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Isinbayeva to scale new financial heights

Triple Olympic gold medalist Li Ning achieved a major publicity coup in Beijing yesterday by signing pole vault queen Yelena Isinbayeva to his eponymous sportswear brand for a reported five-year deal worth \$7.5 million.



Beijing Games champion Yelena Isinbayeva of Russia greets the media in Beijing after signing a five-year sponsorship deal with Li Ning Company Limited, China's No 1 sports apparel maker. [Xinhua]

The legendary Chinese gymnast and highly decorated Russian athlete are now poised to scale new financial heights together after their individual feats wowed audiences during the Beijing Games last August.

As the Summer Games enjoyed an elaborate curtain raiser on Aug 8, man-on-wire Li lit the Olympic Torch while suspended on the roof of the Bird's Nest National Stadium. Days later, record-setter Isinbayeva roared to her second Olympic gold medal in as many Games.

Li has since focused on building his brand into an international name, with Li Ning Company Limited now ranking as China's largest sportswear retailer. Isinbayeva, with her Slavic blonde hair, model good looks and reputation as the world's greatest female pole vaulter, is expected to add both prestige and chic to the brand's armory.

"Li Ning was unknown to me before, as a brand, so it is interesting for me (to sign with it)," the 26-year-old Russian said during a press briefing yesterday. "I hope I can help them develop the brand in the international sports market. It's also a new challenge for me, (which) I like."

Founded by Li, a multiple world champion who soared to success at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, the company now owns around 10 percent of the domestic Chinese market.

Stars currently under contract include Olympic champion diver Guo Jingjing, men's gymnastics world and Olympic champion Yang Wei, and women's table tennis world No 1 Zhang Yining.

To further expand its global reach, it has also signed foreign athletes including NBA stars Shaquille O'Neal of the Phoenix Suns and Baron Davis of the Los Angeles Clippers, and Croatian tennis player Ivan Ljubicic.

Yet the signing of Isinbayeva represents a more timely approach. Unlike Shaq (past his prime) or Guo (a household name in China but not beyond), she was named last year's IAAF female athlete of the year and has set 26 world records in the last decade to achieve a rare dominance of a sport by a single athlete.

She set a new outdoor mark of 5.05 meters at the Beijing Games and a new indoor mark of 5m at a meet in Donetsk, Ukraine, last month.

During yesterday's signing at Li-Ning's headquarters in a southern Beijing suburb, Li made a rare appearance and handed Isinbayeva a kite with traditional Chinese features.

"I believe she will make more miracles in her career and I hope she can fly freely like this kite," he said.

Isinbayeva, a former artistic gymnast, said she felt instantly comfortable with the Li Ning brand.

"Li (also) used to be a gymnast. I think we have the same philosophy on life," said the Russian, who was formerly under contract to Adidas, the world's second-largest sports goods maker.

Neither Isinbayeva or representatives at Li Ning would confirm the financial details of the latest deal.

The company is now tailor-making competition and training gear for its latest ambassador, who is looking forward to setting new records in it.

With five years left before she retires after the 2013 World Championships, Isinbayeva said she expects to topple many more records yet.

"I think it's possible to jump 5.20m and even 5.30m. It all depends on my health, because technically there is no problem," she said.

"I used to think about retiring after the (2012) London Games, but now I am thinking after 2013, because in 2013 there will be a World Championships in Moscow. So I plan to finish there before my home crowd and I plan to succeed there."

She said she will concentrate on sport-related charity work when she steps down before helping to usher in the next crop of world beaters.

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YELENA ISINBAYEVA
Record-breaking pole vaulter