



Gu Ailing, who won China's first women's freestyle skiing big air gold medal at the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games, speaks at a press conference on February. — Xinhua

# Gu Ailing soars 'like a legend' to popularity beyond sport

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**G**u Ailing is already a star beyond the sports podium, with a huge base of global fans, charming personality and, despite her age, is soaring in popularity to being considered "like a legend."

Her gold medal winning victory in the 2022 Winter Olympic Games in Beijing has propelled the 18-year-old woman to a new peak in financial and career choices.

California-born Gu won gold for China in the inaugural women's freestyle big air skiing event with a stunning jump she had never tried before.

"I hope this inspires more girls to take up freestyle skiing," she said after winning the event in which she beat several more famous and experienced competitors.

Gu is now a "top stream" celebrity in China with a flood of brand endorsement contracts. She has gone viral online as well as in the real world. The buzz is building the young skier into a legendary Chinese sports star, approaching the rank of popular basketball icon Yao Ming.

Her face appears in newspapers, on TV, in social media and on elevator LCD screens. Her figurines, apparel and related products sell out immediately. China Mobile's Migu, endorsed in cooperation with Gu, said her signature edition figurines sold out "within seconds."

The Gu Ailing figurines are as difficult to get as Bing Dwen Dwen, the official Winter Olympics mascot, netizens said.

"I picked up at least 10 calls inquiring about brand endorsement with Gu today, one call after another almost without stopping," said Naomi Lu, CEO of BM Communications, a Shanghai-based marketing and consulting agency.

Gu is considering a growing list of endorsements, covering all sectors from telecommunications, finance, food and beverage to electronics. They include Anta, China Mobile (Migu), JD.com, Louis Vuitton, Red Bull, Tiffany and Luckin Coffee, a Chinese chain with a Gu-recommended coffee and cup set, according to agencies and media reports.

The prices for Gu's endorsement are



hiking, from US\$1 million previously to US\$2.5 million now, said industry insiders including Naomi Lu.

They come close to, or surpass, the endorsement prices of top Chinese sports stars such as Yao Ming, Liu Xiang and Li Na. Their peak endorsement prices were up to 20 million yuan (US\$3.12 million), agencies said.

"She is no doubt a top stream star now, both domestically and globally," said Lu, who is involved in many sports marketing contracts.

The brands' confidence in Gu and clamor to invest are not without justification.

Since her gold medal win, Gu has appeared in 20 of the most trending keywords on Weibo, earning over 800 million clicks. She is very active in Douyin and Instagram, interacting with netizens during competition.

She has other 2022 Winter Olympics events to complete, possibly generating more medals, surprises, online traffic and public attention.

In China, skiing is not a popular sport as in the West. It's valid to question why Gu has become so quickly loved by so many people, way beyond only skiing and sports fans, industry insiders said.

Various sport stars have "features" and companies strive to match them with brands and products. Sport stars' stories and unique experience are also plus points for endorsement, said Qiu Lijin, a sport marketing expert from School of Management, Fudan University.

Gu obviously has many "plus points" and "labels" for sports endorsement, like love of homeland, girl power and diversified life roles, Qiu said.

First, California-born Gu is only 18 years old, giving her a potentially long sporting

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