

# CYCLING:

## China seeks a 'national hero' as funding starts to pour into the sport

>> FROM PAGE 1

"I'd like to give the talented 15- or 16-year-olds a chance to reach the pro level," he said. "I've always said there are more talented cyclists than me in China, especially younger ones."

It is this talent that the UCI and Wanda Sports want to nurture in the coming years.

"This partnership with Wanda Sports will provide a huge boost to cycling in China," a spokesman for the UCI told *China Daily Asia Weekly*.

Pivotal to that partnership will be the development of a cycling center to mirror the UCI's World Cycling Centre in Aigle, Switzerland.

Opened in 2002, the Swiss center is an elite coaching and training hub that provides support to developing nations from all around the world, the UCI spokesman said.

It offers training and development for around 100 cyclists every year in all Olympic disciplines — road, track, BMX and mountain bike — as well as para-cycling and cyclo-cross.

More than 1,000 trainees from over 100 countries have participated in training programs at the Swiss center.

These include Guo Shuang of China, winner of four Olympic medals and nine UCI World Championship medals; Stefany Hernandez of Venezuela, an Olympic BMX bronze medalist; and Daniel Teklehaimanot from Eritrea, the first black African rider to wear the polka-dot jersey for "best climber" in the Tour de France, in 2015.

"The opening of a satellite center in China, where promising athletes will be supported and funded by Wanda Sports, represents an enormous boost to cycling," the UCI spokesman said.

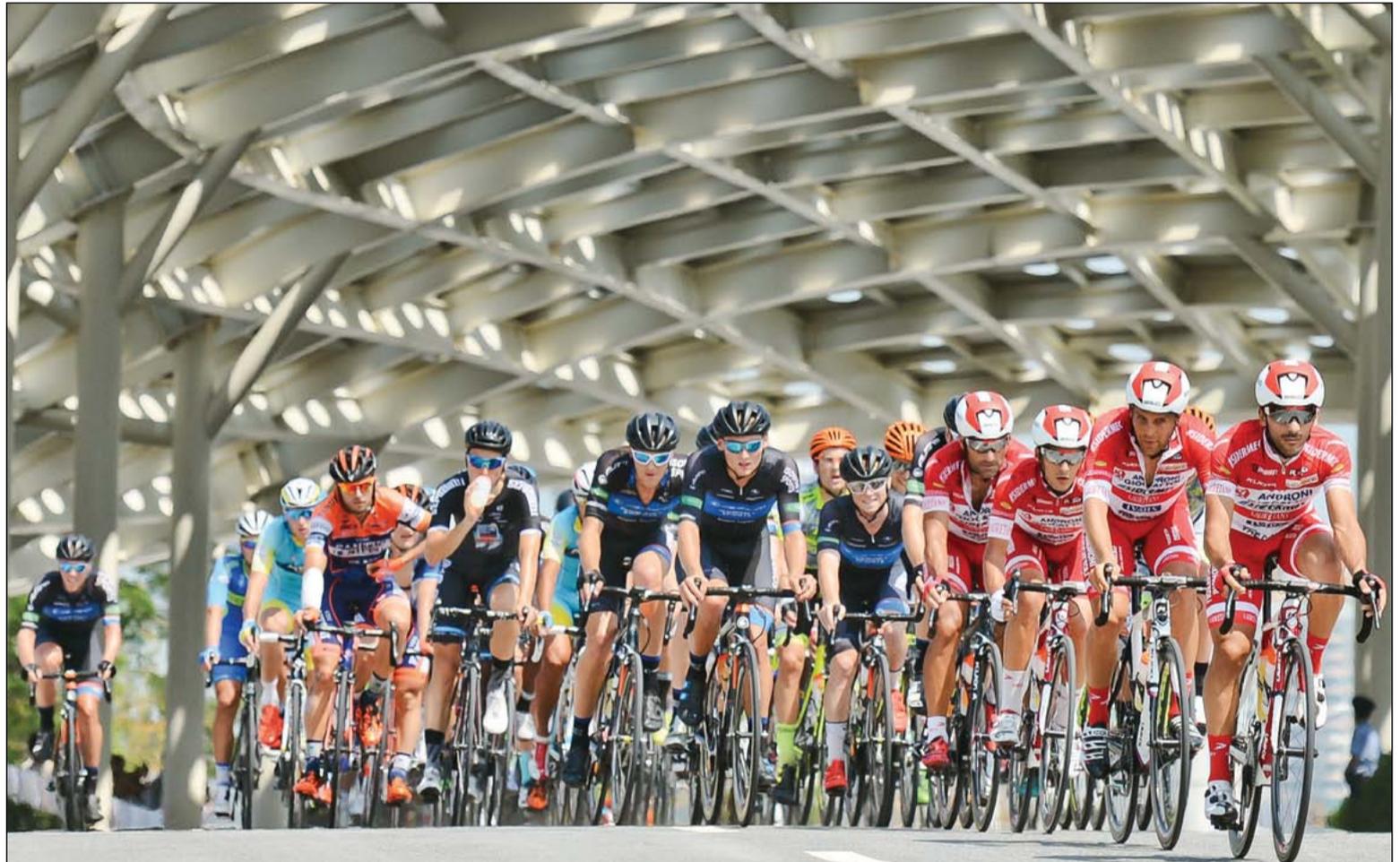
A recent survey by consultancy Nielsen Sports showed cycling as a sport is starting to take off in China. According to the survey, interest in cycling in the Chinese mainland jumped from 19 percent in 2013 to 25 percent today.

Of all the markets measured, the biggest rise was in Hong Kong, where interest in cycling grew from 39 percent to 48 percent. Japan came in second, rising from 14 percent to 21 percent and the Chinese mainland's growth ranked third.

Claude Ringuet, managing director for Nielsen Sports in China and Southeast Asia, said that while cycling becomes more popular in China, it does need a "national hero".

"Look at tennis in China. Until Li Na came along it wasn't all that popular a sport. Today it is," Ringuet told *China Daily Asia Weekly*.

Although now retired, Li captured headlines when she achieved



**Competitors** in the 2016 Tour of China I race in Zhuhai, South China's Guangdong province, in September last year. Experts believe that China has huge potential for growth in both leisure and competitive cycling. ARTUR WIDAK / NUR PHOTO

a career ranking of world No 2 on the Women's Tennis Association Tour in 2014.

Another Chinese hero is basketball player Yao Ming, who made a name for himself in the National Basketball Association, or NBA, in the United States. Now retired, his fame made him a sporting icon.

There has never been a major push to promote cycling as a sport in China until now. Showcasing Tour de France-style events may open the door to a sport that can generate billions of dollars.

Analysts say China's expanding middle class means that cars are replacing the bicycle for many — but an increase in wealth and leisure time means the idea of cycling for sport is catching on.

In Japan, criterium or circuit racing events attract crowds of up to 200,000 people. Organizers are hoping to repeat that in Shanghai.

China has already provided some world champions in track disciplines. The women's sprint team of Gong Jinjie and Zhong Tianshi set a new world record and first-ever gold medal for China in cycling at the 2016 Olympic Games in Brazil.

China is still at the beginning of the journey in terms of structure and finding talent, but the long-term ambition is to have a Chinese rider crossing the finish line on the

Champs Elysees in the coveted yellow jersey.

The upsurge in cycling is not only confined to China. The sport is quickly gathering pace throughout Asia as the middle class grows.

"The middle class has arrived in Asia, and with it significant disposable income," said Ringuet from Nielsen Sports. "Some now even have more than enough (cash) to throw on the roads of Asia and hit the streets on road bikes and the trails on serious mountain bikes.

"As recently as a decade ago, for example, you would not have seen people riding around cities like Singapore, Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur with the full cycling kit and a bike worth upwards of between S\$10,000 (\$7,400) and S\$30,000."

Marcus John, CEO of Sports Capital Advisors, a private equity advisory business focused on sports and entertainment investment in Singapore, said: "Cycling as a sport here in Asia is coming from a low base. It needs to be promoted and it needs local heroes."

Bike ownership in China has reached 600 million and the country is widely regarded as having huge growth potential for both recreational and competitive cycling.

The world's most populous country also has 10 million active cycling fans, 20,000 cycling clubs,

100 cycling events and 15,000 bike stores, according to the UCI.

Additionally, the size of the Chinese cycling sports market is valued at \$1.5 billion, with the industry expecting to reach a growth rate of 20 percent by 2023.

"The innovative new concept is designed to inspire a whole new generation of urban cycling fans," said Wanda Sports in a statement.

Brian Cookson, former president of the UCI, said last December that the body's main role is to "grow and develop cycling globally" and "China provides us with a wonderful opportunity to engage with literally hundreds of millions more people".

Wang Jianlin, chairman of Dalian Wanda Group, said: "We know that China has a tremendous potential in cycling and we are proud that Wanda Sports will be instrumental in realizing that potential, with the support of great partners."

Much of this push for greater participation in sport, including cycling, comes from the government's plan to develop the sports industry and raise the sector's annual output to 5 trillion yuan (\$760 billion) by 2025.

A host of new facilities and initiatives are under way to help increase participation and create fans who engage in the sport.

Technology is central to the

growth opportunity for both domestic and international rights holders and brands. China's media landscape is transforming rapidly to address this opportunity.

Indeed, the country is leading the way in over-the-top technology — apps and services delivered via the Internet — and the integration of big data.

Several top online media platform players like Tencent and LeEco are competing for premium international sports rights to build subscriber and audience bases, according to Ringuet.

"But even in a market with over 400 million sports fans where such huge opportunities for growth beckon for sports such as cycling, the fundamentals are still vital: Accurate valuation of property rights and then real measurement of the value being created through sponsorship and investment by brands, in all its forms," Ringuet said.

It is also essential that those in the sports industry have "a real understanding of the Chinese market," he added.

Such areas include "the continued rise of the middle class and their consumption habits, the way the country is structured and the wide divergence between its cities and the unique opportunities that the different tiers present," he said.