

Lunch with Sumiko

Making peace with herself

She won her first race in Primary 3. Today, Shanti Pereira is South-east Asia's sprint queen. She tells executive editor Sumiko Tan how she has learnt to live with the pressure of having to triumph.



National sprinter Shanti Pereira says that "both personally and as an athlete, you're always trying to be better. It tests you in so many different ways, not just physically but mentally as well". The 26-year-old has "finally found joy" in what she is doing and embraces every opportunity that comes her way. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI



TAKING CHARGE

You can't control what your competitors are doing. You can't control what people are saying about you. But what I can control is what I do with myself.



NATIONAL SPRINTER SHANTI PEREIRA

She also chose to focus on people who matter to her and form her support system. Her family, she adds, has always kept her grounded. Finally, she learnt to accept the athletic journey for what it is – that there will be days she wins, and days she does not. "I used to beat myself up about it. But now, I'm like, yeah, you win some, you lose some. Of course, it's not the best feeling in the world when you lose, but it's just again part of the process. Sometimes it just doesn't go your way. So you figure out what happened, and move on to the next thing." She seems to have settled at a good place and in fact says she has "finally found joy" in what she is doing and embracing every opportunity that comes her way.

Shanti Pereira likes desserts, but she is not having any today. It is two weeks to her next competition in Bangkok, and South-east Asia's fastest woman is in training mode. She is done with her chicken stew – she has eaten only half of it – and would like another latte to round off the meal. But no dessert. I have a sugar craving, though, and am drawn to the "Best Pavlova Ever" on the menu. I go ahead and order it.

The pavlova arrives and it looks delicious. Berries, whipped cream and a generous scoop of vanilla ice cream are piled on top of chunks of sweet meringue.

By now, we have moved on to the video segment of the interview. The table would look nicer if Pereira is also having dessert. I proceed to heap some pavlova onto a plate for her. "I don't want to kill your diet or anything," I tell Singapore's most famous athlete.

"No, lah, it's okay," she says with a laugh. "Just put it there."

She does not touch any of it. Pereira, who turns 27 in September, made the news as a 13-year-old student at the Singapore Sports School as a sprinting talent to watch.

At 17, she joined the national team, and the last decade has seen her experiencing both highs and lows in her athletic career where she specialises in the 100m and 200m sprints.

After a peak at the 2015 SEA Games held in Singapore, her performance dipped, and she faced taunts that her best days were over.

But the last 18 months have been good to her.

In 2022 and early 2023, she had some national record-breaking races. Then in May 2023, she won the 100m and 200m gold at the SEA Games in Cambodia, becoming the first Singaporean female sprinter to complete the coveted double.

In the same month, she broke her own national record for the 100m with a time of 12.26 seconds at a meet in Germany where she came in second.

She followed that by winning the 200m at a meet in Switzerland in June, beating seven European competitors. She clocked 22.84 seconds, just below her personal best and national record of 22.69 seconds set at the SEA Games in May.

She is clearly on a roll, and it shows in her self-assured manner during our lunch at Neptune, a cafe in East Coast Road that she frequents.

At 1.65m tall, she weighs 57kg, the lightest she has been for some time. She looks lithe and toned in a fuchsia cropped vest top from H&M, flowy white trousers from Good Addition and grey Birkenstocks.

Her shoulders and upper arms are enviably sculpted. "You have very good shoulders," I compliment her.

She laughs and says she works on her shoulders a fair bit. "We swing our arms a lot and all of it is driven from here," she explains, tapping her shoulders.

She shares that her elbows tend to jut out when she runs, making her shoulders tight. "We are trying to work on mobilising them a bit more."

She has been giving interviews since she was 17 and is media-savvy. She answers questions eloquently and strikes effortless poses for the camera.

During lunch, she gazes over my left shoulder into the distance when she speaks, which makes her appear somewhat distant or dreamy. But when I listen to the recording of the interview, she comes across as warm, friendly and down-to-earth.

You seem very calm, I remark at one point.

"Do I?" she giggles at this. "But yeah, a lot of people say that I'm very chill," she adds. "When I give interviews, they'll say, 'Can you sound more excited?' I'm like, 'oh, okay, sorry, this is just how I talk.'"

She is familiar with the menu at Neptune and opts for a summer chicken stew, which is roasted chicken thigh in a potato, carrot and tomato broth. She also gets a matcha latte. I choose the shrimp scampi – tagliatelle with prawns in a garlic butter sauce – and order fried cauliflower to share.

She has been more careful about her diet over the past two years. Her meals tend to feature healthy proteins such as chicken and tuna, as well as pastas and salads. She avoids fast food and local dishes such as Hokkien mee and char kway teow.

Getting her body in tip-top condition is not just about training, but also diet, she says. "Training builds muscles, but at the end of the day, if you want to cut any kind of body fat, it is your food choices and how many calories you consume."

Still, she believes in balance. "I love my Toast Box curry chicken with rice. That's my go-to meal every time I come back from a long trip."

She also loves cai fan (rice with local dishes) from a stall in the



At the Singapore Sports School, Shanti Pereira (in front) broke a number of age-group records in the 100m and 200m events. ST FILE PHOTO

Serangoon Garden Market and Food Centre. The market was, in fact, where she wanted to have lunch, but we told her it would be too noisy for us to film there.

Her boyfriend Tan Zong Yang, a lawyer and national sprinter, lives near the market. "We just had the cai fan yesterday," she says.

IN THE FAMILY

Pereira is the youngest of three girls and one boy. "There's definitely a lot of female energy at home," she reports.

Athletics has always featured in her life. Her parents ran for school, an aunt was a national runner in the 800m, and Pereira's second sister, Valerie, was a national sprinter.

She remembers the family travelling to Thailand to support Valerie at a race meet. "So quite track-centric, my family."

Her father is a consultant in the oil business, and her mother owns a pre-school that her eldest sister runs.

Pereira's talent for running was evident early. At Primary 3 in

Katong Convent, she won a 100m race and was asked to join the track-and-field team. At the Singapore Sports School, she broke a number of age-group records in the 100m and 200m events.

In 2013 when she was 16, she became the first female Singaporean to run the 100m in under 12 seconds when she clocked 11.89 seconds at the World Youth Championships in Athletics in Ukraine.

At the SEA Games that year, she came in fourth in the 100m final. "But it was a great experience," she says.

In 2014, she became the first female Singaporean to run the 200m in under 24 seconds when she clocked 23.99 seconds at the Asian Junior Athletics Championships.

The next year, she claimed the Republic's first sprint gold medal in 42 years when she won the 200m at the SEA Games in Singapore. She also took a bronze for the 100m, Singapore's first medal in the event in 42 years. From that high in 2015 when

she was feted, she hit a plateau. From 2016 to 2018, she was on the Government's Sport Excellence (Spex) Scholarship scheme, where recipients get a monthly stipend and other support. She was dropped when her performance dipped.

That low period coincided with injuries – she had a bad hamstring injury, which took her about six months to recover from properly – having to make some adulting choices, and also the pressure of having to prove herself.

After Sports School, she got a diploma in sports and leisure management from Republic Polytechnic, then went to the Singapore Management University to study accountancy. "It felt like a pretty safe option for me," she says of the subject.

"But I was not cut out for it, and it was not what I wanted to do." She has always been interested in fashion, and after she graduated with a Bachelor of Accounting, she interned with a fashion influencer and was later hired by the influencer as a copywriter and content creator.

She was still doing athletics but would dread going to the track. Last year, she decided that she would make a mindset shift in the way she approached her sport.

"I was going through a lot for the past seven years with just so many things happening – injuries and self-doubt and pressure," she reflects. "I kind of just got fed up and said: 'I don't want to feel like this anymore.'"

She decided to focus on things she could control. "You can't control what your competitors are doing. You can't control what people are saying about you. But what I can control is what I do with myself."

This meant making the right choices in what she ate, when she slept and woke up, and what she did to aid her recovery from training. "Every decision you make at every point of the day contributes to your overall performance," she says.



WHAT WE ATE

Neptune
 237 East Coast Road

1 Shrimp scampi: \$22.70
 1 Summer chicken stew: \$22.10

1 Cauliflower pops: \$14.60
 1 Best Pavlova Ever: \$15
 1 Matcha latte: \$9.20
 1 latte: \$6.80

Total (with tax): \$90.40

SCAN TO WATCH
 Shanti Pereira on overcoming the bad times.
<https://str.sg/shanti09>

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