



'Gymnastic prince' maneuvers return

LI NING, NOW SPORTSWEAR COMPANY OWNER, IS A UNIVERSIADE MARKETING CONSULTANT

BY LEI LEI
CHINA DAILY

SHENZHEN — Thirty years ago, a prince was born.

He was crowned with gold.

It was at the Universiade in Bucharest, Romania, that Li Ning emerged as China's "gymnastics prince".

Making his international debut, Li won gold medals in the men's floor exercise, pommel horse and rings, kicking off an era of dominance.

"I have participated in two Universiades, which are called 'small Olympics,' the 48-year-old Li said. "The Universiade is the games that can show the vitality of young people."

After the Universiade, Li emerged as one of the world's top gymnasts.

In 1982, he won six of the seven gold medals awarded at the World Cup. Then came 1984 — and immortality — when Li won six medals in Los Angeles in his and China's Olympic debut.

His three gold, two silver and one bronze at the Games made him the most decorated Chinese athlete at the event.

Altogether, Li won 14 world titles and 106 gold medals in international events in his career.

Li retired from competition in 1988, and was inducted into the International Gymnastics Hall of Fame in 2000.

Even in retirement, Li didn't leave sports. He started a new career as a successful businessman.

In 1990, he founded Li-Ning Company Limited, a sporting goods company that sells footwear and apparel in China. It has become the leading local sportswear enterprise.

In 2005, its annual revenue was more than \$300 million. The company is publicly traded on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange.

"Establishing the brand used to be my personal ambition, but now building up an international brand is the dream of our staff," said Li, the company's chairman.

At the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Li caught everyone by surprise with his high-flying role on China's proudest night.

Hoisted high on cables, Li did a



XINHUA

Above: Li Ning acknowledges the crowd in the air before lighting the cauldron during the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Right: Li in action during the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, where he won three gold medals.

mid-air lap with the flaming Olympic torch and finally lit the main cauldron.

Even his closest friends and colleagues watched open-mouthed across the country, since no one knew about it beforehand.

Rehearsals had been conducted in the dead of night in deep secrecy.

Even 23 years after retirement, Li finds ways to keep a foot in athletics.

His company's products are the official sportswear for the Chinese delegations at many events, including the 2001 Beijing Universiade and every Olympic Games from 1992 to 2004.

For this Universiade, Li is a consultant for the marketing campaign.

"My whole life is married to sports, and I'm happy just to do things related to sports and be with athletes," Li said.

FACTBOX

Date of birth: March 10, 1963 (age 48)

Birthplace: Liuzhou, Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, China

Height: 1.64 m

RECORD

Olympic Games:

Gold - 1984 Los Angeles, floor, pommel horse, rings

Silver - 1984 Los Angeles, team, vault

Bronze - 1984 Los Angeles, all-around

Medal tally

Olympic Games: 3 gold, 1 silver, 1 bronze

World Championships: 2 gold, 5 silver, 4 bronze

World Cup: 9 gold, 2 bronze

Honor

International Gymnastics Hall of Fame, 2000

