

# Japan has sights set on London

## CHEF-DE-MISSION REGARDS ASIAD AS A BUILDING BLOCK TOWARDS 2012 GAMES

By LEI LEI  
CHINA DAILY

GUANGZHOU — With the Guangzhou Asian Games just past the halfway mark, Japan, which used to be the leading sports power in Asia, is third in the medal tally, behind China and Korea.

Still, the chief of the Japanese delegation is satisfied with the overall results so far.

“Up to now, the whole delegation has worked very hard and the results are good,” said chef-de-mission Noriyuki Ichihara, who sees the Asian Games as a dress rehearsal for the 2012 London Olympic Games.

“Although the number of gold medals is not satisfactory, the number of medals is fine. It’s good practice for the 2012 Olympics, since Guangzhou is the last major multi-sport event before London.

“Win or lose, it’s a good opportunity to gain valuable experience,” Ichihara told China Daily on Sunday.

Japan dominated the first eight Asiad before China began an unbroken string of leading the gold medal standings at the 1982 New Delhi Asian Games.

Since the 1996 Asiad in Seoul, Japan has ranked third in gold medals, behind China and Korea.

At the Doha Games four years ago, Japan won 50 gold medals, trailing Korea’s 58 and China’s 165.

Going into the Guangzhou Games, Ichihara said Japan’s goal was to equal or surpass the Koreans. Now he acknowledges that goal might be too lofty — but vowed Japan will fight on.

“The Korean team has done very well at these games and won a lot of gold medals. Looking at the standings today, it’s a little bit difficult for us to surpass Korea. But there are still several competitions to be held, and we will try our best.

“We still have chances in women’s wrestling, which is about to start. I hope the number of gold medals will surpass what we gained at Doha.”

In Guangzhou, Japan has been overtaken in such traditionally strong sports as gymnastics and swimming. In the former, China grabbed 13 of 14 gold medals, with Korea taking the other.

In the pool, China won 24 of the 38 gold medals available, while Japan took only nine.

But for Ichihara, the losses here are worth trading for the expected medal haul at the 2012 London Olympics.

“Our strongest gymnast, Uchimura Kohei is recovering from a shoulder



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injury, so he didn’t compete here,” Ichihara said.

“In swimming, the rivalry between China and Japan is always fierce, but this time China showed great advantages. The Japanese team did not adjust well and didn’t do well.

“But all of these are valuable experi-

ences for our preparation for the London Olympics. We will sum up all the lessons here and work even harder.”

According to Ichihara, the Japanese government invested about 2.5 billion yen (\$30 million) in preparing athletes for the Asian Games, and one-third of that total has to be returned to the government.

But for the London Games, the government is considering a much larger financial commitment.

“We earned the most gold medals for Japan at the 2004 Athens Olympic Games, which was 15. I can’t predict a specific number of gold medals for London, but I hope we can earn more than we did in Athens,” Ichihara said.

“We hope to maintain our advantages in our traditional strong sports, such as swimming, wrestling and judo. We also expect breakthroughs in table tennis, rowing and track and field.”

### Q&A >> NORIYUKI ICHIHARA

**What do you think of the organization of the Guangzhou Asian Games?**

The organization here is very good, and so are the venues. The volunteers are also very helpful. It shows that Guangzhou is capable of hosting an Olympic Games.

**Hiroshima hosted the Asian Games in 1994. Is Japan planning to bid for another major event?**

Hiroshima is now considering bidding for the 2020 Olympic Games.

**Do you think it’s necessary for host China to not care much about winning gold medals and give more chances to the other countries?**

The strong athletes should win the gold medals, there is no doubt about that. So, it’s not necessary for athletes not to strive for gold.

I don’t think China can maintain such an overwhelming advantage in Asia. More and more countries and regions will catch up with China. Japan maintained the lead for eight Asian Games, but was gradually passed by China and Korea. It’s a natural rule.