

In a ‘very mental’ sport, the tiny details matter

For artistic swimmers, the competition day begins long before they step onto the pool deck. Hours of preparation go into perfecting every detail, from hairstyling to make-up, before their routines.

National artistic swimmer Debbie Soh recalls that the earliest she has had to wake up for a competition was about 4am, which was about two to three hours before her event.

While the process varies for each athlete, teammate Rachel Thean begins by tying her hair into a tight ponytail, braiding it and then forming a bun.

Then she mixes boiling water with gelatin, which a teammate helps to apply. Once the mixture hardens, it will ensure her hair stays in place during the routine.

The process is completed by pin-

ning a headpiece and applying waterproof make-up, including foundation, eyebrow pencil, eyeshadow, lipstick, and using setting spray to keep everything secure.

Preparation time varies depending on the event: solo swimmers may need as little as 45 minutes, duets take slightly longer, and team routines with up to eight swimmers can require 1½ to two hours.

Once ready, the swimmers proceed to warm up for between one and 1½ hours.

The tiny details matter in artistic swimming, which blends performance and athleticism.

Thean said: “For now, the costumes and make-up kind of factor into your artistic impression score.

“Previously it wasn’t considered but now it kind of helps with the theme of the routine, so in a way, if



Artistic swimmers Debbie Soh (near left) and Rachel Thean at OCBC Aquatic Centre last month. Besides training up to 60 hours a week, they can take hours to prepare and then warm up for their events, which will last just a few minutes. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

your headpiece suddenly flaps off or if there’s hair covering your face, it will affect the overall artistic impression because it’s supposed to be a performance and it’s seen as though you didn’t manage it well.”

The team have also spent hours in training – up to 60 a week – to refine those details ahead of the World Aquatics Championships (WCH) in Singapore.

They also travelled to World Aquatics Artistic Swimming World

Cup events in Europe, Egypt, Canada and China, testing combinations and selecting team members for specific events.

The stints have been crucial in preparing the athletes for the unexpected.

Soh recounts an incident in Egypt where a sandstorm with 60kmh winds caused delays and led to the cancellations of music rehearsals, as umbrellas and chairs were blown into the outdoor pool,

leaving a thick layer of sand at the bottom.

Noting that much of the sport is “very mental”, she said: “For example if you make a mistake, you cannot let it affect you because you forget the rest of the routine then it’s done for, especially with the new scoring system.”

For the hosts, their expectations are higher as the athletes stress that it is not only about participation.

Thean is aiming to reach the top 10 in the solo events, with the top 12 advancing to the final.

The last time Singapore reached a final at the world championships was in 2011, when they placed 12th in the team free routine combination in Shanghai.

Soh, who claimed an overall bronze at the World Aquatics Artistic Swimming World Cup Super Final in Xi’an, China, with Yvette Chong and Kiera Lee in June, is targeting top-10 finishes in the duet events, while the team are aiming for a spot in the final.

To help achieve her goal, Thean completed her undergraduate studies at the Singapore Management University in December – seven months ahead of her graduation.

Noting that other competitors clock eight to nine hours of training daily, she said: “I’m not saying that it’s quantity over quality, but natu-

rally, when you put in more hours and get more repetitions, the chances of doing better increase.”

Beyond personal achievements, the swimmers also hope that the world championships will raise awareness of the sport in Singapore.

Soh, who has been in the sport for 19 years, has witnessed many talented individuals leave before reaching their full potential – many quit to focus on their education and careers owing to the lack of sufficient support to incentivise athletes to pursue sport full time.

“It’s difficult to get people inspired and passionate enough to want to stay for a long time, so hopefully with more exposure to the sport, more locals will join,” said the 27-year-old, who also hopes the world meet will inspire more men to take up the sport.

Sharing similar concerns, Thean noted that although the sport has grown recently, participation remains low compared to more mainstream sports such as swimming and gymnastics.

The 23-year-old added: “Now that the world championships are on our home ground and there are many roadshows, I hope that more Singaporeans can get a better understanding of the sport and we can also increase participation.”

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