

Long wait over for Paralympics

Singapore's 10 representatives have settled in and are raring to give of their best at delayed Games

LAURACHIA

The Republic's athletes may have had their training and competition plans disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic for the past 1½ years, but they remain upbeat ahead of the Paralympics, which open today.

Over 4,000 athletes are expected to compete in the Paralympic Games which, like the Olympics, will be held largely without spectators and will also see participants subjected to frequent testing and other safe-distancing restrictions.

Singapore's 10 athletes have arrived in Tokyo and four of them – cyclist Steve Tee, powerlifter Nur Aini Mohamad Yasli and swimmers Toh Wei Soong and Sophie Soon – are making their debut in the competition.

Tandem cyclist Tee and competition partner Ang Kee Meng were the first Singapore athletes to arrive in the Japanese capital last Wednesday and Tee said he is counting down to his first race – the men's B 4,000m individual pursuit – tomorrow. The duo are also pencilled in for the men's B 1,000m time trial and men's B time trial (road cycling).

Tee, 40, said it took him two days to adjust to the time zone, having arrived from London, which is eight hours behind Tokyo.

He added: "I'm keeping myself calm and relaxed by listening to my favourite music and listening to stand-up comedy."

"The facilities in the cycling village are so far, so good. The Izu Velodrome is in good condition and I like the track."

Equestrian Maximilian Tan, 34, is glad to be there "considering how difficult the situation has been leading (up) to today".

He also noted that while the atmosphere at London 2012 and



(Clockwise from top) Para-swimmer Toh Wei Soong, para-archer Nur Syahidah Alim and cyclist Steve Tee (with competition partner Ang Kee Meng) are among the 10 representing Singapore at the Paralympics, which open today. PHOTOS: JASON QUAH, TNP FILE

Rio 2016 was more competitive, he senses more relief this time that Tokyo 2020 is happening.

He said: "I am happy to be here, to reconnect with the many friends we have made through this sport from all over the world. I am glad to see that they are safe and well."

He added that moving around the Games Village is "quite seamless" as many considerations were made for athletes of diverse disabilities.

For swimming coach Ang Peng Siong, who coaches Toh, attending Tokyo 2020 is special for another reason – his late father, judoka Ang Teck Bee, competed at the 1964 Olympics, the last time the Games were held in the Japanese capital.

Ang, who was two then, has already purchased a souvenir related to Tokyo 1964 which reminds him of his father.

Turning his attention to Toh, he acknowledged the effect of

the pandemic on his swimmer's preparations, including the one-year delay.

"As an athlete who is still pursuing that perfect race, the extended time was a blessing. We focused on fine-tuning his technique and strength conditioning. He needs to be refined and stronger," he said.

INTENSITY

However, Ang also noted that Toh had not been able to benefit from regular competition ahead of Tokyo. "You learn quickly from such intensity of performing under pressure."

Unable to compete overseas, the athletes and their teams had to simulate competition settings during training.

Swimmer Yip Pin Xiu, 29, went through the process of waiting in the call room and warming up before her "race" during local time trials.

Archer Nur Syahidah Alim,

36, had surprise drop-ins from sports scientists during training to help her learn to cope with the unexpected.

Ang said such simulations also helped Toh prepare mentally as the swimmer aims for personal bests in his three events – the 50m freestyle, 50m butterfly and 400m free (all S7) – and make the finals or even win a medal in the 50m events.

While the Singapore National Paralympic Council had declined to announce medal targets for the contingent, it should be noted that Yip is the defending champion and world-record holder in the 50m and 100m backstroke (both S2).

Singapore will also enter the Games with a world champion in archer Syahidah, who is also No. 2 in the compound women's open individual world rankings.

Equestrienne Laurentia Tan won two medals each at Beijing 2008 and London 2012 although she drew a blank in Rio de Janeiro as she was injured.

She went 15 months without training with her horses and coach, but will be looking to bounce back in three events – the Individual Test Grade I, Individual Freestyle Test Grade I and Team Test to Music.

Joining her in the team event will be Gemma Rose Foo and Maximilian, who will also compete in two individual events each. This is the trio's third time competing as a team at the Paralympics.

Aini, the first powerlifter to represent Singapore at the Games, is fifth on the World Para Powerlifting rankings (up to 45kg) for those who have completed successful lifts this year.

Chef de mission Shirley Low said: "We are quietly confident and ready to go."

laura@sph.com.sg