

[STANDARD CHARTERED MARATHON]

Many sacrifices but he gains self-belief

New marathon champ aims to don national colours – a challenging but achievable target

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Running has given Ashley Liew many things – among them, the right to be called champion.

It has also given the 25-year-old, the top local runner at last Sunday's Standard Chartered Marathon Singapore, a leaner 58kg, 1.77m frame. He once tipped the scales at 80kg and was teased with less-than-flattering nicknames.

But there have also been plenty of sacrifices that come with training at the elite level.

Running was one of the reasons behind the split from his girlfriend of four years earlier this year – although they remain friends.

A strict training regime – 13 training sessions a week, starting as early as 4.15am and sometimes ending past midnight, clocking more than 100km in mileage weekly – means almost no time for himself or friends.

"I find myself rushing to do things, so I can rush to rest. Every minute counts, especially during the intense race season," said Liew, who recently graduated from the Singapore Management University in social sciences and finance.

"There's the training and I've got to study, attend classes, do projects. So I cut out what can be cut out."

Meals were taken alone so no time was wasted chit-chatting. Outings with his few close friends were admittedly rare.

But the pain of sacrifice pales in comparison to the triumph at the finish line – even more so considering how Liew has chased the SCMS title for years.

He was undone by two failed attempts at the 2010 and 2011 editions, first finishing runner-up, then a disappointing seventh last year.

Said Liew, who will leave for the United States in three weeks to pursue further studies in chiropractic: "It was like a demon that I just had to destroy."

"The Singapore Marathon is the most important local race. You can race well overseas and get a good time, but if you can't win in Singa-



PHOTOS: SEAH KWANG PENG, SINGAPORE SPORTS COUNCIL, STELLA LEE
 After being the perennial bridesmaid in several top local running events, Ashley Liew, 25, finally found his breakthrough at the SCMS last weekend, finishing top among Singapore men. While his winning time of 2:45:06 is about 10 minutes off his personal best, he believes he can go under 2hr 30min to stand a chance of making the SEA Games team for Myanmar next December.

pore, does that make you No. 1?"

Yet, Liew never saw himself as a serious athlete before meeting his coach M. Rameshon, holder of the national mark for the marathon (2hr 24min 22sec).

He said: "I ran 4hr 29min for my first marathon in 2004, which I felt was fantastic. Then I did a 3:24 at the 2008 SCMS. I thought I was king of the world. Making five to 10-minute improvements then was good enough for me."

What his coach saw, however, was a diamond in the rough.

Said Rameshon: "He had a naturally good running style and I saw there was potential in him to be a very good runner."

"He just needed a bit of refinement to improve further."

Now, Liew even harbours a dream of donning national colours at the SEA Games. But he needs a breakthrough – to go sub-2:30 – in

order to earn that ticket to Myanmar a year from now.

Liew, who clocked 2:45:06 in winning last Sunday's race, admits it will be a steep climb, but not an impossible one. His personal best is 2:35:00.

He said: "It's tough, but it's not impossible. People always say improvement is going to be minimal once you run a marathon in less than three hours – one, two minutes at best."

"Conventional wisdom tells you that, and I don't like to listen to that. I don't like to be bound by what the norm is, because there is no norm."

He rattles off a laundry list of numbers and timings – the world record, the national record, the time he wants to hit in the near future.

They serve as targets, like route markers along the 42.195km he is so used to doing.

"I like the idea that the Kenyans can run below 2:10. It just shows that it's humanly possible. It's a lot about the mental capacity – what you think you can do, and what you actually can do."

Among the things Liew has gained through running, self-belief might just be the biggest gift of them all.

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