

On Father's Day ... this one is for you, dad

By CHAN U-GENE

SINGAPORE'S Danny Yeo strutted to the starting blocks before his 200m freestyle race at the South-east Asian Swimming Championships and pointed two fingers to the heavens.

That gesture, which has accompanied all of his races in the past five years, has become his trademark. He has never told anyone, not even his family, but it is a dedication - his silent tribute to his father Felix, who died of cancer when the swimmer was 16.

At the Singapore Sports School yesterday, his personal dedication had a much deeper meaning: It was Father's Day.

Yeo, now 22, won gold. The SEA Games champion clocked 1min 50.71sec to retain his title as the region's fastest 200m freestyle swimmer.

Coming in second was Lim Ching Hwang of Malaysia (1:52.18). Another Malaysian, Daniel Bego, was third (1:52.44).

In a quiet moment after the race, Yeo, with the gold in his hand and tears in his eyes, told The Straits Times: "I would tell him (my father) that I did my best. I made it. I made it this far after he passed away."

The swimmer, now in his last year of national service, contemplated quitting the sport after his father - who introduced him to swimming - lost his fight against the disease at 55.

Swimming was what his father loved. Yeo, who is training with the Aquatic Performance Swim Club (APSC), said: "He and Uncle Siong (national head coach Ang Peng Siong) used to swim together. They swam together and stayed in the same block."

So when he lost his father, Yeo almost lost interest in the sport. He recalled: "I wanted to quit. I was not that fast, too. I thought I should concentrate on something else like my studies."

It was a meeting with American Jack Simon, the former United States head coach, which persuaded him to stay on.

Said the Singapore Management University-bound swimmer: "I was an average swimmer, clocking about 57sec in the 100m free."

Singapore's Amanda Lim (far right), 18, and Mylene Ong, 20, with their gold and silver medals respectively in the women's 50m freestyle event. Lim clocked a personal best of 25.71sec. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM



FROM THE HEART

"I would tell him (my father) that I did my best. I made it. I made it this far after he passed away."

- Danny Yeo, after snagging a gold in the 200m freestyle yesterday

"I don't know what Jack saw in me, but he told me that he could bring me down to 50sec."

So he joined the now-defunct Centre Of Excellence (COE) of the Singapore Swimming Association, and started training under Simon.

Since the COE shut down in 2008, Yeo has been training under Jin Xiaoli at the APSC and Matthew Brown at the Brothers Swimming Club in Brisbane. He credits both for his success today.

Meanwhile, Yeo's compatriots Amanda Lim and Mylene Ong emerged as the top local performers, with four golds each, at the end of the five-day meet.

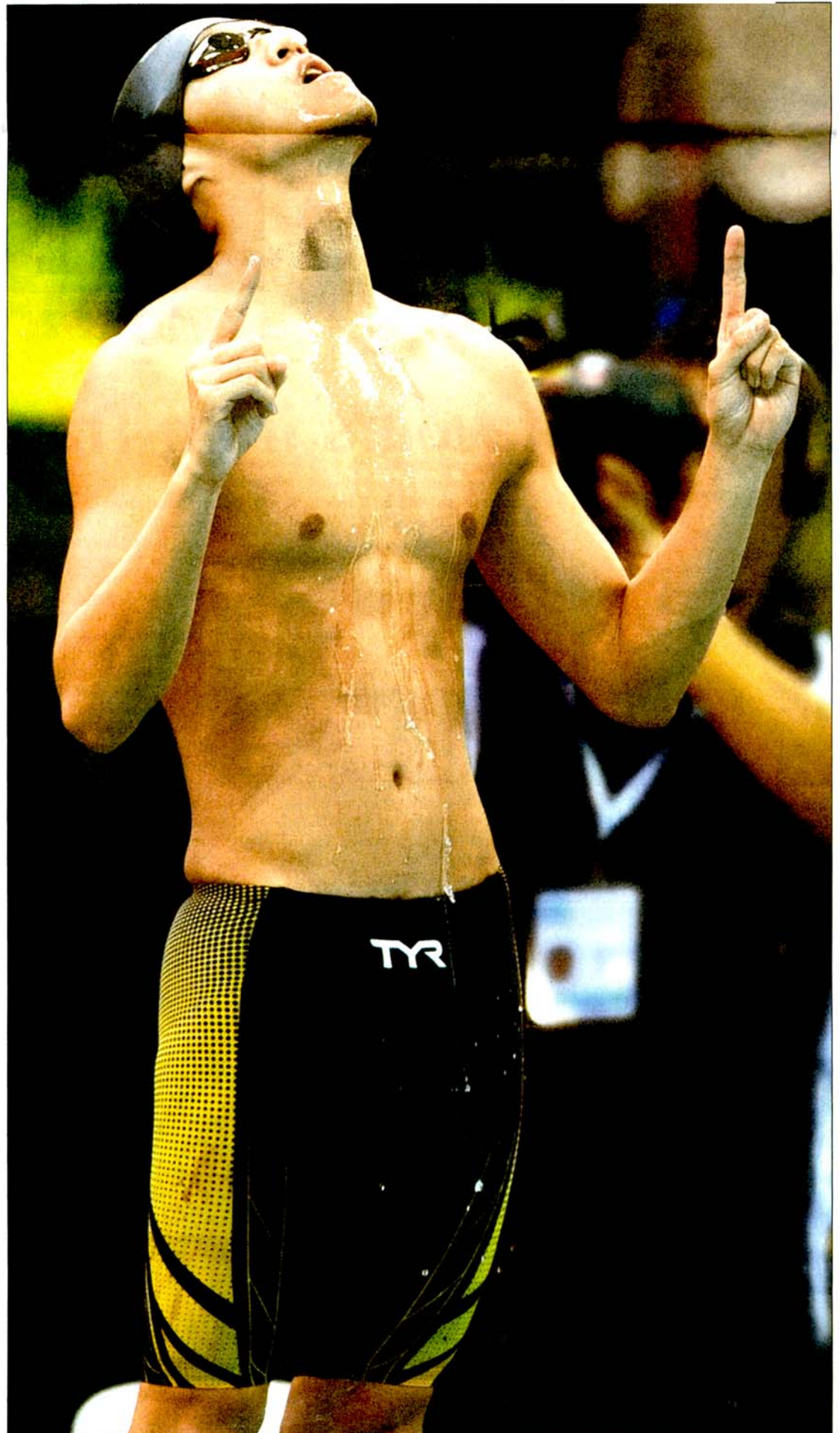
Lim, 18, won her fourth title yesterday when she beat Ong, 20, in the 50m freestyle, clocking a personal best (without the now-banned supersuit) of 25.71sec.

Ong timed 25.86sec for the silver and Thailand's Jenjira Srisa-ard took the bronze with 26.27sec. Both Singaporeans went below the Olympic "B" qualification mark of 26.15sec.

As none of Singapore's swimmers who were competing, including Tao Li and Yeo, met the "A" marks, they will only find out if they have won their place in London when Fina allocates the leftover slots to the "B" timers.

At the end of the four-sport competition yesterday, Singapore cemented their reputation as a regional powerhouse after topping the swimming competition with 16 golds. Indonesia were second, with nine, and Malaysia came in third, with eight.

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Singapore's Danny Yeo pointing to the heavens at the start of his 200m freestyle race in the South-east Asian Swimming Championships at the Singapore Sports School yesterday. The silent tribute to his late father has accompanied all of his races in the last five years. He won gold to retain his title as the region's fastest 200m freestyle swimmer. ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI