



Games put Tie Ya Na's eye on the ball

PLAYING AT THE BEIJING UNIVERSIADE 10 YEARS AGO SET TABLE TENNIS STAR'S CAREER PATH

BY TANG YUE
CHINA DAILY

SHENZHEN — Table tennis star Tie Ya Na would probably have been a regular 9-to-5er if she hadn't participated in the Beijing Summer Universiade 10 years ago.

She was busy job-hunting in her senior year, and all she expected was to be a white-collar worker in an international trade company in one of the office buildings in Shanghai. But she couldn't resist the invitation to play in the Universiade on home soil.

She didn't really expect a medal. As the only non-national team player in the women's table tennis squad, the then 22-year-old, who was a full-time international trade and economics major, entered the tournament as an underdog.

"The job-hunting kept me very busy at that time," Tie recalled. "I was just going to play for fun."

However, she stunned the local fans and the star-studded national team by upsetting then world No 2 Zhang Yining (Zhang later won the 2004 and 2008 Olympic gold medals) and world champion Niu Jianfeng en route to the women's singles title.

She also won the team championship and the mixed doubles gold medal, equaling China's tennis ace Li Na's record of three golds in Beijing.

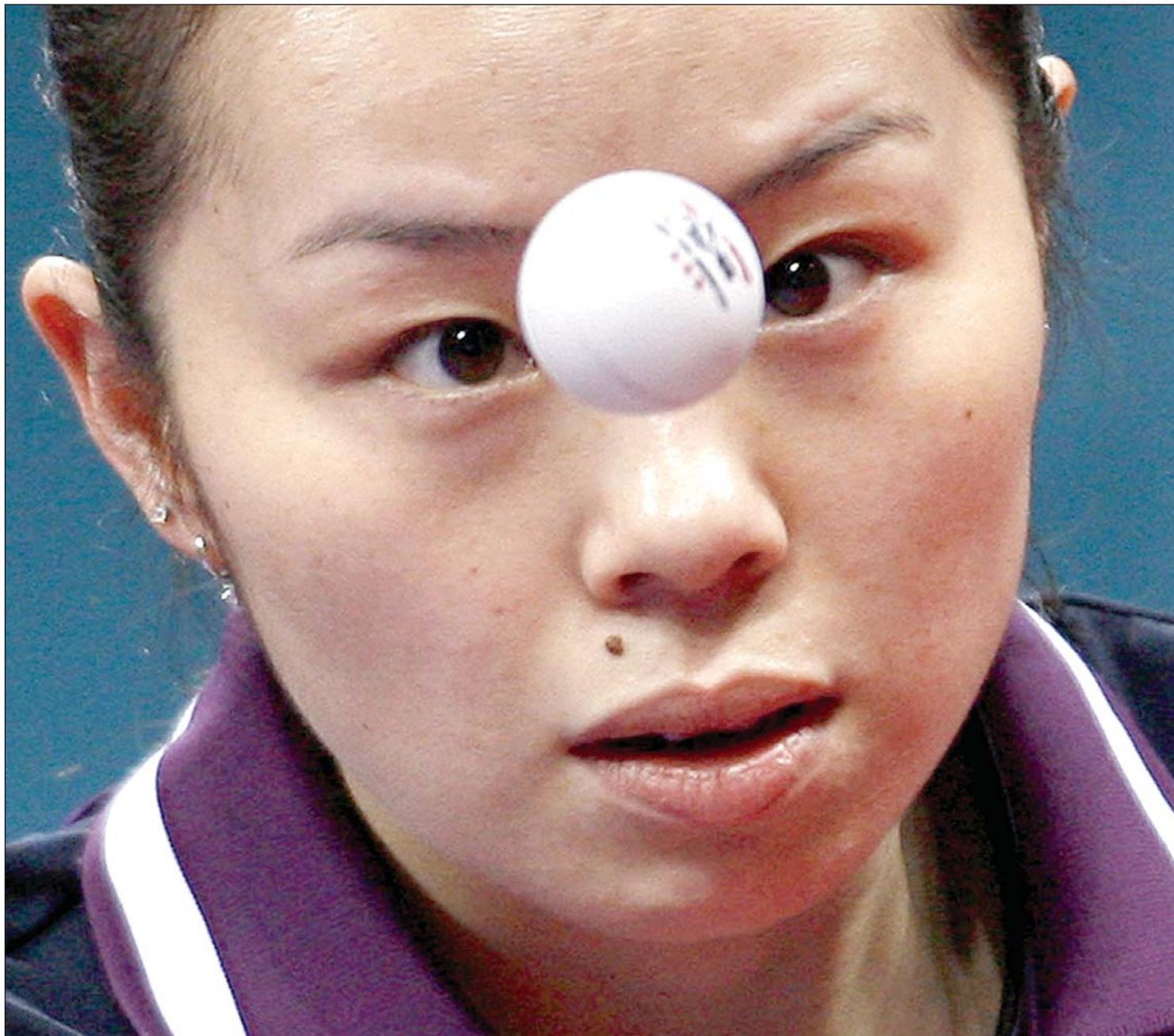
Tie became a household name in China overnight. And her career path changed.

Having first picked up the paddle at age six, Tie received a few years of training with the Zhengzhou city team in Henan province. But she never made it to the national level since the competition is so fierce in the table tennis kingdom.

So, she chose to concentrate on academics and started her undergraduate courses in 1997 at the East China University of Science and Technology.

However, she kept training on the campus and played for the university club in the domestic league.

Then came the Universiade, which not only provided her first chance to play internationally but also made the sport a career choice again.



ROSLAN RAHMAN / AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Tie Ya Na, a full-time student, stunned the world by winning three gold medals at the Beijing Universiade 10 years ago.

Shortly after the games in Beijing, Hong Kong invited her to play for the region. She agreed.

Within a year, she had another major breakthrough when winning the mixed doubles with Zhang Yu at the 2002 Busan Asian Games.

She has won eight singles titles on the ITTF Pro Tour since and reached the quarterfinals at the Athens and Beijing Olympics. She reached her peak in 2008 when she won the silver medal at the 2008 World Cup.

Tie admits she has a talent for the sport, which helps her stand out without much intensive

training, but she would rather attribute her success, especially the calmness during matches, to her schooling.

"Campus life gave me a lot. It showed me a world beyond sports and helped me grow a lot mentally," Tie said. "When you are stronger mentally, everything changes. I would not have been so calm on the court without the four years of study."

Besides changing her career path, the move in 2001 also paved the way for romance.

In 2009, Tie married teammate Tang Peng after dating for three years.

FACT BOX

Date of birth: May 13, 1979 (age 32)

Height: 1.61 m

Highest ranking: 3 (July 2006)

RECORD

World Championships

Bronze 2011 Rotterdam doubles

Bronze 2009 Yokohama doubles

Bronze 2008 Guangzhou team

Bronze 2007 Zagreb mixed doubles

Silver 2006 Bremen team

Bronze 2005 Shanghai doubles

Silver 2004 Doha team

The couple started to play together in the mixed doubles at last year's Guangzhou Asian Games but hasn't found success yet.

However, competition is not

the priority for Tie anymore.

The 32-year-old said she wants a baby. "If I get pregnant before next year's Olympics, I will say goodbye to London," she said.