



Lang Ping, left, won MVP of the women's volleyball tournament at the 1984 Olympics, where her team beat their US opponents to claim the gold medal.

# The IRON HAMMER

**A**S A MILLENNIAL CHINESE WOMAN, I CONSIDER myself very lucky. I was born in the late 1980s as China re-opened its economy to the world, with a few coastal cities, including my hometown, chosen for opening to international investment and trade. That carried the potential for a more prosperous and open-minded society to grow into and embrace. As an only child, my family could provide me with joyous life and the best education. The 1980s were an age full of hope.

What I miss the most from those years was the spirit—the feeling that everything was possible, and anything could be achieved with hard work and perseverance. If you asked me to summarize it, I'd call it the women's volleyball team spirit, epitomized by Lang Ping leading China to win Olympic gold in 1984.

After decades of isolation from international sports, China returned to the Olympics that year and managed to beat the US team 3-0 on their home court in Los Angeles. It was a timely triumph

Her nickname refers to the spikes that helped earn China an Olympic gold volleyball medal. But teamwork is what defined **LANG PING'S** Olympic triumphs as player and coach, writes Brunswick's **LINJIA DAI.**

when the country was in desperate need of confidence. Their Olympic success served as a kind of proof of national success. More than an Olympic medal, it showed the international community that China was getting back in the game.

The team was led by Lang Ping. Known as the “Iron Hammer” for her powerful spikes, Lang was 12 years old when she played volleyball for the first time, and she was selected for the national team in 1978 at the age of 18. Life as a full-time volleyballer is never easy, and this was especially the case for that team given the limited resources the country was able to provide in the early 1980s, even for its very best. They trained hard day and night, with a repetitive, strict, and sometimes dreadfully boring routine.

Lang Ping handled it with perseverance, and optimism. By the time of the Olympics, at the age of 25, she had already grown to be a mature world-class player, known as much for her technical skill as her analytical mind. She was the spiritual team leader and won MVP of the entire tournament at the Olympics.

Lang retired as a professional player in 1986 with numerous World Championship and World Cup titles under her belt, but chose to never settle or stop challenging herself.

Chinese athletes were often assumed to have no education because they spend all their time training. She broke that stereotype. Upon retiring, she studied English at Beijing Normal University and moved to Los Angeles with just \$90 in her pocket in 1987. She managed to get a job as an assistant coach of the women's volleyball team at the University of New Mexico, beginning a whole new chapter of her life.

If the journey to win gold at the Olympics is like climbing Mount Everest, coaching players with a completely different cultural background is like climbing from Everest to the Moon. But she succeeded and led the college team to win title after title.

As a stranger to a foreign country, there were things that Lang Ping needed to adjust to. First and foremost was team culture: Beyond teaching the intensive drills she trained on, she needed to learn how to motivate American athletes and foster team spirit in a completely different context.

Nevertheless, she achieved brilliant results. She rose from assistant coach at the University of New Mexico to return to China to coach the Chinese team to win silver at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. Then she went back to lead the US team to win a silver medal in a match against China at the Beijing Olympics in 2008. As she later put, "it was a

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LANG PING

**After retiring as a player, Lang Ping became an international star as a coach for champion teams in the US, Turkey, Italy and China. In 2016, she led China to win gold at the Rio Olympics.**

huge deal for the US team" to have a Chinese athlete become their coach. In between those years, she also coached at the Italian professional volleyball league and spent a year in Turkey. And she continues to coach now, most recently leading the Chinese national team to win gold at the 2016 Rio Olympics.

From China to Italy, the US, Turkey and back to China, she is the first person in volleyball history to win at the Olympics as both a player and a coach. She has always managed to inspire affection in her players, emphasizing the three elements of "teamwork, perseverance and daring to win despite adversity." She often reminds them: "The power of teamwork is greater than that of personal strengths. The unity of players and of people can help resolve many problems: this is what we call 'volleyball spirit.'"

Beyond her achievements as a volleyball player and coach, what makes her outstanding is her open-mindedness, international vision, and courage in pursuit of her passion.

Under the current geopolitical climate, even the smallest things can easily spark conflict and inflame nationalist tempers. Lang Ping has been called both a "national hero" and "traitor" at different points in her career. But her choice to ignore such labels in the pursuit of her passion is an ongoing story that inspires me. Her "volleyball spirit" is a model for all of us. ♦

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