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VOYAGE TO PARIS 2024: PART VI

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Leading off: How the Olympic torch of Paris will keep the flame lit — for peace and much more

While the Northern Hemisphere has reached that part of the year where evenings close in quicker and light is in shorter supply, the light of the Olympic Games is not far away.

Under 10 months from now the Games will begin in Paris but sooner than that the Olympic flame will light up French skies — and it will be carried atop a stunning new Olympic torch.

The torch, which will bring the flame from Olympia in Greece in time for the Opening Ceremony will actually arrive in France for the first time in May, over two months before the Games begin. But it will also carry the message of the 2024 Games with it.

In recent weeks French designer Matthieu Lehanneur unveiled the groundbreaking version, which has three driving factors in its design: water, equality and peace.

Paris 2024 will be the first Games with complete gender parity with an equal number of men and women competing, something Modern Pentathlon has achieved since the Sydney Games in 2000. Lehanneur reflected the focus on equality in a torch design that is perfectly symmetrical, both

horizontally and vertically.

A sporting gathering which has always served as a symbol of peace and unity among the world's nations, the Olympic ideal of peacefulness has been reflected in the gentle curves and rounded lines of the torch design.

"I wanted to move away from the torch appearing as an object of conquest," designer Lehanneur said at the Paris unveiling in late July. "The magic is not the torch itself, but the flame."

The Olympic flame will be lit on April 16, 2024 and will travel from Greece to Marseille, arriving on May 8, 2024. The flame will then make a 68-day journey across 65 French territories before arriving in Paris for the Opening Ceremony on July 26.

Paris Pointer: Zhang (CHN) and Jun (KOR) emerge from Asian Games with eyes on bigger prizes

The road from Hangzhou to Paris is surely not the easiest or most straightforward but the most populous city in the eastern Chinese province of Zhejiang could well prove an Olympic springboard for two athletes with very different Pentathlon pedigrees.

The 19th Asian Games in Hangzhou (CHN) featured two repeat winners but pentathlon megastar **Woongtae Jun** of **Korea**, who won the men's title, is a more familiar face on the elite circuit than the women's champion, **Mingyu Zhang** of **China**.

World No.4 Jun (KOR) already has an Olympic medal to his name after taking bronze in Tokyo, the first ever for a Korean athlete. His victory came in trademark style with a prolific all-round performance. A consistent contender across UIPM Pentathlon World Cups and World Championships in the past three Olympic cycles, the 28-year-old will be among the hottest of medal contenders next summer.

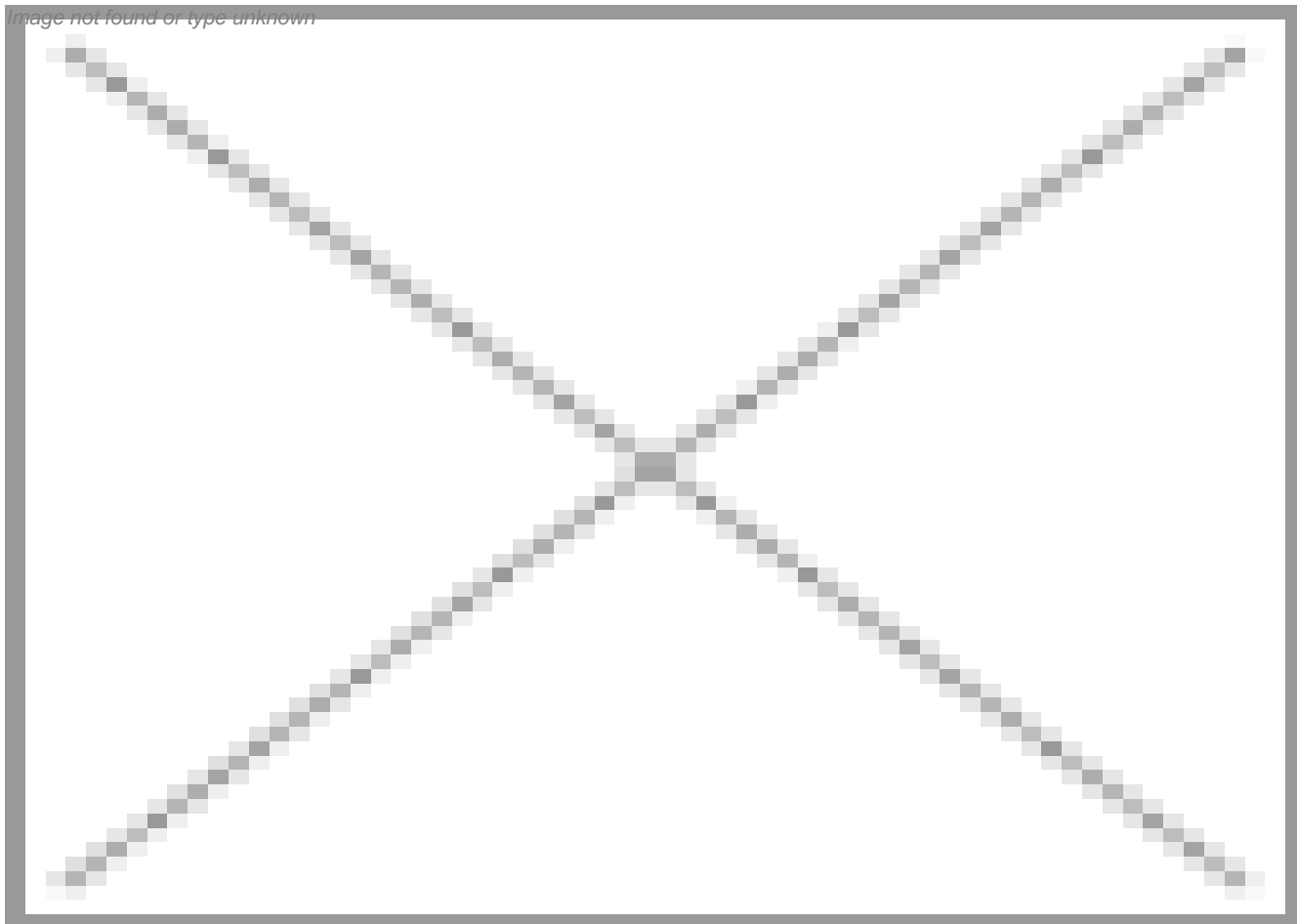
On the other hand, Zhang (CHN) could be bracketed as a quiet contender. Retaining a title she first claimed aged 16 at the 2018 Asian Games in Jakarta (INA), Zhang's re-emergence came a little more out of the blue. Now 21, she has shown signs of finding her form again.

Zhang (CHN) celebrated her first top 10 in a World Cup when finishing 7th in Budapest (HUN) and in August was an impressive 14th at the UIPM 2023 Pentathlon World Championships.

While trailblazer Cao Zhongrong (CHN) won China's maiden Olympic Modern Pentathlon medal with silver at London 2012, no Chinese woman has medalled at the Games. If Zhang (CHN) is looking for an omen, Zhongrong (CHN) also used an Asian Games gold medal to propel himself to Olympic glory. Her own gold in Hangzhou (CHN) was enough to propel her back into the top 20 of the World Rankings.

With so much impressive growth in the Asian confederation, there will be one guaranteed piece of history in Paris: Thailand will hail its first Olympic pentathlete after Phurit Yohuang (THA) made the grade and secured a quota place in Hangzhou (CHN).

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Numbers game

206- — The number of competing nations which are eligible to send athletes to the French capital next summer through their National Olympic Committees. At the 1924 Games in Paris there were just 44 nations represented.

Qualification latest

After the 19th Asian Games in Hangzhou (CHN) from September 20-24, 34 of the 72 quota places at Paris 2024 have now been claimed. **Women:** Great Britain (2), Italy (2), Australia, China, Czech Republic, Egypt, France, Germany, Hungary, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Lithuania, Spain and Uzbekistan. **Men:** Egypt (2), Australia, China, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Mexico, Poland, Switzerland, Thailand and Ukraine.

Now that almost half of the precious places at Paris have been secured, the focus will immediately shift to the remaining 38 places.

The next spots up for grabs come in Santiago, the capital of Chile, which will host the 19th Pan American Games, starting October 20. There will be another five places each for both women and men at that competition.

Full details of the Paris 2024 qualification process can be found at uipmworld.org/olympic-games

Picture: Paris 2024 torch designer Matthieu Lehanneur (right) with Tony Estanguet, President of Paris 2024 Organizing Committee. Credit: Paris 2024.