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Seven years.

Of pressure, of pain, of doubt. Of trying harder, of getting faster, of growing wiser.

There are now brown streaks in her hair, seven tattoos inked on her skin, and three goals on her mind.

Give everything. Enjoy yourself. Send a message.

And as she prepared herself for the women's 200m final at the 31st SEA Games in Hanoi, sprinter Shanti Pereira would repeat a mantra. Over and over and over again.

"No matter what happens, you'll be good."



SELF-DOUBT

To understand what the race felt like to Pereira, one has to go back to the 2015 Games in Singapore.

At the meet, she would win gold in the 200m, clock a personal best and set a new national record. The win also ended a 42-year gold medal drought for Singapore in a Games sprint event.

A new sprint queen had arrived.

"I was just excited to be there, competing in front of a home crowd," recalled Pereira, who also clinched a bronze in the 100m.

But with the weight of winning came the enormity of expectations.

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"It created a lot of pressure and I feel like I didn't have the experience to cope with it yet," she explained.

The next edition of the Games would end in tears for Pereira, as she finished with a pair of bronzes in the 100m and 200m.

Then came two injuries in 2018, before she would finish with two bronzes again at the 2019 Games.

"Physically for the longest time, I was there. I (felt I) could do a PB (personal best), NR (national record) and all that but mentally I wasn't there," she said.

"There was a lot of self-doubt that kind of grew as the years went by. Just because it was like - again another season I couldn't get a PB, and it just continued and continued and continued."



And some people began to write her off, said Pereira.

"Slowly, people just kind of lost faith in me. People have their opinions about my journey, and whatnot. I think, for a while there, I really did let it get to me, which is not ideal. I want to be in a state mentally strong and things like that don't affect me, but for a while it really did."

The negativity ate her up, added Pereira. It got to the point that there were times when she was no longer excited to compete or even train.

Instead, what she felt was fear.

"I couldn't find any motivation," she recalled. "Coming to training, I was just always afraid of doing bad times at training and just not doing well at training."

FEEDING OFF A DIFFERENT ENERGY

Sandwiched among the lows were highs too.

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Pereira clocked a new 100m PB of 11.58 seconds at the 2019 Asian Athletic Championships, and also made her Olympic debut in Tokyo where she ran a season's best time in the heats.

But even with the Olympics, 2021 was a "rough" year, revealed Pereira.

Off the track, she decided to pursue a career unrelated to her Singapore Management University accountancy degree. On the track, the results were not "showing up".

"I felt like I suffered a bit of an identity crisis. I started to believe what people said about me, that maybe I've reached my end. And if so, who was I?" she said.

But speaking to the ones close to her helped.

"They've helped me a lot, to realise that I am fine, I am okay. It's really just a change of a mindset that I had to try to do," she said.

In the lead up to this year's Games, Pereira did just that.

"I reached a point where I just told myself that it really doesn't matter what people think of you," she said. "I have people in my corner, and they really believe in me. They have absolute trust in me that I am not at the end of my career. And I think I just fed off that energy more."

She looked inward.

"I can only focus on the things that I can control - which is how I approach the Games, how I approach training, all these things," she said.

"Whatever people are gonna say, they're gonna say. It doesn't matter. What matters is how I do things, making sure that I do whatever I can and give absolutely everything to my races."

And going into this year's Games, there was a sense of calm, recalled Pereira.

"That was ultimately what I wanted. I wanted to just chill. This is my thing, I'm just going to go there and do the best I can."

And this would mean channelling a similar outlook that she had seven years ago.

"That's the kind of mindset I wanted to be in. I wanted to just relax and have fun and just enjoy the fact that I'm here racing," she said.

'I'M STILL HERE, I'VE STILL GOT IT'

Her legs are a whirl, her heart thumping like a drum, her eyes fixed on the finish line.

At the My Dinh Stadium in Hanoi, along the final stretch of the 200m race, Pereira is ahead.

To her left, a Filipino opponent gains on her, but the Singaporean is not letting this one slip away. Not today.

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Personal best. National record. Gold medal.

The 18-year-old with the blue glitter hairband is gone. There's no exuberant waving to the crowd, no gleeful smile of joy.

Instead, the 25-year-old is floored. Exhaustion, disbelief and the sheer magnitude of what she has done overwhelm her.

"I told myself before the finals that no matter what the result is, I'm going to give 100 per cent. Everything I have, physically, mentally, emotionally. Everything," Pereira explained.

Her message - not just to others, but also to herself - rang loud and clear.

"I'm still here, I've still got it," she said. Days later, Pereira would add another medal to her tally, a silver in the 100m.

Even till today, what she achieved at the Games still hasn't fully sunk in. And isn't just about the victory or the timing, but the "breakthrough", she explained.

"I put in a lot of hard work and sacrifice to be able to make that breakthrough," she explained. "This wasn't the first time where I wanted to do that. I wanted to do this for a really long time. The fact that I actually did it is quite amazing to me."

Pereira's coach Luis Cunha said he was confident in Pereira's ability to perform the way she did.

"(With the performance at the SEA Games) she showed herself that she was able to clock the times. But she also knew what I told her (previously) - that she can do it," he said.

"Now she can confirm my thoughts with the performance. I hope that this allows her to go further and continue to improve this season."

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A NEW CHAPTER

Being able to continue with the same mindset remains a work in progress, noted Pereira.

"It's still a process. I learned from what I did at the SEA Games, and I want to continue doing that. But it's still hard."

And she will aim to build on this, with the Commonwealth Games and the World Athletics Championships still to come later this year.

"It took so much out of me to be able to have that mindset, so I just want to learn from it and continue with this mindset," Pereira added.

Pereira has yet to have a discussion with Cunha on her specific goals for these meets. But she already knows, at the very least, she wants to bring down her times.

"I want to go faster (than I did at the SEA Games), for sure. And I feel like I can. That's the goal. Just do whatever I can in the next few months to try and hopefully go faster for both the 100m and 200m."

After Pereira's first Games gold, her older sisters Valerie and Shobi were inspired to write a children's book to tell the story of her journey and triumph.

Entitled "Go Shanti! Go", the book was published in 2020 and aimed to inspire the next generation of sporting heroes.

"After I won the 200m, my sisters told me that a lot of people (who had bought the book previously) picked it up again. They revisited it, so that was nice," said Pereira.

I ask her if there are plans for a sequel to commemorate her victory in Vietnam.

"Everybody asks me that!" she replied. "I don't know, it's up to my sisters, I was just the inspiration (for it)."

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Book or no book, Pereira's exploits have inspired Singapore once again.

On the track in 2022, she has flipped the page and written a new chapter. It is one penned with blood, sweat and tears, and is no less spellbinding.

Source: CNA/mt(ac)