

THE STRAITS TIMES ATHLETE OF THE YEAR



PRESENTED BY 100 PLUS



Cecilia Low (left) and Kimberly Lim are hoping to win a medal at September's Hangzhou Asian Games but have not decided whether to compete at the 2024 Paris Olympics, where equipment changes will be in force. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

PIECES FALL INTO PLACE

Kimberly Kwek

It took Kimberly Lim and Cecilia Low less than seven days to become Singapore's first sailors to qualify for the medal race at the Olympics last year, but their first steps to making history in Tokyo began seven years ago.

They joined forces in 2015, with the goal of qualifying for the 2016 Rio Games. But they faced a steep learning curve as they struggled to master a new boat – the 49erFX class was new to them – and figure out a campaign strategy.

In the end, it was Griselda Khng and Sara Tan, who eventually represented Singapore in Brazil.

Lim, 25, said: "When we first started the class, we didn't have enough help. We struggled a lot, we got injured a lot, we were not campaigning the right way."

Things improved in 2017 when they began training with Fernando Kuo, who had worked with Portugal's men's 49er sailors for the London and Rio Games.

With his knowledge and experience, Lim and Low began learning more about how to handle the boat and plan their quest to qualify for the Tokyo Games.

It required them to sacrifice time with their family and friends. It was not unusual for the Portugal-based duo to return to Singapore for a collective two months a year.

There was progress though. They won gold at the 2018 Asian Games, and a year later, they secured a spot at Tokyo 2020 by finishing 15th at the world championships in New Zealand.

But by the end of 2019, the pair were exhausted and close to being burnt out.

A year's delay of the Olympics due to the pandemic was a blessing in disguise as it gave them a much-needed break.

Returning to Singapore from Portugal just before the circuit breaker kicked in, they continued to train.

Low, 30, said: "We worked on the small stuff that we really needed to. We kept saying that we needed to work on communication more, but we never had the opportunity to slow down and say what do we actually need to work on. It was small stuff like let's use this word because this word isn't working."

The support of their team, including physiotherapist, psychologist, coach and manager, was also vital.

Lim said: "When we look back at the Olympics, it was a special one because, in the end, things fell into place. We sailed really good races, we had a race win which was also very special."

"Ultimately, it was a feeling of all your pieces coming together, that kind of feeling after seven years of looking towards a goal and finally

being on that stage performing and achieving something we'd always wanted to do."

Their achievements have earned them a nomination for The Straits Times Athlete of the Year Award, which is backed by 100 Plus.

Portuguese Kuo, 33, was proud of their accomplishments, particularly finishing 10th overall as Olympic debutantes.

He said: "You have to be very focused the moment you enter the Olympic Village. It's high intensity in terms of mindset management – you really need to know how you control your environment in order to perform the best you can."

After the seven-year voyage, Lim and Low are unsure what lies ahead. They hope to win a medal at September's Hangzhou Asian Games while juggling their studies at the Singapore Management University and Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University Asia respectively.

But there is uncertainty about Paris 2024, which will feature equipment changes, and both want to test out the updates before committing to another campaign.

Low said: "We are grateful that everyone's giving us time and space to make the call. In the end, if we want to do another campaign, we want to be better. We always want to be better."

kimkwek@sph.com.sg

The Straits Times honours outstanding Singaporeans who have been nominated for the 2021 ST Athlete of the Year award. They defied the odds, injuries and the pandemic to chase their sporting dreams, setting new standards of excellence for others to follow. Sailors Kimberly Lim and Cecilia Low are our third nominees.

DREAM COME TRUE

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KIMBERLY LIM, 49erFX sailor, on partnering Cecilia Low to win 10th place at the Tokyo Olympics last year.