

IT'S PEREIRA'S CROWNING GLORY

Sprint queen's 'crazy' season rewarded with The Straits Times Athlete of the Year 2023

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When Shanti Pereira and her coach Luis Cunha sat down in January 2023 to plan for the busy season ahead, little did they expect to rejig their programme just months later. As the records tumbled for the national sprinter, the duo were forced to reassess their plans.

Their initial focus was on Asian meets, but they redirected their sights to Europe as they plotted the journey to the world championships.

Pereira's quick feet proved to be a happy problem. She had arguably Singapore athletics' greatest individual year, culminating in October, when she won the nation's first athletics gold medal at the Asian Games since 1974.

Her achievements have led to her being crowned The Straits Times Athlete of the Year 2023. This is the first time that Pereira has won the annual award that started in 2009 and is backed by 100Plus.

She edged out fellow nominees Yip Pin Xiu (swimming), kitefoiler Maximilian Maeder, bowler Cherie Tan, English billiards player Peter Gilchrist and wushu exponent Jowen Lim to claim the prize.

Fashionably dressed in a black vest and white pants, Pereira was presented the award by Jaime Ho, editor of ST and Celine Tan, director of regional marketing (beverages), F&N, at The Straits Times office on May 9.

Calling 2023 a "crazy" year, the 27-year-old Pereira said: "I saw all the nominees I was up against and they all had very incredible performances from last year. There were world champions and Asian Games medallists, so it's a huge honour just to be given this award."

The gold rush for Pereira began with the 100m and 200m titles at the Cambodia SEA Games last May and she repeated the feat at the Asian Athletics Championships in July.

A month later, she became the first Singaporean runner to reach the semi-finals of the world championships in Budapest, a result that earned her a 200m spot at the Paris Olympics. At October's Asian Games, she triumphed in the 200m to add to her 100m silver.

She also rewrote the 100m national mark six times and the 200m record four times.

ST sports editor Low Lin Fhoong headed a seven-member judging panel for the award that included the Football Association of Singapore's head of national teams management Eric Ong, Singapore mixed martial arts fighter Amir Khan and archery coach Pang Qing Liang.

Congratulating Pereira on her award, Ho said: "Shanti is one of us. Her authenticity, her vulnerability and her strength in adversity have always been clear to her supporters."

"Her success in sports has shown us that each of us has the ability to



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SHANTI PEREIRA, national 100m, 200m and 400m record holder, on winning The Straits Times Athlete of the Year 2023.

Shanti Pereira receiving The Straits Times Athlete of the Year 2023 award from Jaime Ho, editor of the Straits Times, and Celine Tan, director of regional marketing (beverages), F&N, at The Straits Times office on May 9. ST PHOTO: AZMI ATHNI

excel in our own smaller ways."

Jennifer See, managing director, F&N Foods, said: "The six nominees are exceptional athletes and have all exhibited strong physical and emotional endurance to attain the pinnacle of sports excellence. Their dedication to bring glory to Singapore and to their sports has inspired us all."

"We congratulate Shanti Pereira, winner of The Straits Times Athlete of the Year award, and celebrate her sheer determination, staggering

transformation and stellar achievements."

With Paris 2024 on the horizon, Pereira's preparations began with a bang in March when she broke the 400m national record (53.67 seconds) at the Florida Relays.

But she suffered a setback in April when she suffered a leg injury during a training camp in the United States, forcing her to pull out of the 84th Singapore Open Championships and her much-anticipated debut in the Diamond League compe-

tion in Xiamen and Shanghai.

Noting that she is "taking each day as it comes" in her recovery, Pereira said: "I was upset and (in) tears... because I had to miss my debut (in the Diamond League)."

"It was horrible. But my coach really assured me that it's okay, that it is something that happens and that we have to do whatever it takes now to get back to 100 per cent."

In Paris, the goal is to better her performances from Budapest. There, she finished 17th among the

24 runners in the 200m. In the 100m, she was 31st of 54 in the 100m heats and did not make the semis.

She added: "What I want to achieve is to try to do better than last year in terms of timing. I want to be able to have a better position than last year's world champs."

"For the 100m... I want to be in a better position and if that gives me a spot in the semi-finals, that would be great."

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