

Athletes to Watch at the Beijing Olympics: Yao Ming

Yao Ming is a Chinese basketball player that has taken the basketball world by storm. At well over seven feet tall, Yao possesses outside shooting and passing skills that many much smaller players envy, while also giving a strong presence on the inside to any team he plays on. With this year's Olympic Games taking place in Beijing, China, all eyes will be on Yao Ming as he attempts to lead the Chinese basketball team to the gold medal in front of his home country. Yao Ming has said time and time again that he would love to bring the gold medal to his country, and this year's Olympics may be his best chance yet to do so.

Yao Ming was selected to the All-Olympian team in 2004 after putting up some impressive numbers in the Sydney Olympic Games. He averaged 20.7 points per game and 9.3 rebounds and made 55.9% of his shots as well. Yao would repeat his great performance with similar production in the 2006 World Championships.

Yao Ming played the first years of his professional career with the Shanghai Sharks, in China. He was outstandingly successful there, before becoming a coveted commodity to the NBA's teams. The Houston Rockets were able to obtain him a few years ago, and he has blossomed to become possibly the NBA's best true center. With other centers, such as Shaquille O'Neal, aging, Yao patrols the paint almost unchecked by other big men.

In China, Yao is nothing short of a superstar, as one of China's most popular and recognizable athletes. In China, the NBA is very popular, and since Yao has succeeded quite well in the NBA (despite injury issues), his move stateside to play for the Houston Rockets has only boosted his popularity in his home country.

Yao is also one of the more patriotic basketball players you will find. He cites carrying his country's flag in the 2004 Olympic Games as one of the greatest times in his life, and has also said that if an injury that he suffered in the 2007-08 NBA season kept him from competing in the Beijing Olympics, it would be the biggest disappointment he's endured.

The reason Yao said that is that he suffered a stress fracture to his foot in February that ended his season with the NBA's Houston Rockets. He later underwent surgery and started an aggressive rehabilitation aimed at getting him ready to play at the Beijing Olympics. Yao currently maintains that he will play in the Beijing Olympics, and he will obviously do whatever it takes to make his goal to do so a reality.

The stage has been set for one of China's biggest heroes to help lead his team

to the gold medal in his very own country. If Yao is able to do so, it will bring an almost unimaginable joy to China's avid basketball fans, who have dreamed of such a day since Yao starred for the Shanghai Sharks years ago. With the United States basketball team coming off of several disappointing years, and the Argentinian and Spanish teams showing flaws of their own, it's possible that the Chinese team could escape with the gold.

For Yao Ming, that would be a dream come true.

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