

DREAM BIG, SAYS SHANTI

Sprint queen hopes to inspire fraternity as fans welcome her back after Asiad feat

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On Thursday afternoon, a crowd of 70 people gathered at Changi Airport for what was no ordinary arrival.

It was the homecoming of Singapore's Asian Games gold-winning sprinter Shanti Pereira, who made history with an inspiring and dominant 200m victory in Hangzhou.

Clutching notebooks, pens, flowers, garlands, posters and their mobile phones, the supporters were all eager for a photo, a selfie or an autograph from the golden girl, the history-maker.

For those who were not in the know, like the travellers who came through Changi Airport's T1 arrival hall, they were taken aback by the sizeable media crew and crowd that had gathered.

Some were heard asking who the wait was for, to be told "the Asian Games gold medallist is arriving".

And then she stepped into the arrival hall with a big smile to cheers and applause from fans, family, friends and officials.

The champion was back. The newly crowned Asian sprint queen, who ended Singapore's 49-year wait for an Asiad athletics gold medal on Monday, when she won the women's 200m gold.

She also won the silver in the 100m.

For her exploits, the 27-year-old will pocket \$300,000 from the Singapore National Olympic Council's Major Games Award Programme, though 20 per cent of it will go to Singapore Athletics for training and development.

Pereira was swarmed by fans and she obliged their requests, signing autographs and posing for photos.

Speaking to the media with her gold and silver medals around her neck, she said: "It's really nice to see everyone really excited and a



Shanti Pereira, with her coach Luis Cunha (near left), being welcomed by her boyfriend Tan Zong Yang at Changi Airport on Thursday. Pereira will be leaving for South Korea on Friday for a holiday after her historic achievement at the Asian Games in Hangzhou. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

lot of my family members are here as well. It's a nice, warm welcome back home."

Pereira, who will be leaving for South Korea on Friday for a holiday, added: "I am excited for that, to rest and reflect on what a great year it has been and not just the great moments but the learning points."

"There were a lot of races that didn't pan out the way I wanted it to, so just a lot of reflection and enjoying this moment."

Student Tan Hao Ren, 15, was among the supporters at the airport.

He said: "I feel a sense of pride

whenever I see a Singaporean doing what they love."

"Seeing the number of people here shows how united Singaporeans are and how we all come together to celebrate each other's achievements."

"It's nice to be here to welcome her back."

Full-time national serviceman Roy Tng, 19, added: "She is the symbol of what the Singapore spirit means..."

"She also inspires a lot of young girls who want to be athletes and take Singapore sports to a higher level on an international stage."

The hope, for the athletics fratern-

ity, is for Pereira's achievement to leave a lasting impact.

And it is why Singapore Athletics president Lien Choong Luen is hoping that come 2029 at the home SEA Games, new heroes will emerge in the hunt for the next Shanti Pereira.

Lien said: "Shanti and her coach Luis (Cunha) put in months of hard work, competing overseas and clocking many hours just to shave fractions of a second."

"This is the hard graft that all our athletes and coaches put themselves through..."

"I hope these performances will encourage young athletes watch-

ing at home to similarly commit themselves to aiming for excellence."

"2029 is just six years away, and I am making an open call to every young girl and boy that loves to run, jump, throw to join us."

"And for parents to support their athletic dream to go as far as they can - perhaps one day to an Asian Games medal or more."

Echoing his call, Pereira added: "I really hope my story can somehow inspire not just track and field athletes but people from every sport who are thinking of pursuing it a bit more seriously than they are now."

"For me, I found something that I love to do..."

"I just worked hard at it, pushed for it and I didn't give up because this is what I wanted to do."

"If anyone else is feeling the same way as me, I say go for it, don't be afraid to dream big."

"It does not have to be a scary thing, but you have to put in hard work and sacrifice a lot of things to reach the goal."

With her goal of an Asiad gold attained, Pereira will continue to dream big for herself, and for Singapore.

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