More urged to join disability sports

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Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu has called on more people with special needs to come forward and take up sports, on the back of a historic showing by Singapore's para-athletes at the Asian Para Games (APG) in Jakarta.

She was speaking on the sidelines of a welcome-back ceremony for Team Singapore at Changi Airport Terminal 2 yesterday evening, which saw more than 50 friends and family members of athletes gathering to show their support for the contingent.

Singapore won three golds, two silvers and five bronzes in Jakarta to post their best showing at an APG.

"We want to encourage more among people with special needs to take up sports," said Ms Fu.

"It is shown sports can do a lot for confidence, and they would be able to gain exposure that they might (otherwise) not be available to.

"This is a good way for them to participate fully in society, and help us move towards a more inclusive Singapore."

Her call was echoed by Singapore Disability Sports Council (SDSC) president Kevin Wong.

"What I hope is that every other Singaporean with disability be inspired," said Wong, who is also chairman of the Singapore National Paralympic Council.

"We need everyone to come forward and try their ability at sports. The SDSC, and (national sports agency) Sport Singapore, we are here to support them in discovering their true ability.

"We believe everyone has that ability, but it's also a matter of having the courage. I hope they can see this (milestone) and be inspired."

Wong added he hoped participation in para sports reaches 30,000 by 2020 and, while he did not have the exact figure, he said the current level is "nowhere near" that mark.

Singapore's previous best showing at an APG was one gold, one silver and four bronzes won at the 2014 Games in Incheon, South Korea.

Ms Fu hailed the 44-strong contingent's strong showing in Jakarta as a result of "what hard work and perseverance can achieve".

Wong singled out the Sports Excellence (Spex) Scholarship as a key reason for the good results, noting that the scheme – which funds nine para-athletes – allows them to train full-time.

The two gold medallists in Jakarta – swimmers Toh Wei Soong (50m and 100m freestyle S7), and Yip Pin Xiu (50m backstroke SB4 1-4) – are both SpexScholars.

Yip, 26, also scored a victory outside of the pool on Friday when she was awarded the World Para Series' Best Female Athlete award for high support needs athletes.

She is one of only four winners in the world, and the only Asian. This follows her selection as a Nominated Member of Parliament last month.

Archer Syahidah Alim also achieved a milestone away from the field of competition, after she was voted into the Asian Paralympic Committee's Athletes' Committee. She is the first Singaporean to be elected into the seven-person committee, whose members serve a four-year term.

Pointing to the accomplishments of Yip and Syahidah, Wong said: "It recognises their achievements, and their role in society.

"They are role models and I hope they can continue to be shining lights, to encourage people with disabilities to come forward and lead more active lives."

Syahidah said she endured a "nerve-racking" introduction as part of her committee to the 3,000 athletes from 43 teams at the APG closing ceremony at the Gelora Bung Karno, which drew a reported 18,000 crowd.

But she looked forward to her role as a voice of athletes, particularly as she is the only South-east Asian member in the committee.

"It's an honour to be a part of this team, which is diverse, unique and proactive," said the 33-year-old.

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Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu welcoming back cyclist Emily Lee and other members of Singapore's contingent returning from the Asian Para Games in Jakarta. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG