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PENTATHLON PERSONALITIES: SHUAI LUO (CHN) ON THE RISE TO OLYMPIC HIGH GROUND



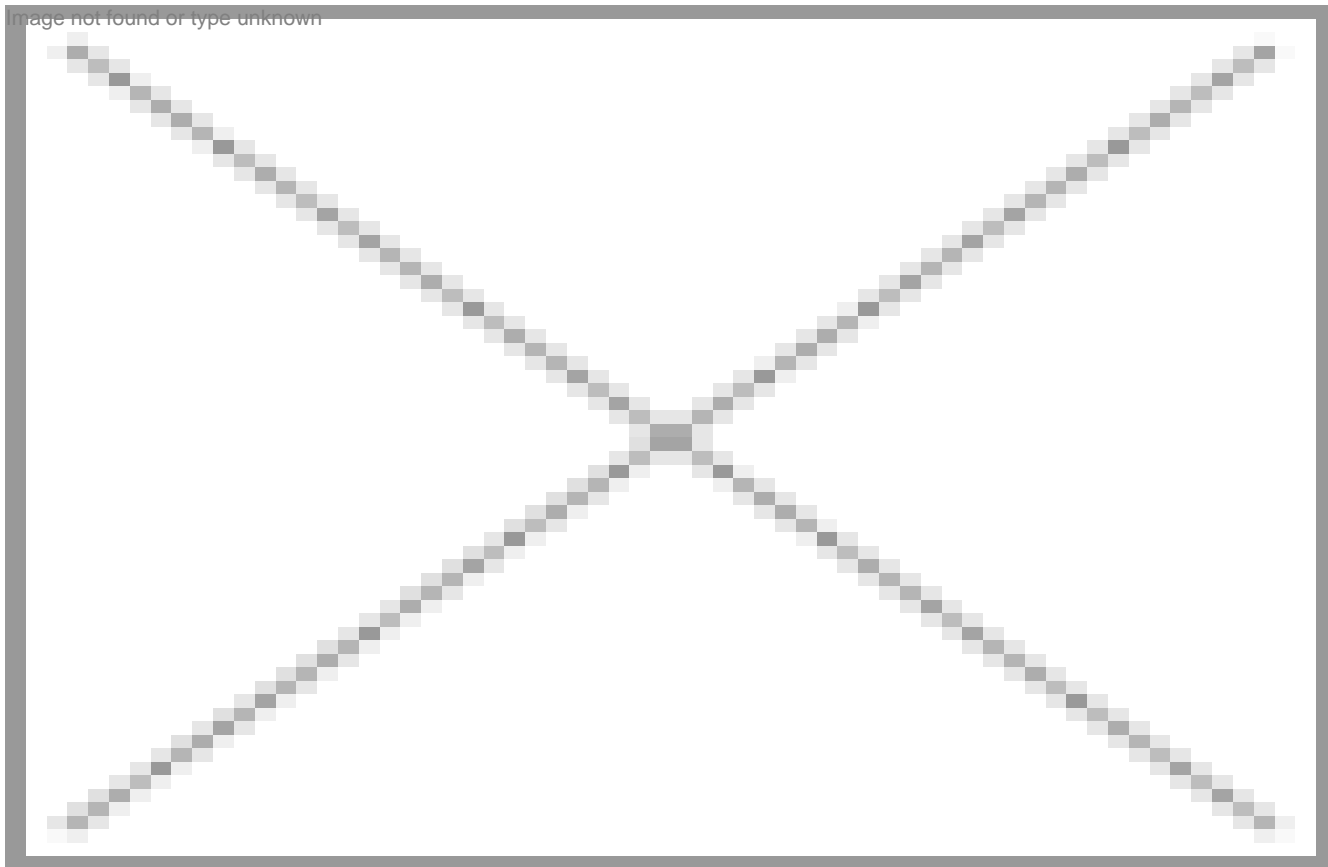
Shuai Luo has spent most of the first half of 2024 on a culinary journey through Europe, embracing the cuisines of Hungary, Turkey, Bulgaria and France. So while a return to home cooking this month is welcome, he hasn't exactly been craving it. Instead he's longing for the sweetest taste of all: fulfilling an Olympic dream.

The 27-year-old from China has risen to a UIPM Pentathlon World Ranking of 24 on the back of some hard-fought but very satisfying consistency on the World Cup circuit. At stops in Budapest (HUN) and Sofia (BUL) he finished inside the top 16 of the Men's Final. At the UIPM 2024 Pentathlon World Cup Final in Ankara (TUR) he progressed to Super Saturday and finished an impressive 13th.

Luo himself is not yet fully impressed, however. He knows that a place at this summer's Paris Olympic Games is not assured. China currently has just one men's quota slot locked in, courtesy of Shuhuan Li's bronze medal at the 19th Asian Games last year. Meanwhile, team-mate Linbin

Zhang is just four places behind Luo in the world rankings.

With the UIPM 2024 Pentathlon and Laser Run World Championships coming fast around the corner and taking place on home soil in Zhengzhou from June 9-16, these are tense times for a team on the rise.



“I will return to China and actively prepare for the World Championships. Because I haven’t confirmed my qualification to the Olympics Games in Paris I have to try best to obtain it first through the world ranking,” Luo told UIPM News. “I have to perform better in the World Championships. I am not very satisfied with my Fencing in the World Cup Final, so I hope to improve my Fencing level to improve my ranking.”

The piste has consistently been a point of pain for Luo, but he has shown signs of turning the corner.

“My performance in the Asian Games last year was not ideal, and my performance in the first two World Cup stations was not good too. So I feel my self-confidence was affected a little,” he explained. “Then our team helped me to find a solution after understanding my advantages and disadvantages [better].

“They also invited a professional Chinese fencing coach to help me, so my performance in the subsequent games was greatly improved, which meant a lot to me. [Also] my physical condition is maintained well due to the continuous competitions.”

Luo’s consistency has been in line with impressive performances across the Chinese team. A first medal of the World Cup season arrived in the Mixed Relay in Sofia (BUL), a fitting reward for recent growth.

“I think the Chinese team has done better than last season. And this is the result of efforts from our entire team. Whenever we find problems, we will actively find ways to solve it and improve it,”

added Luo, who has seen a growing fandom in his home nation of 1.4 billion people. A sports-mad nation, Pentathlon is competing against a host of other pursuits for attention. But Luo has seen things move in the right direction.

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“Chinese people are very receptive to new things. Many people start to get in touch with it for curiosity, and then they become interested in watching the competition. In recent years, Modern Pentathlon has been developing better and better in China.

“When I first started on this sport, my family hadn’t even heard of it, but now when they talk with other friends, more and more people already know about it. One reason is that the domestic athletes helped to promote this sport.

“In addition, the Asian Games was also a great help on the promotion. Also Laser Run City Tours take place in many cities in China. In Shanghai, our team go to different schools every month to develop Modern Pentathlon too.”

Now an all-important UIPM World Championships just weeks out from an Olympic Games will bring huge interest with important consequences to the country. Luo expects “many friends and families who support me in the competition — and there will be some pressure too”.

Luo’s journey to the sport wasn’t straightforward. Coming from a sporting background he was first attracted to the water, but not to Swimming.

“I used to practise rowing, and my rowing coach happened to know a Modern Pentathlon coach, so he recommended me to try it. Then I switched to Modern Pentathlon. My father used to be a basketball player, so I also like sports since I was a child,” said Luo, for whom free time has been a rarity in this Olympic year. While he does sometimes find his way back inside a boat, he has other distractions to help ease some of the pressure in a hectic year.

“I still row occasionally, and I like music more. I also play guitar and piano in my free time. Besides Modern Pentathlon, my favourite sport is tennis, so I play tennis with my friends a lot.”

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Luo's desperation to lock down his Paris place is understandable. He looks to be approaching something of a career peak at 27. And while he has already experienced one Olympic Games, finishing in 21st place in Tokyo, that pandemic-affected event has made him ravenous for the return of crowds in the French capital this summer.

“If I can enter the Olympics, I will be very happy and excited. Because there were no spectators at the last Tokyo Olympics due to the pandemic, and it felt more like a training,” said Luo, who has spent time in Paris this year at training camps.

“I am more eager to perform in front of more spectators who will be watching the Games. It will make me more excited and in a better competitive form. There should be many spectators at Paris Olympics, which will be attractive to me. I am looking forward to it.”

By Joe Callaghan