

《Chinese boxing legend seeks statement win in Shanghai》

By CCTV.com reporter Colin Robinson

For Chinese boxing legend Zou Shiming, high-stakes fights have become routine. The 36-year-old flyweight (112 pounds) is a three-time amateur world champion and two-time Olympic champion. And in his short professional career, he has already competed in six title bouts. But his fight with Japan's Sho Kimura on Friday night stands out as his most important yet.



Zou Shiming celebrates winning the WBO flyweight title in Las Vegas on Nov. 5, 2016. [Source: Xinhua]

Going his own way

When he squares off against Kimura, the seventh-ranked flyweight in the world, Zou will try to defend his World Boxing Organization title for the first time as he prepares for his first fight without his long-term promoter and his Hall of Fame trainer.

Zou signed with U.S. promotion company Top Rank after he won gold at the 2012 London Olympics and was paid an unprecedented U.S.\$300,000 for his four-round pro debut. Top Rank CEO Bob Arum even convinced Freddie Roach, one of the world's most in-demand coaches and trainer of elite fighters such as Miguel Cotto and Manny Pacquiao, to train Zou and have him spar with Pacquiao.

Following an impressive run of nine wins and just one loss with that team, including a dominant victory over Thailand's Prasitsak Phaprom to earn the WBO belt in Las Vegas last November, Zou has decided to go his own way for this fight. He is promoting the bout with his wife, Ran Yingying, and says he is keen to "bring boxing culture to China" as he puts his belt on the line at Shanghai Oriental Sports Center.

Without Roach as trainer, his usual strength and conditioning coach Justin Fortune, or Pacquiao as a sparring partner, Zou is rumored to be working without a full-time coach. To help him prepare for Kimura, he has flown sparring partners recommend by Jay Lau Chi-yuen, owner of the Hong Kong-based DEF Boxing Gym, to Shanghai to work with him at his gym. Even so, his gym is a step down from Roach's world-famous Wild Card Boxing Club in Los Angeles, where Zou has trained for most of his pro fights.

China vs. Japan

Such upheaval at this stage of Zou's career may seem like a major gamble, particularly as the stakes are higher than usual given China and Japan's longstanding geopolitical rivalry, which often spills into sports.

Though national pride is at stake, the buildup to the fight has been amicable, with prefight interviews and press conferences characterized by Kimura's humble attitude and Zou's unwillingness to engage in trash talk.

"Zou Shiming is the boxing star of China," Kimura said. "I'm on the bottom of Japan; compared to him, I'm like sh*t."

But there is always an added edge in any sporting contest where a Chinese athlete or team faces Japanese opposition. And although Kimura, who has been training at 13 Coins gGym in Thailand, is a heavy underdog, he is the WBO Asia Pacific flyweight champion, and he has seven knockout victories — compared to the two that Zou, who is known more for his speed and high volume of punches than his punching power, has managed in his pro career. And Kimura, 28, has been on an impressive run since he was stopped 75 seconds into his pro debut, racking up 14 wins and two draws.

Kimura, who works part-time helping to deliver crates of beer for a restaurant and claims he cannot even afford new training shoes or boxing gloves, is also incredibly driven; he sees winning as way to "get out of poverty." He also says he is determined to honor his mother, who died when he was still young and missed out on seeing him succeed in pro boxing.

"I'm going to win this belt and put it on my mother's grave," Kimura said. "When I won the WBO Asia Pacific flyweight title [last November in Osaka], I put my belt on my mother's grave. But this one is for the world championship. This one is much more prestigious."



Zou Shiming and Sho Kimura pose for a photo ahead of their fight in Shanghai. [Source: CFP]

Kimura expects boos in Shanghai, but he is confident that he will not be fazed by what is likely to be a very partisan crowd at the 18,000-seat stadium. "The crowd might get behind Zou, but that's going to motivate me even more," he said.

Meanwhile, Zou is determined to get a victory in front of his fans. "I have never lost to a Japanese opponent before," he said. "This time, the result will be the same."

Growing the sport in China

As he seeks to make the first defense of his title in front of his home crowd, Zou says he wants to inspire young fighters in his homeland. After China's decades-long ban on boxing was lifted, the government invested heavily in amateur boxing, and Zou shone as the nation's brightest star. Having translated his amateur glory into success in the pro game, Zou now wants to encourage others to follow his lead.

"In the West, they already have a long history of boxing and everyone of all ages watches; but in China, this is still something we have to work hard on. The attention it gets here is not like some of our more conventional sports, such as badminton and table tennis, that lots of kids practice and play," Zou said.

"We want to tell everyone in China that Chinese people have a Zou Shiming who brought back the belt from Las Vegas and kept it here, so that everyone will say, 'If Zou Shiming can, so can other Chinese.'"

What's next

Should Zou defeat Kimura, his mandatory challenger would be Japan's Toshiyuki Igarashi. But with a win, Zou may have other options: he could seek other world titles in potential bouts with fellow 112 lb champions Kazuto Ioka (WBA) or Daigo Higa (WBC), both from Japan; IBF titleholder Donnie Nietes from the Philippines would be another option.

Non-titleholder possibilities include Juan Carlos Reveco of Argentina, Moruti Mthalane of South Africa and Francisco Rodriguez Jr. of Mexico. Alternatively, Zou could move up to 115 pounds.

But as one of the oldest competitors in his division, Zou knows that he may not have many fights left and he is wrestling with the idea of retirement.

"I don't want to say goodbye. But the hardest part for an athlete to face is injuries and age," Zou said.

"Maybe tomorrow I will say I can't fight anymore. But as long as I can, I will not say goodbye to boxing because I'd hate to part with it."