



[Previous Story](#) || [Headlines](#) || [Next Story](#)

Our Best Links

Keyword Search

[Advanced](#)

Chen back in global spotlight

STEVE SCHOLFIELD

Staff Writer

ESCONDIDO -- When Yueling Chen set the world record in the 10K walk at the age of 16, her coach rewarded her by locking her in a room.

They do things differently in China.

Chen, a naturalized citizen living in Escondido, will represent the United States in the 20K walk at the Sydney Olympics.

The race will be held at 4:45 p.m. PDT on Sept. 27.

It will be the 27-year-old's first international competition since she won the Olympic gold medal for China in Barcelona eight years ago.

Chen's story is compelling. She is the first China-born woman ever to win a gold medal in track and field. After her triumph in Barcelona, she was proclaimed a national hero.

But getting to the winner's stand in Barcelona was years in the making.

She was part of the rigid Chinese system that takes children away from their parents to train for the good of the state.

"They took me to camp in 1986 and I was there until the Olympics," said Chen. "We would run in the morning, do race walks in the afternoon and study reading and writing at night."



Escondido's Yueling Chen goes through the U.S. Olympic processing center in Chula Vista. She'll compete in race walking on Sept. 27.

It was such a strict atmosphere that Chen admits, "I only got to visit home maybe once a year."

When she ran 43:42 to set a world record in 1989, Chen was not allowed to talk to the world's media. Instead, her life and the lives of her teammates became even more restricted.

"My coach was different," understated Chen. "He was very strict. He would lock us in a room and we had to ask permission to go to the restroom."

Chen shared a room with three other athletes in an area approximately 10 feet by 15 feet.

Chen was quick to say not all athletes were locked up, but the 30 individuals supervised by race-walk coach Wang Kui were.

"My coach did not allow us to have boyfriends and no one could get married or they would be off the team," she said.

Didn't such a restrictive life make Chen bitter?

Not at all.

"He is a famous coach who developed world-caliber athletes," said Chen. "I am basically a happy person and I like a disciplined life, which he gave me. But I didn't want it too long."

She admitted that the camp was an improvement in her life. Yueling is one of eight children.

"When I first started training, I had no shoes," she said. "I knew that getting to go to the camp would be better for me. I used to get up early in the morning and run barefoot in the snow. I trained myself until I got to camp."

She started slowly there, first trying out as a middle-distance runner. But the coaches thought she had the discipline to be a race walker.

They were right.

After setting the world record, Chen participated in her first international meet outside of China -- a competition in Yugoslavia -- when she was 17. It turned out to be traumatic because she was disqualified.

"The judges said I was lifting," she said.

Race walkers must keep one foot on the ground at all times.

To make matters worse, her coach did not attend the meet.

"I thought, 'How can I go back to China and face him?' But he said nothing. He welcomed me back and said nothing. He knew that I was just starting out and had potential."

That potential paid off in Barcelona.

She was awarded the gold medal after Russian walker Alina Ivanova crossed the line first, but was disqualified for the same technical violations.

When she arrived back in China, Chen immediately asked the Chinese Athletic Federation if she could retire.

They granted her request and told her she had served her country well.

"They really didn't need me anymore," she said.

The federation gave its blessing when Chen announced she wanted to go to live in the United States.

"Ever since I was little I have always wanted to come to the United States," she said. "People from China would go (to the United States) and come back and say how friendly and open-minded the people are."

She spent a year in Utah before finding Escondido.

Two things brought her here.

* She works for a Rancho Bernardo-based distributor of health and nutritional products, Imagenetix, Inc., as its Asian marketing director.

* Her home in the hills just north of Escondido is much like her childhood home in China.

Chen had no inclination to try for the USA Olympic team because when she arrived here she was physically exhausted. But with the help of the nutritional products she sells, Chen said that she got her health back and became interested in competing again.

After finishing second at the trials in Sacramento, she thought she had made the team. But China blocked her attempt by refusing to sign a waiver that Chen needed to compete.

Under Olympic rules, an athlete who has competed in the Games for one country must wait three years to compete for another after gaining citizenship. This rule is meant to prevent athletes from playing musical chairs with their citizenship.

Chen became an American citizen on April 12.

But in a startling development, China changed its mind after some gentle pressured was applied by the USOC.

When Chen learned that she was back on the team, her phone did not stop ringing.

"I have had hundreds of interviews with reporters and my Web site received more than 1,500 hits in the two days after he announcement," she said.

While Chen is not considered a favorite in the 12.4-mile event, she is going into it with an optimistic outlook.

"I have only run three 20K races, so anything can happen," she said. "No one is going to go for the world record. The only important thing is to finish one, two or three."

Chen and her manager, Derek Boosey, will leave for Australia on Sunday, take part in the opening ceremonies and then leave for Brisbane, Queensland.

"My brother, Allan, lives there and we will stay and train there for the race," said Boosey.

As for Chen, there is one thing that will be the same as Barcelona.

"At the opening ceremonies in Spain, we wore red," she said. "I just got my Olympic clothes and noticed that we will be wearing red this time, too."

And if all goes well, Chen will be in the international spotlight again.

9/6/00

webmaster@nctimes.com

©1997-2000 North County Times

editor@nctimes.com
