

Gary Yeo is gunning for a personal best in London



Photo: SINGAPORE SPORTS COUNCIL

By Lim Say Heng

If fate had taken a different turn, Gary Yeo would be charging up and down hills as a career soldier, instead of sprinting down stadium tracks.

After a stellar season last year, the 25-year-old will march onto the biggest stage of them all when he takes his place in the heats of the men's 100m at the 2012 Olympic Games in London on Aug 4.

It has been an improbable journey, according to Yeo.

"I never thought I would represent Singapore when I started running in Victoria School. I thought I would sign on in the army or police, eventually," he said.

After his O Levels, Yeo went on to Singapore Polytechnic and successfully obtained deferment from National Service to compete in his first South-east Asia (SEA) Games in 2007.

When he finally got his first taste of the army during basic military training in 2008, it just didn't feel right.

He decided the army was not for him and joined the Singapore Management University after National Service to pursue a business degree.

That was in 2010.

One year later, he stormed to a silver medal in the men's 100m final at the 2011 SEA Games in Palembang, Indonesia, and was part of the Singapore men's 4x100m relay team who were only just pipped to the gold medal by the hosts.

Highest point

Yeo, who clocked a personal best of 10.46sec in Indonesia, said: "The 100m silver medal was definitely the highest point in my sprinting career. I never thought it would be possible.

"It was only a month before the SEA Games that my coach (Melvin Tan) and I felt I had a chance at a medal since I was getting good times during training."

Yeo, a former hockey player in school, was part of the 4x100m relay team who set a new national record of 39.82sec - the previous mark was 40.10sec - when the Singapore quartet won silver at the 2009 SEA Games in Vientiane.

Muhd Elfi Mustapa, Lee Cheng Wei, Muhd Amiruddin Jamal and Yeo sealed their place in Singapore's history books when they became the first quartet from the Republic to break the 40-second barrier in the event.

The two silvers from the 2011 SEA Games helped Yeo end the year on a high, after he struggled to juggle training, studies and his part-time work as a coach - as well as a knee injury - for the better part of the season.

This year, he has already competed at the prestigious Asian Indoor Athletics Championships in Hangzhou and the World Indoor Championships in Istanbul.

He was also part of the national 4x100m relay team who rewrote the national record again, when they clocked 39.58 at the Kanchanaburi leg of the Asian Grand Prix in May.

The year has certainly been good for Yeo so far.

He recently got engaged to his childhood sweetheart of 13 years and he's raring to have a go at the Olympics.

Eye on the future

Yeo, who recently went for a three-week training stint in Japan, said: "I am aiming to lower my time in London and even though it is not at the optimum level yet, it's slowly coming down, just like my coach and I have planned."

The men's 100m final in London threatens to be one for the ages, with Usain Bolt being eyed up by a host of challengers led by Yohan Blake.

Singapore's Yeo, who will be running at the Games after a wild-card invite, will go unnoticed amid all the hype surrounding the event, almost certainly enjoying one run out in his heat.

But Yeo is looking to learn as he targets glory at next year's SEA Games.

He said: "I am aiming for two golds next year, in the 100m and the 4x100m relay."



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"It's very possible in the relay, since we've actually bettered our national mark recently."

After that, the sprinter aims to bring the curtain down on his running career when Singapore hosts the SEA Games in 2015.

He said: "When I go overseas to compete at major Games, the crowd is not made up of Singaporeans.

"I want to experience racing in a stadium full of Singaporeans and I think I will thrive under such a situation and do better."