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FINAL KISS



PHOTOS BY CUI MENG / CHINA DAILY, AP AND XINHUA
(From top left) Liu Xiang crashes into the first barrier in the opening heat of the 110m hurdles in London on Tuesday. In a poignant and brave gesture Liu picks himself up, and despite being injured, hops to the last hurdle and kisses it. To the roar of the crowd Liu then embraced his waiting rivals who helped him from the track.



Nation shares the heartache as a ruptured Achilles tendon forces 2004 Athens gold medalist to withdraw again from the Olympics. **Chen Xiangfeng** writes.



At least this time Liu Xiang got to run. Of course, it was only for a few steps, and the result was the same — an early exit from the Olympics and an exceedingly disappointed nation.

China's track and field star again saw his gold-medal hopes dashed prematurely, as he hammered into the top of the first barrier with his lead leg and tumbled to the ground in the first heat of the 110m hurdles at the London Games on Tuesday.

The former Olympic and world champion picked himself up slowly, not daring to put his injured right foot on the ground, and hopped into the tunnel.

He came out again a few seconds later — still on one leg — and hopped the length of the course to a standing ovation from fans and competitors.

He was carried away on a wheelchair from what might have been the end of a glittering, if stuttering, career.

His parents cried in their hotel room in suburban London. "He could not make it because his injury was too serious," said his mother, Ji Fenhua. "It was really difficult for him to even make it to the starting line."

Liu was not available for comment. It was emblematic of his place in Chinese culture that even members of the media struggled to get a handle on their emotions.

CCTV commentator Yang Jian broke down sobbing with millions of viewers watching.

"Liu is a warrior," Yang said. "After a race that was possibly the last of his career, the process and the result are hard for us to accept mentally, but that's the ruthlessness of competitive sports."

"He still tried to fly today, when he knew he couldn't make it to the finish line. That reminded me of the 2004 Athens Olympics, where he flew to win the gold medal. Now he is 29, and maybe he should take a break. This is the worst result I could have imagined."

The rest of the world sympathized. Britain's Andy Turner, the winner of the heat, helped Liu off the track and into a waiting wheelchair.

"I know how painful those Achilles problems are, and after what he's been through, this is absolutely devastating for him," Turner said. "I really feel sorry for Liu Xiang because in my opinion, he's the greatest hurdler ever."

The world's fastest man agreed. "It's really hard," said Jamaican 100m gold medalist Usain Bolt. "I think he's one of the best."

"He's showing the world he can do great things. For him to push himself and come back last year and for this to happen, it's really sad for any athlete."

The (London) Daily Telegraph's chief sports correspondent, Ian Chadband, wrote that he admires Liu's perseverance.

"Without a trace of emotion on his face, the crowd saluted him and he sat down in his wheelchair," Chadband wrote. "It was remarkable that Liu could remain so sanguine about his calamity."

Liu hoped to regain the title he won in Athens in 2004, when he set an Olympic record of 12.91 seconds.

As China's best hope for track

and field gold in 2008, he had to pull out before his first heat due to chronic inflammation in his right Achilles tendon.

Liu returned to the spotlight when he won gold at the 2010 Asian Games and silver at the 2011 World Championships.

Concern over Liu's injury grew quickly after his arrival in London over the weekend.

His injured right foot flared up again during his final tune-up in Germany. After arriving in London on Friday, coach Sun Haiping acknowledged the foot was bothering Liu.

"Knowing Liu's situation, I think what caused the fall was his old injury to the right Achilles tendon," said Du Liangjie, a rehab expert from the China Rehabilitation Research Center.

"Although he received a course of therapy and rehabilitation after the 2008 Beijing Olympics, it was nearly impossible that he would fully recover from that kind of tendon injury. For ordinary people, their daily activities wouldn't cause the recurrence of the injury, but for the 29-year-old Liu, who trains intensively every day, the recurrence was highly possible."

Some thought it might have been more than simply the injury that led to Liu hopping around the track.

"He was definitely crushed under the pressure of the nation," said Liu Chuang, a Chinese student from Ningbo, Zhejiang province. "All of the people were hoping for him to regain his form and win back the gold medal."

"It's really a tragedy." When Liu walked away before the first round at the Beijing Olympics, many fans said he shouldn't have left but instead should have finished the race by walking.

"It's unfair and cruel that Liu had to take on all of the nation's hopes in athletics," sports commentator Huang Jianxiang said.

"For so many years, Chinese athletics relied solely on Liu for its big moments on the international stage. That's not normal. Our sports authority should reflect on that."

Liu's victory in Athens put him in the books as the first Asian man to win gold in track and field, a popular and influential sport around the world. China took 51 gold medals to top the tally in Beijing but lags behind the rest of the world on the track and regards Liu as a national treasure.

One physical education teacher said he hopes Liu's fate won't dampen the nation's enthusiasm for the sport.

"There would have to be some kind of negative impact on the mentality of parents who enrolled their children to train in the event," said Tao Qiang, a teacher from Shanghai No 2 Sports School, where Liu trained at an early age.

"The 110m hurdles have always been a favorite event at the school. I hope the passion for it won't cool down just because of the loss of a single athlete," he said.

Contact the writer at chenxiangfeng@chinadaily.com.cn. Wang Zhenghua contributed to this story.

COACH: INJURY NEVER WENT AWAY

It's not that Liu Xiang's torn Achilles tendon is back.

It's that it never went away in the first place.

China's track and field chief said on Tuesday that Liu's treatment for the injury has been an ongoing process for the past four years.

"The injury is the same one he had in Beijing," said Feng Shuyong, the team's

deputy leader.

"Over the past several years, he has had good medical care, but it is still there and we never stopped the treatment."

"An Achilles injury is almost impossible to fully recover from. We tried hard before the Games, but we could not find effective ways (to deal with it)."

Eight years ago in Athens,

Liu found himself in the international spotlight when his 110m hurdles victory made him the first Asian man to win a gold medal in track and field. On Tuesday, Liu fell victim to the same injury that kept him from competing in the 2008 Games in Beijing.

"The initial diagnosis from the medical staff is that he might have a torn Achilles

tendon," Feng said.

"He battled with the injury and hoped he could at least make it to the final. But he failed."

Feng said no decision has been reached on Liu's future.

"He is not thinking about retiring," he said. "(But) it is hard to say (if he will return). I hope all the fans can understand this, and that anything can happen. It

happens to many athletes."

"The State General Administration of Sports are contacting hospitals for the treatment of Liu," a Shanghai official told Xinhua on condition of anonymity.

"He will remain in Britain for a while and is very likely to receive a surgery in the country," the official said.

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