

FROM NETBALLER TO LIONESS

Mattar Sailors striker receives first call-up to national side after switching sports in 2022

Kimberly Kwek

Newly minted national footballer Raeka Ee has never been one to shy away from a challenge.

Ee, who is 1.58m tall, did not let her diminutive frame stop her from pursuing netball, which she picked up as a Primary 3 pupil.

Instead, she worked on other aspects of her game, such as speed and agility, earning her call-ups to the national Under-14 and U-17 teams in 2017 and 2018 respectively.

That determination is now translating on to the field as Ee, who began playing football competitively in September 2022, received her first call-up to the Lionesses squad for their friendlies against Bangladesh on Dec 1 and 4.

Ee said: "When I first started playing football competitively last year, my goal was just to have fun and see how far I could go in the sport. I did not have a specific goal to make the national team."

She is among seven uncapped players who were called up to the 130th-ranked Lionesses' 21-player

squad that will face world No. 142 Bangladesh in Dhaka.

The 20-year-old was introduced to football by her father and grandfather at a young age and used to have kickabouts at the void deck with her cousin.

While she wanted to play the sport in primary school, she never got the chance as it was not offered as a co-curricular activity.

So when the opportunity came when she enrolled in the Singapore Management University (SMU) in September 2022, she jumped at it. A few months later, she joined Mattar Sailors, who play in the second-tier Women's National League (WNL).

The transition to football has not been too challenging for the SMU

law undergraduate, who is also a recipient of the Singapore Police Force scholarship offered by the Public Service Commission.

The forward said: "Switching sports was relatively smooth because playing netball helped to build up my physical fitness to apply in football. I also watch a lot of football so that helped me in knowing the rules and understanding game plays."

"The biggest challenge the past year was developing my technical skills on the ball and my confidence since netball is played with the hands while football is played with the feet."

Lionesses coach Karim Bencherifa said Ee's work ethic caught his eye when he was watching WNL

games.

The Moroccan said: "She always impressed me with her will, even when her team didn't have the ball. She has a good spirit, she works hard, she has speed and she scores goals."

"Even in training, she's willing to learn. She's young. She still has to learn many things but from what I've seen, I'm very happy with her."

While he has called up some new players, there will be familiar faces returning to the squad, including Borussia Dortmund forward Danielle Tan, who has bagged nine goals in 11 appearances for the German club.

For Bencherifa, expanding the pool of players available for the national team is a priority as he noted

that some players may not always be available due to injuries or personal commitments.

The Lionesses' main assignment in 2024 will be the Asean Football Federation (AFF) Women's Championship, but Bencherifa is looking to build a squad for the future, citing competitions such as the next few SEA Games, including the 2029 edition which will be held in Singapore.

But first, he hopes to secure two wins in Bangladesh. He said: "We're developing players. We have to look at them but we want to come back with two wins. That's my aim. We want to end the year on a high."

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FULL OF POTENTIAL

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KARIM BENCHERIFA, Lionesses coach, on newcomer Raeka Ee.

Raeka Ee (far left) is one of seven uncapped players in the Lionesses squad that will face Bangladesh on Dec 1 and 4. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE