olympic title at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games, when Wang stepped forward to offer support and care beyond that of just a teammate.

He accompanied her to rehabilitation sessions, where Xu had to learn how to walk again following surgeries on both knees, helped her analyze training footage after she recovered and listened when she vented her frustrations.

It was Wang's patience, composure and analytical thinking, coming from more setbacks of his own than Xu's in their early careers, that carried his wife out of self-doubt.

A mutual affection started to build quietly through understand-

ing the unique physical and mental challenges of their sport, leading to a romance that they proudly shared with fans in a joint social media message posted a day after the conclusion of the Beijing Winter Games, where Xu's victory on home snow overshadowed Wang's second-straight early Olympic exit.

"For a long while in my career, failure seemed the main theme, and, because of that, I've learned to accept my imperfections," Wang confessed.

"And that has pushed me to be someone who thinks in the long-term, who trusts the process and always focuses on the next step."

Finally, after having tested their respective form with flying colors at multiple World Cup events, they peaked at the right time, one after another, at the Italian Alps resort in Livigno.

A more relaxed and more focused competitor on high-stakes occasions, Xu attributed her near-perfect performance in the women's final to her mind — as steely strong as the screw pinned into her left knee as result of her 2018 surgery.

Entering the Feb 18 final in second place, she needed a flawless run to secure back-to-back gold.

She launched into her signature triple back flip with three twists, soaring high into the clear sky. Her body rotated cleanly, landing stably and precisely, and the judges rewarded her with a winning score of 112.90 points.

"I felt every muscle, every breath and every heartbeat in that moment," Xu recalled during the lecture.

"After four years of training, injuries and doubts, I knew I had given everything. When the score came up, I didn't just celebrate a win. I celebrated the girl who refused to quit."

What made her victory even more emotional was that, two days later, Wang claimed his own first Olympic gold in the men's individual final, where he also delivered the performance of his life to fend off strong competition from Switzerland's two-time world champion Noe Roth.

Now, with the new four-year Olympic cycle kicking in, Xu and Wang said the itch for more glory has grown in them again.

"When is the moment that I feel most proud?" Xu replied to a student's question. "I'd say right now, because I am still on the road. And I will be on that road with him, all the way to France."

## BASKETBALL

## Lakers take Game 1, as Rockets fail to fire without Durant

LOS ANGELES — Kevin Durant was ruled out of Houston's playoff opener against the Los Angeles Lakers with a bruised right knee about 90 minutes before tip-off.

The rest of the Rockets were neither ready nor able to pick up the slack.

Houston is in an early postseason hole, and the Lakers are feeling awfully good about their upset chances after Los Angeles' 107-98 victory on Saturday night.

Both teams were without their top scorer to begin the first-round series, but only the Lakers responded to the challenge with the necessary determination and production.

With Durant, Luka Doncic and Austin Reaves — a combined 82.8 points per game — all watching in their civvies, Los Angeles surprisingly controlled Game 1.

While the Lakers got double-digit scoring from all five starters and 60.6 percent shooting overall, the Rockets didn't have a 20-point scor-

er, or anybody who could make more than 50 percent of their shots except reserve Tari Eason.

Those results were even more disturbing because Houston grabbed 21 offensive rebounds, and coach Ime Udoka thought his team got plenty of good looks.

"Whoever (is) playing, we play with them," Rockets center Alperen Sengun said. "But we missed (Durant) for sure tonight, and, hopefully, we see him soon."

Sengun had 19 points on 6-for-19 shooting, while Reed Sheppard and Amen Thompson got 17 points apiece on a combined 13 of 38 from the field. Sheppard went five for 14 on 3-point attempts, and his teammates combined to hit just six additional 3-pointers.

The Rockets seem confident Durant's bruised right knee isn't a long-term problem, although Udoka said it was "very tender. ... Tough to bend in certain ways. He hit it in a very awkward spot, I suppose. Pain



Los Angeles Lakers forward LeBron James (left) talks to his son Bronny during Game 1 of a first-round NBA playoff series against the Houston Rockets on Saturday in Los Angeles. AP

tolerance is one part, but (also) limited movement."

While Durant was a late scratch for Houston, the Lakers have had more than two weeks to adjust to being without Doncic and Reaves,

who both got hurt on April 2.

That preparation time showed. Most notably, Luke Kennard continued to step up as a starter with a career playoff-high 27 points and 5-for-5 shooting on 3-pointers, pro-

viding more reason for the Lakers to be grateful for his midseason arrival from Atlanta.

"Since I've been here, we haven't been really healthy a lot, so this just speaks on the guys in the locker room staying ready, being ready," Kennard said. "Guys stepping up in big moments, making big shots. I feel like everybody did that tonight."

Deandre Ayton delivered a confident 19 points and 11 rebounds, and Rui Hachimura also showed offensive aggression — an all-too-rare quality in the forward — while scoring 14 points. Veteran guard Marcus Smart added 15 points and eight assists, and 41-year-old LeBron James merely controlled the floor while racking up 19 points, 13 assists and eight rebounds.

"It's just our playoff mentality," Lakers coach JJ Redick said. "You can't worry about who's in or out of the lineup. It's our game plan. It's our standards. It's how we play, and we've built toward that. I thought

our guys just responded well and met the moment. There's a lot that you have to do (against) Kevin, and you just kind of scrap that and you move on to all the other stuff we worked on."

Durant's absence and the Lakers' performance in Game 1 have both suddenly provided significant credibility to the Lakers' determination to hang with the Rockets long enough for Doncic and Reaves to have an opportunity to return to the postseason. This series schedule even contains an extra day off before three of the next four games.

"We're going to try to make this season as long as possible so that we can get those guys back at some point," Redick said Friday. "We don't know what that is, but that's just our job. And their job is to do everything they can to be in a position to come back at some point. It may not work, but that's what we're trying to do."

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## MOTOR SPORTS

## Domenicali says Verstappen understands 'bigger picture' of F1 rule changes

PARIS — Formula One boss Stefano Domenicali has called on drivers, including the outspoken Max Verstappen, to "be respectful" of the sport, but said changes to this year's new power unit regulations need to be made.

The Dutch four-time world champion has been the most vocal of the drivers criticizing the new regulations concerning the hybrid engines, the electrical power management of which has posed problems for the drivers in the opening three races of the season.

Verstappen called the new style of racing "a joke" after the Chinese

Grand Prix and has hinted he will take a break from F1 in 2027 if it remains the same.

"We have spoken many, many times since the beginning," Domenicali told Autosport.

"I understand his (Verstappen's) comments, and he understands the bigger picture. I don't want to fall into the trap of trying to create antagonism, because that's not me.

"We're going to be together. He is the best driver, he is a multiple world champion, and, of course, his voice has to be listened to.

"But, he knows that his voice has a weight. And he needs to respect that

weight, (as) sometimes some people can take it the wrong way and this is something we shouldn't allow to happen."

He also urged all the drivers to "protect the jewel" of motor sports.

"What I said to them is: 'Listen, guys, don't forget that what we are doing is because we did the right things together. So, be respectful of a sport that gave all of us an incredible opportunity to grow, to make a lot of money, to develop a personality in the world that other sports cannot give.'

"And I think that has been acknowledged.

"We mustn't forget this is the jewel of our sport, and we need to protect that jewel."

## 'Full power'

Domenicali also said talks between the FIA, the teams and the drivers to find a solution to the current problems were "moving in the right direction."

"There are meetings this week and next week before the Miami Grand Prix to see what can be done to improve or adjust the situation."

The FIA is expected to announce changes this week that Domenicali hopes will "allow drivers to be, as

much as possible, at full power or full braking" during races, where there have been safety concerns.

The new hybrid engines, 50 percent internal combustion and 50 percent electric, were brought in to encourage overtaking and make races more exciting for the hundreds of millions of viewers around the world.

"The outcome is magnificent ... There's a lot of action, and that's what people want to see," said Domenicali.

But, an accident at Suzuka last month, involving Haas driver Oliver Bearman, who crashed at 300 km/h

into the Alpine of Franco Colapinto, running 50 km/h slower, has revived paddock criticism over the large speed differences between cars and the complex management of the electric power.

"The regulations obviously need to be improved," said Domenicali.

The season was interrupted after three races because of the ongoing conflicts in Iran and Lebanon, which led to the double cancellation this month of the Bahrain and Saudi Arabian Grands Prix. The season resumes in Miami on May 3.

AFP