

The 36-sport countdown continues with diving and taekwondo

TAKING THE CHALLENGE ON BOARD

A new direction for experienced diver Myra Lee pivotal for team prospects

By CHARLES ONG

INITIALLY, she had laughed it off as a joke. But Singapore diver Myra Lee realised her coach was dead serious about her competing in the 10m synchronised platform at next month's SEA Games.

Coach Xu Jie believed that Lee's experience in the 10m platform, coupled with having the ability to match 17-year-old Freida Lim's dives, meant that she would be a perfect fit for the discipline.

The news surprised Lee. After all, four years had elapsed since the 21-year-old made the decision to stop training from that height.

Then, she had aggravated a back injury during the 10m preliminaries at the 2010 Youth Olympic Games in Singapore.

"I didn't like coming to training every day feeling scared ... and it was the reason why I dropped it," said the second-year Singapore Management University social science student.

Still, when coach Xu made the proposal in October, Lee spent two weeks mulling over the prospect of re-learning her 10m routines from scratch.

A church friend also gave Lee a gentle nudge, urging her to get out of her comfort zone, and she decided to give it another shot.

Of her first foray back on top of the dive tower, she said: "I stood there looking down and wasn't too sure about this.

"But I said to myself, 'You have to overcome your fears.' The inward and reverse routines - I told myself that I will do as many as I can. The fear will gradually lessen."

13 DAYS TO GO



Fast forward to the present, and Lee is preparing to launch her bid for another SEA Games medal with her new partner.

Her former partner, Fong Kay Yian, 18, will also tackle the 3m synchronised springboard with a new face - Ashlee Tan, 15.

Lee and Fong clinched the SEA Games bronze in the event two years ago, but their Myanmar experience will come in handy as they will be able to guide Games debutants Freida and Ashlee.

"Ashlee usually feels upset if she encounters problems with her dives," said Fong. "But I try to tell her to focus on the coach's instructions and do her best in every training session."



Myra Lee (right) 21, and Fong Kay Yian, 18, won bronze in the 3m synchronised event in the 2013 SEA Games. Next month, Lee will compete in the 3m individual and the 10m synchronised categories. PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

Added Lee: "Though everyone has different coping mechanisms, we try to help them with the pressure."

In order to get a taste of world-class international competition, Singapore's divers competed at Fina Grand Prix meets in Canada and Puerto Rico last month. Although they finished last in all their three synchronised finals, national team manager Damien Ler said the trips were a valuable experience.

"They haven't had the opportunity to compete on this scale in

the past year," he said. "There were key take-aways on coping with competition pressure. Our divers didn't falter much.

"They even came away confident, able to manage the stress in an unfamiliar environment."

The Singapore squad are quietly confident that they will improve on the 2013 SEA Games, when they won two silver and two bronze medals.

Now entering their final preparations, the eight-strong team are clocking almost 40 hours a week at a local training camp.

But they will face stiff competition from overwhelming favourites Malaysia, who won all eight golds in 2013 and will aim to repeat that feat next month.

But Ler remained unfazed, instead choosing to focus on the performance of his charges.

"Malaysia might be hot favourites but our strategy is to do our best and get close enough to their performance," he added.

"Anything can happen and the next-best team must be ready to take advantage."

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Diving

GOLD MEDALS ON OFFER: 8

Malaysia, who swept the golds at the last SEA Games, will be looking to repeat their feat. Still, Singapore are hoping to pull off shock upsets as they seek their first title since 1973.

WATCH OUT FOR

Pandelela Rinong

A 2012 London Olympics bronze medallist, the Malaysian, 22, will be the star of the show as she is aiming for her sixth gold. She will likely be reunited with fellow 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth Games bronze medallist, Nur Dhabitah Sabri, for the synchronised 10m platform.

Mark and Timothy Lee

The Singaporean twins will be looking to improve on their silver medal in the 3m synchronised springboard in 2013.

TEAM SINGAPORE

Men

- Timothy Lee (3m springboard, 3m synchronised springboard)
- Mark Lee (3m springboard, 3m synchronised springboard)
- Jonathan Chan (10m platform)

Women

- Fong Kay Yian (3m springboard, 3m synchronised springboard)
- Myra Lee (3m springboard, 10m synchronised platform)
- Freida Lim (10m platform, 10m synchronised platform)
- Kimberly Chan (10m platform)
- Ashlee Tan (3m synchronised springboard)