



From left, Team Singapore's torch bearers Aloysious Gan (boccia), Tay Wei Ming (badminton) and swimmer Yip Pin Xiu lighting the cauldron to mark the start of the 8th ASEAN Para Games at the Singapore Indoor Stadium last night. PHOTO: WEE TECK HIAN

START OF MOVEMENT FOR MORE INCLUSIVE S'PORE: GRACE FU

Grit, determination take spotlight as Para Games kick off

Dazzling opening show gives S\$75 million APG inspiring start

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SINGAPORE – Air rifle gripped fiercely by her side, quadruple-amputee Aishah Samad stood tall in the spot-

light, game face on as she basked in the rapt attention of some 6,000 spectators at the Singapore Indoor Stadium.

The stage was hers, just as the ASEAN Para Games (APG) will be for the 154-strong Team Singapore

contingent, and some 1,000 athletes from the region's nine other countries.

And as the 8th APG, held here for the first time, kicked off last night with a dazzling opening show of art, acrobatics, dance and sport, Aishah's motto "I want, I can, I will succeed" will resonate strongly with a nation just entering the final month of SG50 celebrations.

Often relegated to the sideshow of the SEA Games and its non-disabled counterparts, the APG have traditionally not dominated the spotlight, but this time it will.

Over the past few months, APG organisers have painted the town red in their efforts to drum up publicity and interest in the Games and its athletes. Swimmer Yip Pin Xiu, shuttler Tay Wei Ming and shooter Aishah are

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now well-recognised faces of para sports, alongside a Team Singapore contingent that have been sprinting, shooting and swimming hard over the past year in preparation for the biggest competition of their careers. And the message they — and the Government, which will spend S\$75 million staging the APG — hope to convey is: We are all a part of Singapore society.

Singaporeans of all ages have embraced the Games, with families turning out at the APG Carnival at the OCBC Square to try out the activities, while a crowd of 1,730 turned out at the National Stadium yesterday morning to witness Singapore's 1-0 triumph over Indonesia in cerebral palsy football.

And over the next six days, Singaporeans will be able to catch some of the region's best para athletes in action across 15 sports. Team Singapore's elite athletes will also be on their gold-medal mission, as they make their bid to better their best-ever haul of 16 gold, 10 silver and 11 bronze medals from the 2001 APG.

For many of the athletes, the Games here — rated by athletes and officials as the best in its 14-year history — are already an unforgettable experience. "I knew from the start that it would be a big thing, but I never expected it to be so huge," said Yip, Singapore's sole Paralympic gold medallist. "With this one big event, it will show Singaporeans the human spirit of the Games, as well as the competitive side. To me, it is a lot of progress, and it is a whole new level Singapore is taking towards para sports."

Shuttler Tay will compete in his



fourth APG. "I think Team Singapore will do very well," he added. "Firstly, it's because our morale is very high, as well as given that the support of the general public will boost our confidence and give us more motivation when competing."

Added Grace Fu, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, in her speech yesterday: "We celebrate all abilities, we celebrate the indomitable spirit of our para athletes, we celebrate the extraordinary in each and every one of us. The ASEAN Para Games is not just a sporting competition, it is a milestone for every Sin-

The opening ceremony of the 8th ASEAN Para Games yesterday. Wheelchair dancers, deaf performers, people with autism and children from special schools shared the stage with non-disabled performers.

PHOTO: WEE TECK HIAN

gaporean, as we mark the start of a movement to build a more inclusive society through sport."

And after months of preparation and anticipation, Games participants and spectators alike were certainly ready to party last night, soaking in an opening show put together by 661 performers, 454 students, 174 volunteers and 120 motivators. Wheelchair dancers, deaf performers, people with autism and children from special schools shared the stage with non-disabled performers, weaving an entertaining tale of inclusiveness through sports and the arts set to a kaleidoscope of

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SINGAPOREAN SWIMMER,
PARALYMPIC GOLD MEDALLIST

video montages, pyrotechnics and laser lights.

But there was no doubt the APG athletes were the highlight of the show, with spectators greeting each contingent in the athlete parade with loud cheers and applause. Led by flag-bearer Yip, Team Singapore's athletes were clearly delighted to be in the spotlight, waving their flags as the audience, which included Singapore President Tony Tan, saved their loudest whoops and whistles for their countrymen.

And they would have been moved by the sight of Aishah in the torch relay, holding the torch aloft with her bionic arms as she walked down the ramp, joining fellow Singaporeans such as Kalai Vanen (powerlifting), swimmer Toh Wei Soong and Yip in the torch relay. After some 80 minutes of entertainment and formalities, it was left to Yip, Tay and nine-year-old boccia player Aloysius Gan to kick off the APG with the lighting of the Games cauldron.

Having overcome the initial fear of the flames setting her hair on fire, Yip is ready to get cracking in the pool. "The sense of pride I get from winning a gold medal and the pride I get from representing my country here is different," she said. "It is an achievement for the whole country, and I am very proud to be part of this. This is something the country is doing and I am so proud to call myself a Singaporean." **ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY ADELENE WONG**