

SWIMMERS WANT VOTING RIGHTS AT SSA ELECTIONS

They feel the move will ensure their opinions carry weight with officials

By CHUA SIANG YEE

AS captain of the Singapore swim team which delivered 30 medals at last year's SEA Games, Russell Ong served as a conduit between athletes and management.

While the curtain has since fallen on the Myanmar Games, Ong has not forgotten his duty to his fellow swimmers.

In an unprecedented move, the 25-year-old has stepped forward to lobby for national aquatic athletes to be given a chance to vote at the Singapore Swimming Association (SSA) elections on June 13 for the very first time.

"I feel that we should have a voice in swimming matters, and I have written to Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong and the SSA about this," he told The Straits Times yesterday.

"It's only fair because we are directly affected by policies passed down by the management.

"Athletes have been through the system and can offer fresh perspectives from the ground.

"I believe our opinions would matter if we are given voting rights."

At present, voting power resides in ordinary members – swimming clubs with at least 30

paying members – of the SSA.

Said SSA secretary-general Lee Kok Choy: "Russell has raised a point with merit. The current constitution does not allow national athletes to vote but we definitely want to meet with him, chat about it and see if there are alternative solutions to allow athletes to have a vote."

Ong, a freestyle specialist, decided to speak up as several SSA policies had raised the ire of swimmers and their parents.

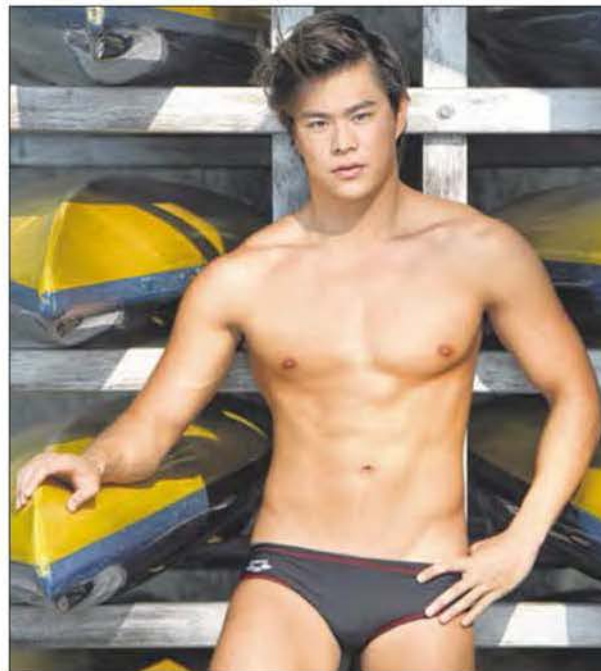
An example was a regulation at 45th Singapore National Age Group championships in March, which stated that swimmers aged between eight and 10 must take part in the 200m freestyle in order to participate in the 50m or 100m free.

They also had to compete in the 200m individual medley if they want to swim in the 50m or 100m events of other strokes.

Ong, a final-year student at Singapore Management University, said some parents had shared their frustration with him.

Training for long-distance events is more time-consuming while some prefer to specialise in sprints.

Parents also find it unreasonable to force their children to swim in events they do not want to.



Russell Ong, captain of the national swim team in the 2013 SEA Games, says he has heard from parents unhappy with SSA policies. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

Said Ong: "I understand the SSA has good intentions but losing the support of parents would hurt the swimming community in the long run."

Competition guidelines aside, some swimmers have also voiced concern about the selection poli-

cies for major games.

For instance, there was confusion over last June's Singapore National Swimming Championships, and whether it was the final qualifying meet for the 2013 SEA Games.

Ex-national swimmer Gerald

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PROVIDE ANOTHER ANGLE

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Koh agrees it will be beneficial to engage swimmers, whether they get voting rights or not.

Said Koh, who represented Singapore at the 1996 Olympics: "It's very important swimmers participate in key decision-making. They also get flak if they don't do well.

"If one person can consolidate the overall views for the team, grievances will definitely be minimised."

Lee, who will run for SSA president at the elections, said: "The policies are implemented with some degree of discussion among the high-performance team.

"There are different schools of thought but we believe this is the right way to do it."

The ex-national swimmer added: "We've always tried to meet the needs of our stakeholders.

"We are open to change and to come up with a solution that is good for Singapore swimming."

Ong, who won a silver at last December's SEA Games, said he did not have an axe to grind with the association.

"I want to stress that I am not a disgruntled athlete. All the above are just examples which I feel an athlete's voice would have helped," he added.

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