



Photographer Thomas Schreyer was granted rare access to the Chinese Gymnastics Center in April 2011

WHEN I ENTERED THE BEIJING Gymnastics Center, I was totally impressed to see so many gymnasts practicing together. More than 100 athletes, men and women, "stars" and unknown. Everybody was extremely focused and disciplined and knew exactly what to do. Coaches seemed to be present only for corrections, none of which were for just the finest detail.

The Chinese used to be wary of a foreigner like me to shoot photos. It's not that they don't

like strangers. But in the past, they had really bad experiences with other photographers, whose pictures portrayed them in terrible positions and with ugly faces. Now everybody is very distant due to those bad experiences in the past.

From my experience in April, there really is nothing "extraordinary" to shoot; most of what I saw looked normal. There were some small differences from what new night expect.

Gymnasts are so concentrated that they hardly make any mistakes. And if they do, there is no

coach shouting at them, urging them or getting angry. It seems as if they know what is at stake. They also know that taking a break to read a magazine or tape an ankle means losing their own time.

While the atmosphere in the gym was serious in terms of training, most of the gymnasts were smiling, and coaches joked with them.

"This is now," says Bi Wenjing, who won a silver medal on uneven bars at the 1996 Olympics. "Yes, nowadays you can see them smiling from time to time. During my time it

was a lot more severe."

But smiling does not mean a lack of diligence. Olympic uneven bars champion He Kixin was laughing with her coach one minute, then standing still for a lecture on improvements for her uneven bars. It appears that everybody respects everybody else.

Sometimes they cry. Tan Sahn, the all-around silver medalist from the 2010 Youth Olympics, shed tears when she could not complete a fault. Her coaches spoke very calmly to her. I did not understand the words, but they were neither

aggressive nor loud. Just an explanation, perhaps.

Watching this kind of training was so fascinating that I could hardly feel the hours passing. It was like flying time.

Asian people are always friendly, and that is how they were in this gym, too. I did not see any upset behavior, and if something did not work, they just kept trying it again and again. Perhaps that is why the Chinese men and women are the reigning Olympic team champions.

—Thomas Schreyer

BEIJING



"In order to have superior scores, we must pay the highest price"

"Make progress together harmoniously"

以超人的代价换取超人的成绩

和谐共进

HOME OF CHAMPIONS

The main hall is decorated with inspirational messages and includes a raised podium for one of its two floor exercise areas. Beneath the white balcony is a Hall of Fame wall, with photos of former team and individual champions.

If you look closely, you'll also spot a basketball goal on one of the support posts.

The apparatus is by Gymnova, official supplier to the 2012 London Olympics.

Flanking the main gym are two pit areas as well as various conditioning stations. With severe deductions for missed handstands on uneven bars, note the giant vertical "guides" on the wall next to the bars.

STRETCH & SWEAT

• **Tao Sixin** (left) strengthens her ankles on a rubber dome, while coach **Luo Feng** monitors the flexibility of a younger gymnast (right). Below, veteran **Cheng Fei**, coming off a knee injury, is assisted by Chinese women's coach **Lu Shunzhen** as she makes a run at her third Olympics.



TEAMWORK

• **Yang Yilin** (in black) helps a teammate position another weight on her hips as she works on her core strength.

• Below, a pair of younger gymnasts take turns improving each other's straddle, which will come in handy during Stalders and Endos on uneven bars.





TRAINING AIDS

- The coach above is supported by a padded harness as he stiffs his gymnast in a perfect handstand.
- With vault a critical event for women, and a relative weakness for China, this gymnast has a mountain of mats to overcome.
- OPPOSITE: Pieces of foam help coaches bring about the desired results from their gymnasts, whether it's a split leap or a walkover.





MAKING MUSCLES

• A gymnast aligns his handstand with a wall, and **Lu Bo** grins during a set of curls.

• **OPPOSITE:** One boy has the other's back on parallel bars for shoulder dips, while another gymnast holds a handstand while wearing a weight bell. In the bottom photo, world and Olympic rings champion **Chen Yibing** strengthens specific muscle groups with the help of a trainer.



FUTURE PERFECT

• With plenty of young gymnasts, expert instruction and a state-of-the-art facility, China is poised to stay atop the world of gymnastics for the indefinite future.





COOLING DOWN

— Olympic uneven bars champion **He Kexin** reacts to the chilling, painful shock of ice water.
 — **OPPOSITE:** **Qin Li** starts to tire on the treadmill; four girls attend to their conditioning and icing; and another group chats and browses a few issues of *IG* magazine (a gift from the photographer) while icing their ankles in buckets.

