



Rowing to victory on a wave of emotion

Oasis Hu in Hangzhou pieces together the story behind Hong Kong's surprising first gold in the 19th Asian Games

Few expected Hong Kong's first gold at the 19th Asian Games to be won by a pair of 20-something rowers.

On Sunday, the first official day of events, Hong Kong's athletes from a number of sporting fields competed to be the first to win gold, and the expectations of residents and the media were pinned on the more-established stars.

Edgar Cheung Ka-long, Olympic gold foil medalist, was tipped to shine in fencing. Swimmer Siobhan Bernadette Haughey, debuting in her 50-meter breaststroke event, was also the subject of keen attention. Meanwhile, Chen Suijin's wushu prowess made her a favorite following her world championship victory in 2017.

Yet the city's first gold medal came earlier than expected.

The Hong Kong rowing duo of Lam San-tung, born in 1998, and Wong Wai-chun, born in 2000, triumphed in the 2,000m men's coxless pair final, overtaking Uzbekistan to cross the finish line in 6 minutes, 44 seconds.

The medal was not only the city's first gold in the Hangzhou Asian Games, but also the first gold to be won by the Hong Kong rowing team in nearly a decade, since the 2014 Incheon Asian Games.

In addition, it was the first gold medal in Hong Kong rowing history to be won in the open class of the Asian Games. Generally, rowing is divided into open and light categories. Compared to the light category, competitors in the open category face no restrictions in terms of weight or height, leading to intense competition and making it even more challenging to secure medals.

The city buzzed with excitement on Sunday morning, and finally took notice of its new champions.

In an exclusive interview with China Daily on Sunday, the two newly crowned champions, clutching their medals, said they had often felt underappreciated during their careers.

Four years ago, the duo was compelled to form a partnership to compete as a coxless pair after they failed to qualify for a key boat competition. Also, at 183 centimeters and 75 kilograms, Lam always faced a body-size disadvantage against the average open rower profile of 195 cm and 90 kg. These factors caused people around them to harbor doubts about them for a long time.

Achievement is the only way to overcome doubt, Lam said, adding that they had set the Asian Games gold as their goal as early as two years ago.

For the past two years, they relentlessly trained on ergometers, simulating rowing up to 1,000 repetitions daily. For over six months, they stayed in the highlands on the Chinese mainland, in places such as Yunnan province in the country's southwest, to receive training. In a thin-air environment where most people struggle to breathe, they endured high-intensity exercise and training for more than six hours a day. The toll left Lam's feet so swollen that he couldn't sleep, while Wong's hands were covered in blisters from the exertion.

"Every second on the plateau was an ordeal," Lam said.

But with single-minded determination to win the Asian Games gold medal, they persevered until the last minute. They desperately longed to become champions, with a title, and with the honor that would come from proving themselves and from bringing pride to the city's rowing team and to the whole city.

Braving adversity

Despite their young ages, both Lam and Wong have dedicated about a decade to rowing.

Wong started rowing at the age of 13 while he was a secondary school student and soon found it to be his favorite sport. "After long days of studying, rowing on the river and enjoying the beautiful view was a real respite for me," Wong said.

At the age of 14, Wong began his official rowing training to better pursue his passion.

During that time, Wong faced the challenge of having to balance his studies and training.

To accommodate both, he would wake up at 4 am every morning and commute for an hour from his home to the training center. After hours of training, he would rush to



Above: Lam San-tung (left) and Wong Wai-chun celebrate their gold-medal-winning race on Sunday.
Top: Lam (back) and Wong are seen in action during the Rowing Men's Pair final. JIANG HAN / XINHUA



Wong's hands, full of calluses, record his repetitive training, which caused blisters to form, burst, and regenerate. ZHU WEIJIE / CHINA DAILY

school for his lessons. Then, when the school day ended, he would return to the training center once again for further training before going home at around 9 pm. He slept for just a few hours each night.

After persisting with this demanding routine for two years, Wong became a full-time athlete, and took up rowing as a career.

Lam shares a similar journey to Wong's. He also embarked on a rowing career at a young age and had to navigate a demanding schedule, managing his studies and training for two years before becoming a full-time athlete.

Throughout this period, Wong and Lam received training at the same center, and so knew each other well. However, it wasn't until 2019 that they officially formed a partnership.

At that time, four male athletes from their team had to vie for a spot in the double sculls event in a crucial competition. Lam and Wong formed a team to compete together; but unfortunately, they lost.

Undeterred by this setback, they racked

their minds to find ways to continue training and join the competition. Finally, they found that they could still participate in the open event of the double sculls.

The double sculls differ from the single sculls in that each person in the former has their own pair of sculls, while in the latter, two people share a pair of sculls, demanding a higher level of coordination.

Additionally, the average size of participants in the open event is around 1.95 meters in height and 90 kg in weight, placing Lam at a disadvantage with his height of 1.83 meters and weight of 75 kg.

Their pairing was soon met with skepticism.

"People didn't have high expectations for us," Lam said. Echoing his partner, Wong said they were not considered a potent team within their group most of the time.

Undeterred by the skepticism, Lam and Wong remained dedicated to their training and competed at the 2019 Asian Championships. To everyone's surprise, they secured a bronze medal in the competition.

"At that time, we actually didn't train enough but still won a medal, which gave us hope for our future cooperation," Wong said.

This success motivated them to push themselves even harder. Luckily, at that time, Kenny Wu Jining assumed the role of head coach for the Hong Kong rowing team. Wu has a wealth of coaching experience, having worked with the Chinese national team and the Guangdong provincial team.

Recognizing the potential of the pair, Wu set an ambitious goal for them: to win the gold medal at the Asian Games.

With this objective in mind, Wu devised a comprehensive plan to guide their preparations.

Physical challenge

Recognizing Lam's physical disadvantage in terms of height and weight, Wu drew up a training strategy to enhance the smoothness of their paddling movements, aiming to counterbalance the strength of their opponents.

To further optimize their performance, Wu

arranged special training for them on the Yunnan plateau for more than half a year.

Aerobic endurance plays a crucial role in rowing performance, Wu said. Training in a high altitude, low-oxygen environment improves the cardiorespiratory fitness of athletes and pushes them to surpass their physical and mental limits.

They went to the plateau and started a rigorous daily routine. They would wake up at 5:30 am and, aside from essential meal breaks and rest time, their relentless training sessions continued until 9:30 pm, after which they went to bed.

"Training on the plateau was incredibly hard," Lam said.

The low-oxygen conditions would make even walking a struggle for most people, but they had to endure the intensive training, such as exercising for an hour without a break.

"Every training session on the plateau was so painful that my body ached as if I was being beaten," Lam said.

Additionally, plateau training was extremely tedious. Every day, they pulled the dyno — a device used to simulate rowing movements on land — thousands of times.

The repetitive training took its toll on Wong's hands, causing blisters to form, burst, and regenerate, ultimately resulting in calluses forming on his hands.

The pain was intense sometimes, but he could not apply medicine, as it would interfere with training and delay progress, Wong said.

Furthermore, the intense muscular strain during training gave them hot and swollen feet, making it difficult for them to sleep at night, Lam said.

To ensure their preparations were fool-proof, Lam and Wong went even further, paying meticulous attention to all aspects of their daily lives, including their clothing, food and travel, in order to safeguard their health and escape illness.

Even on hot summer days, Lam would wear an additional layer of clothing to protect himself from catching a cold, he said.

Also, to avoid any emotional input that could potentially affect their focus, the pair would minimize contact with their families, relatives, and friends.

"Actually, we never adapted to the training on the plateau (from) when we left here. We just used willpower to propel us forward. Because we had one goal — the gold medal at the Asian Games," Wong said.

Standing tall

The rigorous training paid off as they entered Sunday's race. Although they initially trailed behind the Uzbekistan rowers during the first half of the competition, they overtook their opponents shortly after passing the halfway mark and surged ahead, crossing the finish line with a time of 6 minutes, 44 seconds.

"Actually, we never thought we would lose in the competition," Wong said, explaining that they had dedicated about two years to preparing for that six or so intense minutes.

During the award ceremony, Wong clinched the gold medal tightly in hands. "We have run through the whole race process in our heads countless times before the competition, and now our dream has come true."

Overwhelmed with emotion, Lam let out a cry, finally releasing the pent-up feelings that had accumulated over the past several years. "We have poured all our efforts, our time, and hearts into this gold medal."

Coach Wu, filled with excitement, said that the two had always been hardworking and had a proactive attitude in pursuing their goals. "They are typical Hong Kong youth, embodying the spirit and determination of their generation," Wu said.

Looking ahead, Wu said that their next target will be another world tournament, highlighting their ambition to strive for seats in the Paris 2024 Olympic Games.

When asked about whether Wong and Lam were willing to train on the plateau again, the pair burst into laughter and said, "It is hard even imagining it." However, after a brief pause, they nodded their heads and responded firmly, "For victory, we think we will do it."

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