

PEOPLE

A WOMAN OF EXCELLENCE

By Beth Berdeski



Yueling Chen became the first Chinese athlete, man or woman, to win an Olympic gold medal in track and field. She was also the first Asian woman to ever win the event.

Chen represented the People's Republic of China as a member of the 1992 Olympic race-walking team. This was an historic and precedent-setting event because it was the first time women were allowed to compete in the 10-kilometer race walk.

In the six years Chen was training for the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, she walked 48,000 miles - enough to circle the world twice. After her great Olympic accomplishment, a life-size bronze model of Chen was erected in her hometown. So many individuals wanted to touch the statue that a fence was built around it so that it would not be rubbed bare. Her image was splattered on magazine covers across the country.

Last year, a Chinese documentary was shown to an estimated 900 million Chinese. There may even be a movie made about her life. But even with all her newfound fame in China, she wanted to move to the United States to learn English, start a marketing career, and become a citizen.

After moving to the United States in 1993, Chen attended Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah to help her master the English language. More recently, she attended Palomar College in San Diego, and is also attending the John Casablanca Modeling School in San Diego to learn about fashion modeling. And if that weren't enough, Chen is the director for Asian marketing for Imagenetix, a nutritional science and skincare company located in San Diego!

Chen also finds time to volunteer with a variety of charities. She is the honorary spokesperson for the National Kidney Foundation and San Diego County's Union of Pan Asian Communities. She has also been involved with the 1999 Special Olympics World Summer Games and 1998 NIKE World Masters Games. At both of these events, she conducted race walk workshops with athletes. She says, "It's a great event to help these kids build self-esteem and feel good about themselves."

Chen was born on February 4, 1973 in Tieling in the province of Liaoning, China. While growing up, she showed interest in singing and painting. She also showed natural athletic ability. The Chinese government decided that Chen would concentrate her time training to be an athlete. Chen began competing when she was only 11 years old.

In 1989, when she was 16 years old, she won the gold medal in the 10-kilometer women's race walk at the Asian Track and Field Championships in New Delhi, India. From there, she went on to win another gold medal at the 1990 Asian Games in Beijing, China. At the 1991 World Student Games in Sheffield, England she competed for the first time outside of Asia and earned a silver medal.

Chen's next immediate goal is to become a member of the United States race walk team for the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Although she had retired after winning the gold medal, Chen's competitive spirit was rekindled when she was at the 1998 USA Track and Field Championships in New Orleans.

She has already overcome her biggest political obstacle becoming an U.S. citizen. Immigrants must live in the United States for five years before they can apply for citizenship. Chen had completed her five year residency in 1999, but there was such a backlog of cases, it was uncertain whether she would be sworn in before the cutoff deadline for the Olympics. In April, U.S. Rep. Calvin Dooley placed Chen in the front of those waiting for naturalization. On April 12, she was sworn in as a citizen.

At the summer Olympics, Chen may be one of at least six foreign-born athletes who have had to receive U.S. citizenship to enable them to participate.

The 2000 Sydney Olympics will be another precedent-setting event in the track and field department. It will be the first time women are allowed to compete in the 20-kilometer race walk. Not only does Chen want to be a member of the U.S. race walk team, but she also wants to bring home another gold medal.

In a recent 20-kilometer event in Chula Vista, Calif., Chen finished the race in 1 hour, 35 minutes, 45 seconds, which would place her third place in the U.S. On July 16, Chen will compete in the race walk trials, which will determine her eligibility for the Olympics. The top three ranking individuals during the Sacramento trials will make the team. We wish her all the best!

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