

SOON, ANG AIMING TO STAR

Swimmer and runner among 17 debutants bound for October's Asian Para Games

Kimberly Kwek and Lin Tianbao

After standout performances at the 2023 Asean Para Games (APG), swimmer Colin Soon and sprinter James Ang are looking to close their seasons on a high at the Asian Para Games in October.

They are among 17 debutants in the 33-member Singapore contingent heading to Hangzhou for the quadrennial competition, which will take place from Oct 22 to 28 after being delayed by a year owing to the pandemic.

At the APG in Cambodia, Ang won silver in the men's T13 200m and 400m and set a national record in the latter in 51.22 seconds, more than a second faster than his previous personal best of 52.9sec.

"It proved to myself that I could really push quite far. I ran another time that was similar to that at World Para Athletics Championships (51.53sec) as well," said the Singapore Management University (SMU) law undergraduate on the sidelines of the Asian Para Games flag presentation ceremony on Saturday.

"With that consistency going and training looking pretty good, I'm just hoping that coming towards these Asian Games, I can hit those timings locally, maybe get some personal bests and then when we get to China, have a really good timing."

It has been quite the journey for Ang, who has Stargardt's macular dystrophy, a genetic condition that causes progressive vision loss.

The 22-year-old discovered he had the condition when he was nine when he was unable to see the whiteboard in class.

But that did not stop him from



The 33-strong Singapore contingent who will be heading to Hangzhou, China, for the quadrennial Asian Para Games from Oct 22 to 28. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

pursuing sports, and he represented Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) in track and field competitions.

His coach first raised the possibility of joining the national para-athletics team, but examinations and the pandemic put things on hold.

He joined the athletics club in SMU and reached out to the Singapore Disability Sports Council.

He obtained the local and international classification for his condition, with the latter done at a World Para Athletics-sanctioned competition in Tunisia in August 2022.

Shortly after, Ang made his APG debut in Solo, Indonesia, where he finished fourth in the T13 400m.

He said: "It's been a very determinative year because when I went for the Cambodia Games, I went in wanting to do my best."

"But I surprised myself with how big a personal best I got and it

made me think about exactly what goals I want to achieve."

Like Ang, Soon has had a fruitful 2023 capped by his four-gold haul in Cambodia – he won a gold and two silvers in the 2022 edition.

He also bettered four national and three Games records, winning the S13 50m and 100m freestyle,

SBI3 50m and 100m breaststroke. He added a silver in the S13 100m backstroke.

The 18-year-old, whose older sister Sophie is a Paralympic swimmer, said: "It was really spectacular, I didn't expect it at all. My performance was stellar and I'm not sure if I can replicate it again, but I hope I can."

His performance drew praise from coach Roland Tan, 59, who has worked with him for five years.

Tan said: "He has been very consistent during training and his hard work has started to pay off."

Pointing to changes in training as a factor for his improvement, Soon explained: "My coach and I are taking a slightly more targeted approach with a bit more focus this year."

"He paces me more, and we've been upping the intensity and volume."

Soon, who was diagnosed with cone rod dystrophy from young – the condition causes vision loss – also prides himself in overcoming setbacks.

He said: "Sometimes my performances in training might wane a little and that throws me off guard. But I've been able to bounce back from these challenges... by reassuring myself that I can be better."

"My goal, as ever, is just to make sure I really perform to the best of my abilities."

At the previous edition in Jakarta in 2018, Singapore won three golds, two silvers and five bronzes.

Singapore National Paralympic Council vice-president and chef de mission Monique Heah was coy on the team's medal targets, noting that "we hope that the athletes will do their best and try very hard".

Soon is hoping to establish himself as one of Singapore's top swimming prospects. Stressing that he and Sophie have a close relationship, he added: "Obviously I want to distinguish myself from my sister... I also want to make a name for myself."

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