

In a declining sport strangled with more and more alphabet titles and weight classes, an Olympic gold medal, for some, carries more weight than a professional world belt, and an Olympic super heavyweight gold, for all the world, weighs the most among any other medals in the Olympic square ring.

A silver is nothing to dismiss, either.

After taking on a 21-day intensive training camp with Hall of Fame trainer Lou Duva in Pennsylvania, United States, the Olympic super heavyweight silver medalist Zhilei Zhang concluded his journey at the freshly-ended World Boxing Championships in Milan, Italy, adding a second Worlds' bronze to his accolades.

The 2007 World Championships bronze medalist, who stands 6-7, seemed more confident, resolved and solid when he fought at the premier boxing tournament.

"The intense training in the U.S. did exert some effects on Zhilei," Jinhua Gu, Zhang's long-time handler said. "But it's not evident, 'cause the time span was too short. It needs to take at least three months or half a year for Zhilei to make a shift."

After pausing for a moment, he continued: "It's fair to say that Zhilei has improved a little compared to his former self during the Olympics a year ago. He is getting more matured, more potent and more technically sound, day by day."

The up and coming Chinese giant made a strong first showing by dumping his Uzbek opponent with an impressive 11-5 victory on the opening day of the tournament, and then struck the second stunning blow in the pre-quarterfinal when facing the tough opposition from boxing powerhouse Germany, winning the fight 12-8.

Storming into the last 8, Zhang measured up his sturdy adversary Primislav Dimovski who hammered his way to the quarter finals, smashing his antagonists by 21-3 and 21-0, respectively, in the opening round before the first ended with a draw, 1-1.

Leveraging his experience, the leader of the Chinese national boxing team adapted to Dimovski's style quickly, outclassing the eastern European 3-0 in the second stanza.

Trailing by 4 points, Dimovski started off strong going into the third, but the Chinese was no pushover as he sustained his foe's onslaughts and remained in full control throughout the last round, winning it 2-1.

Zhang waltzed through with a dominant win of 6-2.

"Zhilei suppressed his opponent by implementing our pre-arranged tactics well," Gu told me

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Written by Zhenyu Li

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following the fight. "We've done a lot of homework on this eastern European boxer beforehand."

"Our next opponent is the one that knocked off a Cuban fighter. We won't take him lightly."

Although two years older than Zhang, his Ukrainian foe Roman Kapitonenko, whose only bright spot on his lackluster resume was a bronze at the 2008 European Championships, was no match for the Chinese Olympic silver medalist in terms of experience and pedigree.

Almost all of the insiders in the Chinese boxing community predicted that Zhang had a great chance to prevail.

Right after Zhang breezed through the quarterfinals, both Chinese domestic and international media outlets had almost looked past the Ukrainian and set their eyes on the second seeded Zhang's showdown with the reigning champion Italian Roberto Cammarelle, a megafight billed as a classic shoot-out between two of the world's best amateurs in the flagship division of the sweet science.

Before facing Zhang's semifinal opponent, Gu had mentioned me about Zhang's likely confrontation with his old foe Roberto Cammarelle.

"The Italian who beat Zhilei at the Beijing Olympics poses a big hurdle on his way to the gold," Gu observed before the semi finals. "With the Italian's home court advantage, chances for us to snatch the gold medal are slim."

Cammarelle gave Zhang a nightmare at last year's Olympic boxing final on his home turf before being crowned under the brightest spotlight in the biggest sporting pageant. The silver medalist Zhang banged the ring post heavily after the fight was stopped before the final bell. His eyes welled up with tears that seemingly contained both regret and revenge, as he was being interviewed by the Chinese media.

This rematch was the ideal kind of fight journalists would love to watch. It would have all the makings of an epic battle that was easy to create storylines for.

However, it didn't pan out as most insiders thought it would.

Zhang performed under the mark and was unexpectedly outboxed by the Ukrainian underdog in a semifinal upset.

The No.2 ranked Chinese seemed sluggish in the first two rounds, losing by a large margin of 0-4. In spite of his final outburst in the last stanza, in which he inflicted marked damage on his rival, time ran out on Zhang.

His conquest at the Worlds was halted one punch away from the final.

"Zhilei should've been better," Gu told me after the upset. "He got off on the wrong foot. Actually, they (Zhang and his semifinal opponent) are fifty-fifty. Overall, he is up to the mark."

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Zhang is being so taken for granted for his excellence in the ring that when I asked the president of the Chinese Boxing Association Jianping Chang his take on the performance of the Chinese boxing national team at Milan Worlds, he even did not mention Zhang's name.

"By and large, I am satisfied with the performance of our boxing athletes at the Worlds so to speak," Chang remarked. "We preserved our best contenders, for instance, Shiming Zou and Xiaoping Zhang (two of the 2008 Olympic gold medalists) while dispatching a fresh team comprised mostly of raw talent. Those young prospects like Chao Li, Jiazhao Li and the likes had a fairly impressive run."

When I asked Chang about the American promotional company D & D Global's agreement with the Chinese Boxing Association, the only official governing body that oversees all boxing events in China, to grant the company the right to train and promote Zhilei Zhang and the other members of the Chinese national team in the United States, the biggest boxing boss in China replied sharply and firmly that this was pure rumor.

"I didn't know the thing at all," Chang said, noticeably unhappy. "There's no substantial contract signed between the Chinese Boxing Association and the American promoters. Training in the U.S. was just a short-term program for Zhang. His next goal is going for glory at the 2012 Olympics. He will not move into the professional ranks at this stage."

Yet, he continued to say: "We do not exclude future possibilities of letting Zhang train in the States, for a fair sparing partner for Zhang is not accessible in our country."

Standing at 2.01m, edging 0.03 meters in height over the universally recognized No. 1 heavyweight champion of the world Wladimir Klitschko, the Chinese giant is an excellent puncher who can also box in a technician's manner. He is swift and nimble for a super heavyweight of his size, and as most Chinese boxers, displays nifty footwork.

Combined with a southpaw stance, Zhang stands out as a unique, imposing presence in the ring. It is no wonder why he cannot locate a trial horse in a nation with over 1.3 billion people, not to mention a rivalry. He is not only a rarity in the square circle of China, but all over Asia.

Zhang's dedication to the combat sport is beyond doubt.

Due to his gigantic weight, often times, the Chinese giant suffers fairly severe wear and tear on his feet following an action-packed training, but he has never showed a single sign of reluctance to carry on.

"The intensity of his training is so strong that every so often he even doesn't have the strength to walk up the stairs on his feet," Gu confided to me.

As hungry as he is in the gym, Zhang's ambition lies way outside of it. As he told me: "Before the world heavyweight crown, my goal is to take the London Olympic gold!"

If he could continue to train under the hand of the American legendary trainer Lou Duva and

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compete at the highest level, China's Zhilei Zhang will loom as a top contender at the summit of the sweet science in the coming years, which both the Chinese and the Americans would be pleased to see.

As Lou Duva put it: "Give Zhang two or three years and he'll be ready to be a heavyweight world champion."

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