

Breaststroke specialists Lionel and Samuel Khoo feed off each other's energy and support

The New Paper continues the countdown to the 29th SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur with a look at the family connections in the various sports. In the final instalment of the series, we feature the KHOO COUSINS in swimming.

● LIM SAY HENG

Swimmer Lionel Khoo, an only child, described his paternal cousin, Samuel Khoo, as "the closest thing I have to having a brother".

But once the SEA Games swim competition starts at the National Aquatic Centre in Kuala Lumpur on Monday, the pair will find themselves locked in a tussle for supremacy.

Lionel, 22, and Samuel, 18, will be going head to head in three events – the men's 50m, 100m and 200m breaststroke.

But Lionel stressed that the kinship will not take a backseat in their quest for individual glory. In fact, it's going to be quite the opposite.

Lionel said: "This is the first time we are on the same team."

"It's really cool. We have the Quah siblings and now we have the Khoo cousins."

"Moreover, we are in the same events and it's much better this way than having someone else. He is the closest thing I have to having a brother."

MORAL SUPPORT

The Khoo cousins are not the only ones with a family connection in the Singapore swim contingent.

There's also the Quah siblings – Ting Wen, Zheng Wen and Jing Wen – and another pair of siblings, Dylan and Jamie Koo, who will be donning Singapore's colours during the Games.

For debutant Samuel, having a familiar face around him as he negotiates his races is a comforting thought.

He said: "There is this moral support; you are no longer alone in your race, you know you have someone there."

"Although he is also your competitor, you know you can rely on him and he can rely on you."

Lionel, who will also be swimming in the 200m individual medley, added: "It's really cool to look at the scoreboard before and after the race, and you'd see 'Khoo' and 'Khoo' there."

"It is quite a rare surname,

Cousins, competitors and confidants

SWIMMING

WHEN
Aug 21-26

WHERE
National Aquatic Centre, KL Sports City, Bukit Jalil

SQUAD

Benedict Boon, Christie Chue, Darren Lim, Dylan Koo, Faith Elizabeth Khoo, Francis Fong, Gan Ching Hwee, Glen Lim, Roanne Ho, Hoong En Qi, Jamie Koo, Jonathan Tan, Joseph Schooling, Lionel Khoo, Samuel Khoo, Amanda Lim, Natasha Ong, Ong Jung Yi, Pang Sheng Jun, Quah Jing Wen, Quah Ting Wen, Quah Zheng Wen, Hannah Quek, Samantha Yeo, Teong Tzen Wei, Nicholle Toh, Rachel Tseng, Danny Yeo

PERFORMANCE AT THE 2015 SEA GAMES
23 golds, 12 silvers, 7 bronzes

and we are related after all."

In a country where there is a comparative dearth of national-level breaststroke specialists – former national coach Ian Turner once pointed this out and tried to remedy the situation – the Khoos said their decisions to specialise in the stroke were purely coincidental and not influenced by each other.

"I chose what I thought was the easiest stroke," said Lionel.

"I started swimming at four, and was maybe seven or eight when I started to specialise."

FLY LOOKED SO DIFFICULT

"I thought it was the easiest stroke but, as I got older, I realised that it wasn't so easy," added the Singapore Management University undergraduate with a cheeky smile.

Samuel said his two elder siblings used to swim competitively at the primary school level, and he was influenced by them to focus on breaststroke.

The Raffles Institution student said: "I used to be in the spectator stands watching them swim and, back then, I thought a 200m race was quite fun – just four laps of breaststroke."

"Butterfly was a no-no for me because it looked so difficult."



Cousins Samuel (left) and Lionel Khoo will be competing in the men's 50m, 100m and 200m breaststroke events at the SEA Games. TNP PHOTO: LIM SAY HENG

When asked why he didn't choose freestyle, arguably the most popular stroke among competitive swimmers here, Samuel said: "Actually I have no idea why, breaststroke just seemed more suitable for me."

While Lionel has been swimming at the national level for years and holds the national records for the 100m and 200m events, Samuel started competing alongside his cousin at the open-level events in meets only this year, having previously competed in the age-group level events at the same meets.

The two don't talk about swimming outside of training – shoes are their preferred discussion topic – but their parents do discuss their progress.

Lionel said: "Their desire for us is to have a friendly rivalry; not a straight-up one though, they are just hoping for the best for both of us."

But neither swimmer is concerned with the comparisons.

Samuel said: "At the start of this year, I started focusing on myself; I just want to do well and improve myself and didn't have any personal goals, such as beating a specific person."

"That's one of his key strengths," Lionel chipped in.

"He is able to focus purely on himself and ignore anything that is outside and that is what will really help him in his swimming career."

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