

SPORT

SEVENS HEAVEN FOR RUGBY TRIO

Ong, Shuhadah, Chan will make Games bow, having made the switch from other sports

Nicholas De Silva

A few years ago, the sport of rugby sevens was relatively unknown to them.

But fast-forward to the present and the trio of Ong Pei Yi, Nur Shuhadah Mohamed Abdul Gaffoor and Jayne Chan are part of the 12-woman squad heading to the Aug 19-30 SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur, where they will be making their debuts.

All three were once promising youth athletes in other sports and made the switch to rugby sevens only recently.

Ong was a budding hockey player on track to making the senior national team, having represented the country at the Under-21 level in multiple competitions.

However, university commitments prevented her from attending training sessions, which led her to call time on her hockey career.

She was introduced to rugby sevens when she took a sports elective module at Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

"My friend convinced me to take up the elective and that it'd be fun to try something new, so I agreed," the recent NTU chemistry graduate told The Straits Times.

The module's instructor, who was also the university women's rugby sevens coach, recognised Ong's talent immediately and invited her to join the team.

Although she acknowledges that hockey and rugby are different, she insists that there are some similarities as well.

"I carry over things like evasive running, footwork, field awareness and scanning from hockey," said Ong. "I enjoy the unpredictability of things and how fast and physical sevens is."

For Shuhadah, the painful seven-year wait to represent her country in a major competition is finally over.

The former basketball player was set to participate in the inaugural Youth Olympic Games in 2010, but

had to pull out after being diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, which saw her lose even basic mobility.

She fought the disease into remission, and eventually resumed playing sports recreationally after three years of treatment.

But as an avid sportswoman, who has also played football, handball and touch rugby, Shuhadah was still unsatisfied so she jumped at the opportunity when national rugby sevens women's head coach Wang Shao Ing spotted her last year at the National University of Singapore's inter-hall games.

"It's really an honour to wear national colours at such a high level, especially after all I have been through. Back then, when I was diagnosed, I never really thought that I would be here. It was just taking it one step at a time and I'm lucky that it led to this," she said.

"I really like how I can put to use all the skills I gained from my previous sports into the game. It is really tactical and aggressive and that's what I like about it."

When asked if her condition worries her, the mechanical engineering graduate said: "My disease made me realise how little time I have to play sports. My doctor told me that I would have to pay the price if I continued, but I am willing to do that because it makes me happy."

"I will do it (rugby) as long as my body can take it."

Similarly, former basketballer Jayne Chan, 18, who represented Singapore at youth level, also switched to rugby when she realised her talents were better suited there after following her friend to a club training session in January.

"After playing in the Under-18s, I was not even invited to try out for the national team. I'm really short for a basketballer and did not see much of a future so after trying rugby, I realised I have a lot more to offer here," said Chan, who stands at 1.56m.

Wang admits she is amazed at the progress of the trio.



Jayne Chan is on the fast track with the national women's rugby sevens team. The former youth basketballer has not looked back since her decision to take up the sport in January. PHOTO COURTESY OF SINGAPORE RUGBY UNION

SEA Games rugby sevens squad lists

MEN'S SQUAD:

Marah Moehammad Ishraf (captain), Teng Chong Yau, Nicholas Yau, Muhammad Zaki Mahmood, Samuel Koh, Nashrul Hadi Hanafi, Ho Yi Shu, Jonathan Wong, Mattias Chia, Samuel Teo, Xavier Ducourneau, Adam Alexander Vine.

WOMEN'S SQUAD:

Ong Pei Yi, Sim Chiew Hong, Chan Jia Yu, Eunice Chu, Samantha Teo, Alvinia Ow Yong (captain), Nur Shuhadah Mohamed Abdul Gaffoor, Huab Arra Heloise Castro, Lau Pui San, Jayne Chan, Lee Han Ni, Wong Yilin.

"They're already athletic, fit, fast, agile and have spatial awareness. Certain elements are already there and transferable to rugby. They are able to apply this instinctively and this makes it a lot easier to coach them. It's funny to think how it's only been two years at most since they started," she remarked.

The Singapore Rugby Union announced the men's and women's squads yesterday.

Despite new-look squads with only a handful of veterans, both teams will be looking to improve on their medal-winning performances from the last SEA Games on home soil two years ago, when the women's and men's teams won a silver and bronze respectively.

ndesilva@sph.com.sg

Triathletes training creatively for SEA Games gold

Lester Wong

They may be underdogs, but national triathletes Willie Loo and Clement Chow are targeting nothing less than a one-two finish at the upcoming SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur.

"We don't just want to match our performances from two years ago. We won't be happy with that," said Loo, who won the bronze medal at the 2015 SEA Games on home soil (2hr 7min 1sec), with Chow (2:07:30) coming in fourth. "The gold has always been the target."

Filipino Nikko Huelgas won the gold then in 2:04:32, and the Singapore duo reckon he is the favourite again this year.

The Republic has not won a gold medal in the triathlon at the SEA Games since 2007, when triathlete-turned-marathoner Mok Ying Ren won in Thailand.

Yesterday, Loo acknowledged the challenge awaiting him and Chow, noting: "We're never the favourites. Most of the others who are racing are full-time athletes, and also many years younger than us."

At 34, Loo is nearly a decade older than the 25-year-old Huelgas, who won the ASTC Triathlon Asian Championships in Indonesia last week in 2:00:50.

Chow and Loo do not train full-time. Chow is an auditor, while Loo works in sports distribution and also coaches.

The pair have not managed to find the time to familiarise themselves with the SEA Games route in Putrajaya, which features a swim leg in a lake instead of the sea.

"So the first time we will see the route is when we land, two days before the race (on Aug 21)," said Loo, who has been making do with Google Maps.



Doing the shorter sprint distance (750m swim, 20km cycle, 5km run), national triathletes Willie Loo (left) and Clement Chow each finished in a time of 1hr 5min 35sec in the TRI-Factor Triathlon at East Coast Park yesterday. PHOTO COURTESY OF ORANGE ROOM

With less time to train than their rivals, the duo revealed that they have had to "get a little creative" with training.

"When you're training full-time there are always some sessions where you take it easy a little bit and just go through the motions," said Chow, 29. "But we have to cut these out and push more every time. We don't have a choice any more, there's no time to waste."

Which is why the pair asked to be allowed to compete in yesterday's

TRI-Factor Triathlon at East Coast Park, which allowed them to fine-tune their race-day strategy.

Doing the shorter sprint distance (750m swim, 20km cycle, 5km run) – which is half the standard distance – the pair finished together with a time of 1:05:35.

"The organisers were very accommodating to let us use the event for training," said Loo. "They gave us permission to draft (cycling in formation), which is normally not allowed in age-group events so we're

thankful for the opportunity." Added Chow: "This was a full-dress rehearsal for us. We got to try out all our race gear and worked on our strategy, so we're quite happy with that."

The standard distance men's open category was won by SEA Games reserve Zacharias Low, who clocked 2:14:11 and was crowned overall TRI-Factor Series champion.

lesterw@sph.com.sg

Reagan Cheng racing at the CSC Super Junior Invitational. He won eight events, setting meet records in five of them. PHOTO: CHINESE SWIMMING CLUB



Reagan continues valuable performance

Ho Cai Jun

Reagan Cheng continued his domination of the Chinese Swimming Club (CSC) Super Junior Invitational with victories in eight of his 11 events yesterday.

The boys' (eight-year-olds) Most Valuable Swimmer of last year once again received the award, but this time for nine-year-olds.

In addition to his eight golds (50m breaststroke, backstroke and freestyle, 100m free, breast and back, 200m free and medley relay) at the two-day meet, he also broke meet records for all of them, except the 50m breast, 200m free and 200m medley relay.

"I'm happy because I achieved what I set out to achieve," he said. "I wanted to become the Most Valuable Swimmer again to make myself proud."

At the competition with over 500 athletes from 39 local and foreign clubs, Reagan, who was up against foreign athletes in some of

his races, managed to cope with some extra nerves.

Said the CSC swimmer: "I always pray before I start swimming to calm myself down. My coach also told me to try my best."

The Primary 3 pupil from Anglo-Chinese School (Junior) is on the mark, having bagged at least one other Most Valuable Swimmer distinction – at the Singapore National Age Group meet in March.

David Lim, external consultant of the CSC, said: "Reagan's road is still a long one. He is showing signs of a swimmer beyond his tender age. He will really need to manage his development and choose the correct pathway to realise his full potential."

In the girls' category, Japan's Misa Okuzono, the girls' (11-year-olds) Most Valuable Swimmer, set meet records in all of her wins (50m breast, back, butterfly, free, 100m fly, free, back and breast, 200m free and medley), except the 200m free.

caijunh@sph.com.sg