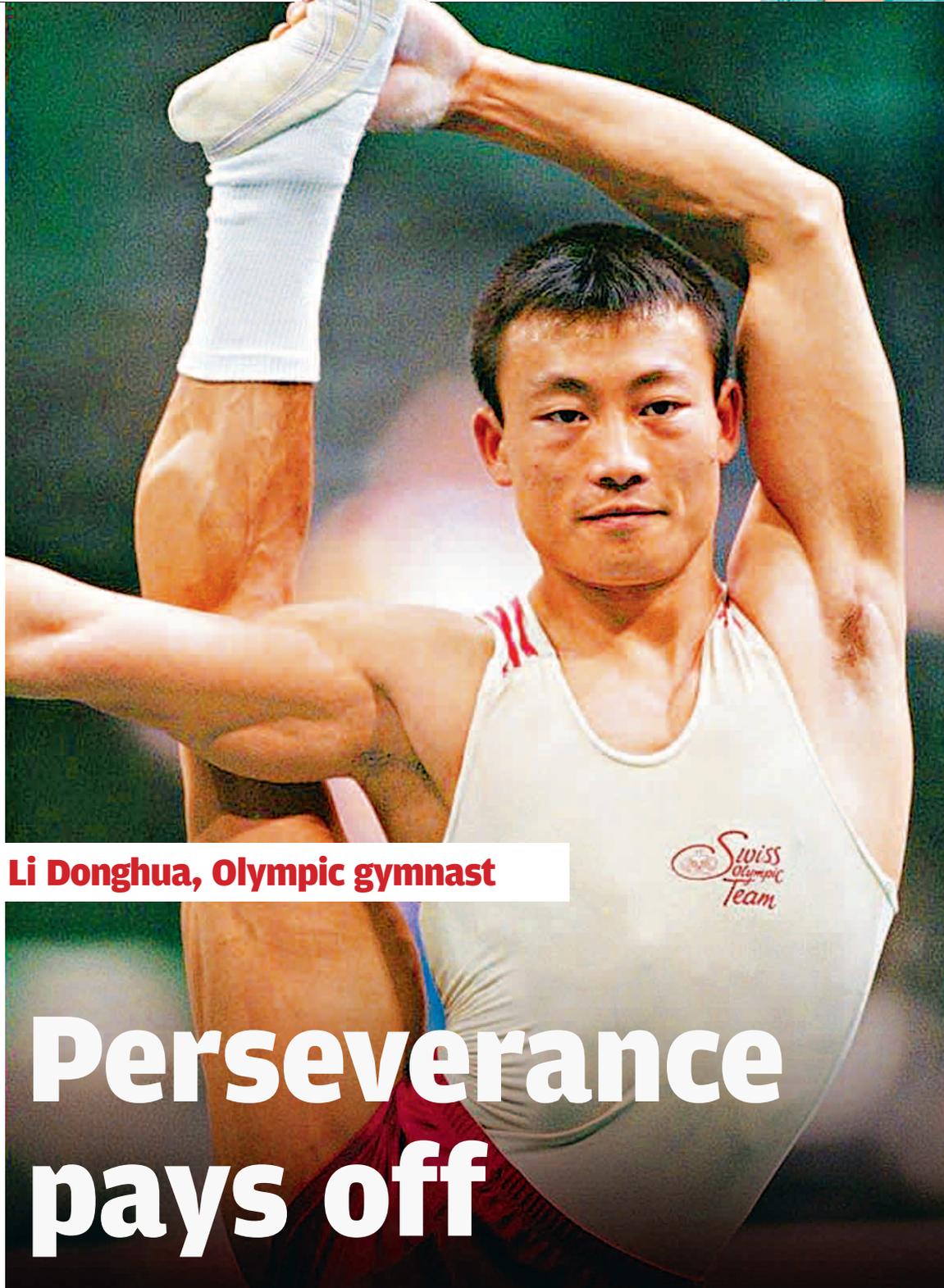


elaine yau



people



Li Donghua, Olympic gymnast

Perseverance pays off

To most Olympic athletes, winning gold at the Games represents the pinnacle of their career. However, Li Donghua's epic win of the gold medal in pommel horse in the 1996 Atlanta Olympics at the age of 28 was tinged with a spot of sadness.

On the day he was crowned champion, Li stood on the top step of the podium to the accompaniment of the Swiss national anthem.

"I won for Switzerland instead of China. Though I was overjoyed at my victory, I felt a bit sad that I didn't win for my country," said the 40-year-old who was in Hong Kong last week to promote the Games as the Olympic ambassador for Switzerland.

The unexpected scene of a Chinese man winning gold for a European country can be traced back to a fateful encounter in Beijing in 1988.

A chance meeting with a Swiss tourist who would become his wife a year later spelled the end of his career as a gymnast with the Chinese national team.

"I told them I was going to marry a Swiss woman. They asked me to leave her and gave me three days to make the decision," says Li.

Just as the British king Edward VIII famously chose love over his kingdom, Li gave up his promising career in China and headed off to Switzerland with his new wife with just a few suitcases.

Despite all the happiness that came from being newly wed, the stark reality soon struck a harsh blow.

"My hopes for reigniting my

career there were dashed when I first arrived. There were very few coaches. In Switzerland, gymnastics seemed to be mainly for amateurs," says Li.

But the difficulties he faced when he first arrived in his adopted country strengthened his resolve to pursue his Olympic dream.

"I didn't get the same treatment as other Swiss athletes. There was no salary and it was the first time I tasted poverty," says Li, whose wife worked at a department store to support them both.

"I didn't give up. I trained

myself. I made videos of myself practising and kept re-watching them to improve my moves."

Li's efforts gradually paid off: he won several Swiss gymnastic competitions.

But the requirement for immigrants with a Swiss spouse to wait five years before they are granted Swiss nationality meant that Li had to forgo all international competitions during his prime athletic years.

Surprisingly, the mounting difficulties did not undermine Li's dreams of Olympic glory.

His chance to prove he had what it takes at an

international level finally came in 1996.

Winning gold in the Atlanta Summer Games not only made up for missing out on so much in previous years, it also gave the gymnastics scene in Switzerland a huge boost.

"Before I won in 1996, no Swiss gymnast had won gold in the pommel horse for a hundred years.

"The Swiss government thanked me for bringing glory to their country," says Li.

Performing his winning moves on a pommel horse last

SWISS GYMNAST LI DONGHUA WON GOLD FOR HIS ADOPTED COUNTRY IN 1996. PHOTO: AFP

Profile

- Won the pommel horse championship in China in 1987 at the age of 19
- Met his future Swiss wife in Beijing in 1988
- Got married and left China to begin a new life in Lucerne, Switzerland, in 1989
- Won various gymnastics competitions in Switzerland from 1989-1993
- Won the bronze medal in the World Artistic Gymnastics Championship in 1994
- Won the gold medal in the World Artistic Gymnastics Championship in 1995
- Picked up the gold medal at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996
- Has been touring the world staging performances to promote gymnastics since 1997



week to the thunderous applause of shoppers in Sha Tin New Town Plaza, the charismatic Olympic champ is happy that he is finally doing something for his country of birth.

"I was appointed the ambassador for the Swiss Olympic delegation. One of my duties is to promote the Beijing Olympics which provides the perfect chance for people around the world to find out about the new China," says Li.

say it

Phrases from this story

pommel horse
馬鞍

accompaniment
伴奏

fateful
註定的

promising
有大好前途的

Write to us!

If there's someone famous you would like to learn about, e-mail elaine.yau@scmp.com