

CHAY DOWN BUT NOT OUT

Cancer-stricken SAQ president won't run for 2nd term, but will focus on 2025 worlds

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Mark Chay will not seek re-election as Singapore Aquatics (SAQ) president when his two-year term ends in August, after being diagnosed with chronic myeloid leukaemia, a cancer of the white blood cells.

In an exclusive interview with The Straits Times, the 42-year-old former national swimmer said: "The first consideration for my decision is to focus on organising the 2025 World Aquatics Championships with fellow organising committee co-chairperson (Sport Singapore chief) Alan Goh.

"The second is my health. It is about re-prioritisation, focusing on getting well, as well as spending more time with my family.

"Running a national sports association is not easy. It requires a lot of time, energy, dedication, especially if you're looking at Singapore Aquatics where we have five aquatic sports and there are high expectations every time we go to any major Games. As such, the SAQ presidency is a full-time commitment which I don't have in me now."

As a former national athlete, Chay competed at the SEA, Asian, Commonwealth and Olympic Games, and was named Sportsboy and Sportsman of the Year in 2001 and 2002 respectively.

However, he now has the biggest fight on his hands, after the cancer diagnosis surfaced following an annual check-up in March.

He said: "When you receive news like this, you don't really know what's going on. My wife was with me when I got the report. I sought a second opinion and went to a specialist and they confirmed this is the situation. I went for many consultations, and I didn't know whether the oral chemotherapy medication will be effective or not.

"I thought and feared the worst. I wondered if I have done enough to prepare my family, especially now that I have a three-year-old daughter.

"Physically I feel a bit more fatigued from the treatment in general, although I'm feeling a lot better nowadays and I don't think it has really affected me that much. It's been a few months, and the medication seems to be taking me where I need to be. But until I get into a stable state, my priorities should be being there for my family."

The SAQ annual general meeting (AGM) has to be called by Sept 30, when its next president and nine other positions will be elected.

Affiliates have to be given 21 days' notice of the AGM, while the deadline to submit the nomination forms is seven working days before the election.

Incidentally, the topic of succession was already discussed among the SAQ executive committee in January, and Chay's cancer diagnosis sped up the activation of the plan, as he backed SAQ secretary-general Kenneth Goh to take over because of his "right attitude, aptitude and experiences".



Outgoing Singapore Aquatics president Mark Chay (in black) is backing secretary-general Kenneth Goh to take over when his term ends in August.
ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

The 46-year-old, who was a former national 50m and 100m breaststroke national record holder, is an academic director and associate professor at the Singapore Management University.

He said: "If the opportunity presents itself and you have the ability to serve, then you step up. I've always been involved in education and developing talent in my day job, and to serve in SAQ is an opportunity to shape the ecosystem for talent development.

"We also have a very strong secretariat, and I have confidence in them. Working with them over the last two years, they know my style, I know their style and their capabilities. I also feel that confidence and optimism within the sport as well."

In June 2022, Chay was elected unopposed as he took over from former president Lee Kok Choy. Back then, office holders can serve a maximum of four two-year

terms, but this has been changed to two four-year terms after SAQ's AGM in 2023.

Other than the upcoming July 26-Aug 11 Olympics, Chay presided over a successful 2023 SEA Games outing in Cambodia where the national swimmers dominated the pool with 22 golds and regained the men's water polo gold.

He regarded the one silver and heart-wrenching 10 fourth-placed finishes at the Hangzhou Asian Games in 2023 as "actually a damn good result", and also had a special mention for the women's water polo team who made their world championships debut in Qatar in February.

His tenure was also bookended by controversial incidents that saw him having to deal with the fallout from some national swimmers admitting to smoking cannabis in 2022, and the Paris Olympic relay selection controversy.

Chay said: "We made decisions that were very soundly based on existing policies and procedures. They were difficult to make because they were sensitive issues. But the presidency requires someone who has that empathy and firmness to make fair, sound and sometimes unpopular decisions that are right decisions for the organisation and its future."

Above all, he was most pleased to make progress in expanding the base of Singaporeans taking part in aquatic sports and cutting down on the attrition rate.

He cited how, during his tenure, the number of affiliates have grown from 112 to 137, "which speaks volumes of how great the environment is to start a business and create programmes whether for learn-to-swim or high performance across the five aquatic sports".

In terms of participation, he has also seen an increase from 2,600 to 2,800 athletes who participated in SAQ's structured aquatic programmes and competitions.

He added: "It's a start and there's momentum going. There's no doubt that the World Aquatics Championships will inspire future generations of athletes and champions and we will see a spike in interest and participation, even with the masters programmes."

National swimming legend Patricia Chan, who chairs the SAQ alumni organisation the Legacy Council, paid tribute to Chay and hopes he will continue to be active in the fraternity.

She said: "I am grateful for the commitment Mark has put in to grow the importance of the Legacy Council. The Singapore Aquatics Hall of Fame was also made possi-

ble because of his support. We look forward to his contribution to the Legacy Council when he comes on board, for he will no doubt be invaluable to our aquatic legacy."

While Chay is determined to see through the successful running of the world championships, he feels it is the right time to gradually take off the many hats he has been wearing over the past few years.

In recent times, he was the chairman of the Athletes' Commission at the Singapore National Olympic Council, member of Olympic Council of Asia's Athlete Committee, coach of Paralympic champion Yip Pin Xiu, and a Nominated Member of Parliament, while his World Aquatics bureau membership will end after the 2025 world championships.

With such a packed CV, he was running on four hours of sleep on many days, and looks forward to spending more time with his family.

He will keep his day job as Global Esports Federation executive director, and will find ways to volunteer and contribute to the sports fraternity once his condition stabilises.

Chay said: "Sports has given me so many opportunities and shaped me to be the person I am today. As much as possible, I want to create more opportunities for future generations, and I always want to put my best foot forward and be a player on the field rather than sitting on the bench.

"As long as people think I can add value, I will try my best. But, for now, I need more family time and more focus on getting better."

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