

## Never underestimate Liu Xiang: father

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On New Year's Eve, outpatient Liu Xiang sent his father a text message from Houston expressing his New Year's resolution: "I will protect myself and I will get stronger."

Compared to the bitter 12 months China's star athlete had just been through, a year that saw him hobble out of the Bird's Nest in August then fly to the US for surgery on his right Achilles tendon one month ago, the message sounded a note of hope for 2009.

"Through my phone calls with Liu recently, I know that his rehab is going very well and I'm more and more confident he will make a full recovery," said Liu Xuegen, the athlete's father, who spoke to China Daily from their hometown of Shanghai as the family prepared to see in the New Year.

This is just one in a series of hurdles that the tireless 25-year-old has had to endure during a journey that has seen him hit the pinnacle of his sport, said Liu Xuegen.

"Liu seldom expresses his feelings so openly as he did in that New Year's text message. What struck me was his determination.

"If he can get back to his best slowly, he still has a good shot at surprising people at London 2012."

An unexpected injury to his right Achilles' tendon ended Liu's chance of defending his Olympic crown at home in August in the 110m hurdles. Instead of thrilling a crowd that could hardly contain its excitement, he worried a nation by hobbling out of the stadium during the first round of preliminaries and hitting out in frustration as he left.

Recalling that moment, the senior Liu said it was his son's circle of friends who came to the rescue.

"I got the phone call from him an hour after he withdrew and he reassured me he was OK," he said.

"I finally saw him a day later and I was worried because he looked depressed. But, luckily, he has so many friends and fans and they gave him a lot of support. Now he knows he has to rebuild his confidence to pay them all back."

Liu's personal struggles also form the plot of a new TV commercial by one of his sponsors, Coca Cola, in which the main characters are Liu and his father.

The ad replays the moment that Liu left the National Stadium in pain, with his father helping him rediscover his confidence.

"Do you know how many hurdles you have leaped over? This is just another hurdle in your life," says father to son in the ad.

"The scenario of the ad moved me at first since it was more or less the same as the real situation," Liu told China Daily. "I was nervous to be on TV since it was the first time I had acted, but Liu encouraged me."

Liu underwent surgery in Houston on Dec 6 and he is recovering faster than expected. One month after the operation he can now walk without any aids but he is not yet allowed to go jogging on hard surfaces.

"The latest plan is for him to jog in the water, a program that will last for about 10 days," said Liu's coach Sun Haiping, who has just returned to Shanghai.

"The doctor said maybe Liu will be able to jog as normal in four weeks, which means he will have achieved 90-percent recovery at that time."

The family said they expect him home in April.

"Liu's doctor has been surprised at the speed of his recovery and they say he might be back here in early April," said Liu senior.

"Source: China Daily"