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Lai Xuanzhi

A sports teacher at the Qixing Primary School in Guangzhou



Lai Xuanzhi (right) instructs his students during a routine training session.

years of hard training, they had just one thought and hope: Sports can reshape a child's future.

In July this year, Cen and his fellow player, who were already members of China's national rope-skipping team, broke the world record in a male Double Dutch Speed Relay at the 2023 World Jump Rope Championships held in the United States, in Colorado Springs.

To Lai, achieving good results in competitions may mean a lot, but is not everything. It has been his staunch belief that sports can fundamentally broaden a child's view and encourage him or her to achieve higher results in many aspects of life.

Indeed, quite a few students, whose parents are migrant workers making a living in Guangzhou, had never thought of going to universities — a dream that would require stamina in academic studies. They had thought they would discontinue their education after graduation from primary school or, at best, high school.

But Lai felt relieved when many students began brimming with confidence and building their stamina in academic studies through strenuous sports training. What made him happiest, he said, was seeing an increasing number of otherwise introverted and self-doubting students becoming more confident, more outward-looking and more communicative.

In particular, a pleasant surprise came from a girl named Zhang Maoxue. Lai recalled in a recent interview with Guangming Daily that Zhang used to

feel inferior to others, but rope skipping gave her new-found confidence.

"She and I had been training together for more than one year, but she didn't say even a word to me," Lai recalled. "However, after winning several gold medals in a national competition in 2014, she surprisingly ran toward me and put all her medals around my neck, saying, 'I'm so glad, teacher!'"

The sudden change in the young girl's character moved Lai to tears. In an interview with Yangcheng Evening News, Lai said the girl's belated greetings helped him make up his mind to stay at the Qixing Primary School despite various challenges.

"Not just the girl, but many other students who used to be withdrawn and timorous have become more confident and open-minded," he noted. "They have also begun to achieve better results in the school's academic studies."

On September 5, less than a week before China's annual Teachers' Day, Huang Jinlai, a senior writer in Guangzhou, published an article summarizing what people can learn from Lai. Here are the nuts and bolts of what the writer proposed:

- Lai's strenuous pursuit of sportsmanship despite limited resources;
- Lai's staunch belief that "sports can reshape a person."
- Lai's love for and devotion to his pupils.

Indeed, Lai has led by example in training for 365 days a year. He overcame his own shortcomings by studying hundreds of videos of professional



A group of Chinese players broke a world record at the 2023 World Jump Rope Championships held in Colorado Springs, the United States, in July.

rope-skipping performances. He came to school at 5am almost every day for an hour's training before his students arrived around 6am for collective drills.

Moreover, through exercises and experiments, Lai even invented a half-squat posture to help students jump ever faster.

To Huang's suggestions, I would venture to add one more: Let sports play a bigger role in school education.

This should be a more important lesson we can learn from Lai's unexpected

and unusual success. For too long, too many schools have focused too much on academic studies as if these studies alone suffice to make students succeed in life.

Academic studies matter, but are far from enough in shaping a student's overall character. Tapping into students' athletic capacity may well help them rediscover their otherwise hidden or neglected strength — strength that one may not be able to cultivate through mere textbook learning.