

Luis Cunha
guiding runner
Shanti Pereira
through a
recovery session
at the Home of
Athletics in
Kallang. The pair
have been
training together
since January.
ST PHOTO:
JOEL CHAN



SHANTI ON TRACK WITH NEW COACH

Sprinter trains and eats differently in Cunha team-up, hopeful of Tokyo Games wild card

Nicole Chia

These are strange times for Shanti Pereira. Singapore's fastest woman is getting used to the idea of being slow – not because her form is deteriorating, but that much around her has changed.

She is training with male athletes for the first time and, for the first time in nine years, is guided by a different coach. Pereira, 23, has been working with Luis Cunha since Janu-

ary, after the resignation of long-time mentor Margaret Oh during the year-end 2019 SEA Games in the Philippines. Oh had coached her since she was 14.

Pereira, holder of the 100m and 200m national records, told The Straits Times she was prepared for "everything to be different" – from the warm-up exercises to the training drills, when she joined Cunha, the former national sprints, relays and hurdles coach.

While she used to train regularly

with two other female athletes, her group now comprises only males, including sprinters Timothee Yap and Tan Zong Yang, as well as hurdler Ow Yeong Wei Bin.

She said: "I've been training with girls my whole life and now I'm just always at the back and I'll be trying to keep up and be as close as I can."

Cunha interjected: "She went from one situation where she was the fastest to one where she is the slowest."

The 55-year-old Portuguese was Pereira's first choice for a new coach, feeling he could improve her performance by honing her techniques and fine-tuning her recovery methods.

There have been no major changes, but Pereira now pays more attention to what she does off the track and what she eats.

While grocery shopping during a recent training camp in Australia, for example, Cunha noted Pereira's choice of breakfast cereal "was not the best choice as an athlete".

"They were things with a lot of simple sugar, and then I advised her to compare that to one with less sugar and choose the latter option," said Cunha, who previously coached now-retired hurdler Dipna Lim-Prasad.

Pereira added: "It's just being more aware of what I do before I sleep and the quality of sleep, as

well as what I do during the day before training to make sure I recover properly. Sometimes it means doing an extra recovery workout to arrive at a hard session fresh."

Both coach and athlete stressed they are still in the adaptation phase of the partnership, and that they are not expecting "too much too soon".

For Pereira, who memorably won the 200m at the 2015 SEA Games for Singapore's first sprint gold in 42 years and clinched bronzes in the 100m and 200m at the last two editions, the focus this year is assimilation with Cunha's approach.

The Singapore Management University undergraduate said: "This is with the hope of achieving a personal best for both my events. I genuinely feel I'm on the right track."

Her personal bests are 11.58sec for 100m and 23.60sec for 200m. While her times are not within the Olympic qualifying marks of 11.15sec and 22.80sec, she is hopeful for a wildcard entry to the July 24-Aug 9 Tokyo Games.

Cunha added: "I'm still getting to know her and understanding how she adapts to certain new things, or even old things. She had a very good season last year, breaking the 100m national record, so the challenge is to continue to improve."

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ON THE UP

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SHANTI PEREIRA, on her season's goals.

LESS IS MORE

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LUIS CUNHA, Pereira's new coach, on his athlete's dietary choices.