

WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS OSAKA

Liu spearheads China's great leap forward

By Kiyomi Arai

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OSAKA—The Chinese team leader at the world championships said Wednesday his country's athletes' chances of success at next year's Olympic Games in Beijing have greatly improved thanks to star hurdler Liu Xiang's gold-medal performance at the 2004 Athens Olympics.

"Liu gave [Chinese athletes] confidence...and showed them they can make it to the top," Feng Shuyong, head of the Chinese delegation of 61 athletes and vice president of the China Athletic Association, told The Daily Yomiuri.

That confidence has been displayed at this week's competition in Osaka, Feng said.

Besides Liu, two other 110-meter hurdlers made it through Wednesday's heats to qualify for tonight's semifinals. One, Shi Dongpeng, qualified with a personal best that also was the fastest time of the day.

Liu's success also has led many coaches to modify how they train young athletes, Feng said.

Asked what the changes were, he said: "It's better not to tell. But traditionally, Chinese athletes don't want to go to Europe or America to compete. Liu's coach encouraged him to do that and compete with world-class athletes. That's the way to encourage [athletes]."

Because the world championships in Osaka is taking place at about the same time of year and in the same part of the world as next year's Olympics, Feng said it had an extra significance.

"It's good not only for Chinese athletes, but for athletes from all over the world," he said. "The weather will be



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Feng Shuyong

more or less the same...This gives opportunities for athletes to experience summer in this part of the world."

There is no doubt that hosting the 2008 Games has become a strong motivation for athletes in China to train more, Feng said.

"[Our] athletes will think this will be the only chance for them to compete [at an Olympic Games] in their own country. They have a target, and will try even harder to do well in front of the mainland audience."

While Liu is China's strongest medal hope on the Beijing track, Feng expects the Chinese track and field team to win one or two gold medals and three others.