

Rower falls short of golden dream

► Veteran Zhang waited 12 years to get back to final, finishes 4th

By Cui Xiaohuo

It took Chinese veteran rower Zhang Xiuyun 12 years to get back to an Olympic final. She was just one second shy of a medal.

The 32-year-old world champion returned to Olympic rowing this year after missing the last two with a heart illness. She finished fourth in the women's single sculls final at the Shunyi Olympic Rowing and Canoeing Park yesterday. But she remained in good spirits.

"I'm happy today. I picked up the old feeling of competing in an Olympic final. I am happy with what I have achieved today after all these years," the Wuhan native said.

The day was not a complete disappointment for Zhang: an hour after her final she saw China's Wu Yufu/Gao Yulan win a silver medal in the women's pairs, matching China's best Olympic performance. Young rowers and gold-medal hopefuls Li Qin/Tian Liang,

however, failed in their bid for the women's double sculls pair title.

The pair, which has not lost an international regatta since 2007, could not keep pace with New Zealand's Swindell sisters and finished fourth.

China, which has been training its rowers for half a century, will have to wait another day to see if it can win its long-awaited Olympic title. Coming into Beijing, China had won two rowing silvers and one bronze in past Games (1988 and 1996).

"An Olympic gold in rowing has been a dream for Chinese rowers for decades," Zhang said. "I had my eyes on silver medalist Michelle Guerette from the US, but then I realized I had few chances to overtake her."

The veteran, who has trained since she was 14 and won her first crew world championship at 17, has experience in China's long quest for rowing gold.

Zhang won her only Olympic medal in Atlanta 1996, a silver in women's double sculls,

which she won with partner Cao Jinying, missing out on gold by only a second. Cao is now Zhang's coach in the single sculls.

Cao chose to lay down her paddle after Atlanta, but Zhang continued to train in the single sculls and qualified for the Sydney Games. But hours before she was to compete, Zhang had to withdraw because she was not fit for the final.

"I still find it hard to understand why I had to withdraw from that race," she said afterwards.

But that was not the end of her bad luck. Months before the Athens Games, Zhang was diagnosed with a serious heart illness, forcing her into temporary retirement.

"It seemed destiny played a hand in my career, stopping me from two finals in two Olympics," she said.

Zhang got married after Athens and gave birth to a daughter in 2006. But she was determined to make another run at the Olympics so she could compete in Beijing. Zhang does not plan to retire after the Olympics, and has her sights set on the national games next year.

China's Zhang Xiuyun powers in the women's single sculls semifinals at the Shunyi Rowing and Canoeing Park.

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