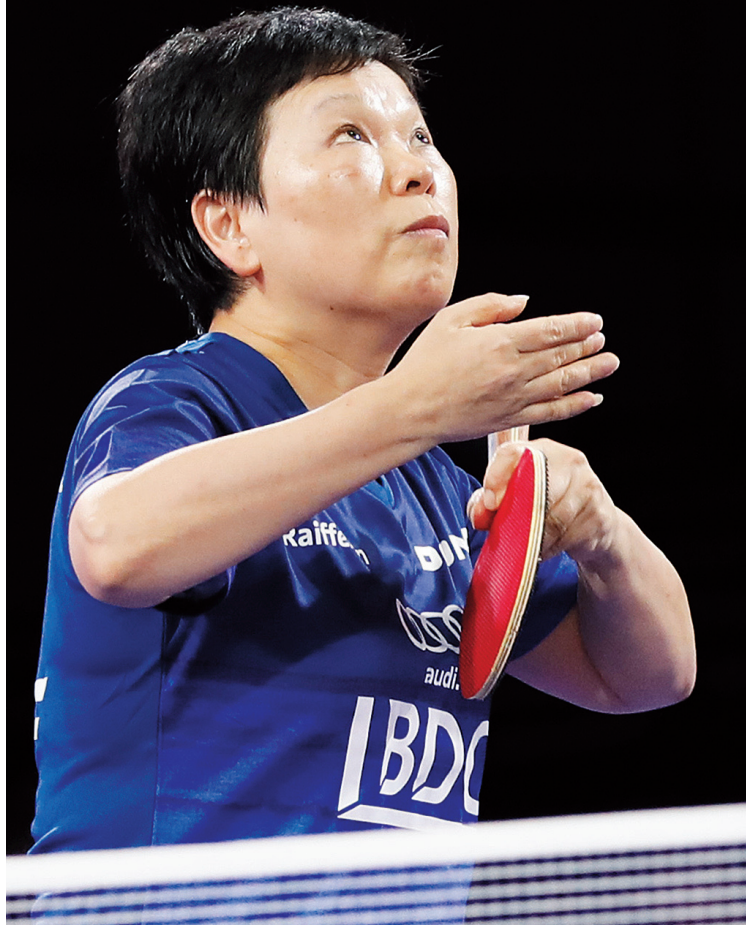


Friday, December 3, 2021

'Shanghai Auntie,' 58, wins medal at table tennis worlds



Ke Jiayun

Ni Xialian, a 58-year-old "Shanghai Auntie," set a record at the 2021 World Table Tennis Championships held in Houston. She won the bronze medal of women's doubles representing Luxembourg. It was Luxembourg's first woman's team medal at this championship in history.

"I've never imagined that after more than three decades, I can step on this podium again," Ni said. "Now I'm written into the history of Luxembourg and not only on behalf of myself but all Chinese. I feel proud and honored about that."

Born in Shanghai in 1963, Ni joined China's national table tennis team in 1979. In the 1983 World Table Tennis Championships, she won two gold medals for the women's team and mixed doubles with partner Guo Yuehua, representing China. In the 1985 World Table Tennis Championships in Goteborg, Sweden, she won a silver medal with partner Cao Yanhua in women's doubles.

After she retired from the national table tennis team, she moved to Europe and settled in Luxembourg. Starting in 1991, she represented Luxembourg in attending the games.

Ni's great performances in table tennis are deeply recorded in the minds of many Shanghai-nese. When she lost to Wang Yidi in women's singles on November 26, her fans wept at the scene. Three days later, pairing up with 29-year-old Sarah De Nutte, Ni faced Wang Manyu and Sun Yingsha in the semifinal of women's doubles.

Although they suffered a 0-3 loss to China's top table tennis pair, they still won a historical medal for Luxembourg.

On the Luxembourg table tennis team, the other young players



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Ni Xialian

all call Ni "Mom" because when "Mom" is there, then they can be confident. During the game, Ni kept encouraging De Nutte to take it easy.

"In the European Table Tennis Championships in late September, she didn't dare to rush ahead. It's still me being the No. 1 in singles and winning access to next year's World Table Tennis Championships in Chengdu," Ni said to the Xinmin Evening News. "But this time, she stood out bravely and fought with me until the end."

"She is of a similar age to my son, and I've witnessed her growth. Now I'm happy to see that she is likely to be my successor," Ni added.

"Her peers are working at companies and making more money than her. But she devotes herself to her table tennis career with love for this sport, same as I do."

Ni met more than 100 fans after the game and received their congratulations. Some young fans said their parents also loved watching Ni's games when growing up.

"I heard your cheer during the game and was really touched," said Ni.

Ni's ties with table tennis started when she was 9. That year, she watched the Asian-African-Latin-

American Table Tennis Friendship Invitational Tournament on television and found table tennis interesting. Then she decided to become a member of school's table tennis team.

Later, she spent seven years with the national table tennis team and left for Europe when she was 23.

"I never fear competition, although there should be some younger players who play better than me. At that time, I could have chosen to continue, but I felt that would not be that meaningful to my life. So I decided to leave," she recalled in an interview.

In 30 years with Luxembourg table tennis team, Ni has won the championship in a series of games, including the women's singles in European Table Tennis Championships.

In 2015, Ni defeated 27-year-old Japanese table tennis star Ai Fukuhara. Two years later, it took Ni 94 minutes to win the game against Japanese player Honoka Hashimoto, which set a record for the world's longest table tennis match.

She attended this year's Tokyo Olympics, and on November 14, she beat Wang Yidi at a game in the World Table Tennis Slovenia Hub and became the runner-up.

Ni has participated in the Olympic Games five times and when being asked if she would join the Paris Olympics in 2024, she said "Never say never!" with a big smile.

Generally, the older Olympic athletes are mainly skill players in events like equestrian, shooting, or sailing. Age, injuries or illness, and the will to fight are obstacles for events with high requirements for physical strength.

For Ni, life is enjoying the happiness brought by playing table tennis when she is in good health. "It's like the whole world is cheering for me - they say, we hope you can make a miracle. So as long as I take the field, I will do my best every minute."

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