

Singapore athletics hit a new low at the 2007 SEA Games with just one gold and a bronze. The Straits Times meets two men – a veteran and a teenager – who are determined to bring cheer to their sport



WONG TO THE RESCUE

Discus thrower returns from 2½-year layoff and is going for 8th gold

By JONATHAN WONG

HIS iPhone rang non-stop. Daughter Jessica, eight, was asking for directions on how to get to Bishan to meet her mother Jana.

As James Wong put down his Apple-inspired “prison”, another call came through. A student from Nanyang Polytechnic, where Wong is a sports and wellness studies lecturer, had a query. Then, a staff member called.

“And this is my day off!” he said with a chuckle.

With the South-east Asia (SEA) Games in Laos approaching, it seemed that a day for Wong extended beyond the conventional 24 hours. “Sleep less man,” was his matter-of-fact explanation. “There’s always time, you just have to make it.”

So he does. Waking up before dawn six days a week, the discus specialist drags

his aching 40-year-old body to the Kallang Practice Track near his home to train for an hour. He manages to steal away after class in the evenings for another workout. At each session, he performs about 26 throws. In his prime, he could complete up to 40 throws.

“That was a long time ago,” he said, reminding me that he turns 41 next month. “My body is not what it used to be.”

Yet, here he is in another SEA Games (his ninth overall) after making his comeback in February from a 2½-year retirement to qualify for the discus event in Vientiane.

Seven consecutive golds in the event from 1993 to 2005 have secured his place in local sporting folklore. It begs the obvious question: Why come back?

He replied: “I felt that I needed to return to save the sport from further humiliation. It hurts me to see Singapore struggling on even the regional stage.”

Standing 1.91m tall with his 125kg hulking frame, a vulnerable Wong appears an outlandish idea. But anyone who watched him fight back tears after overcoming dengue fever to win in Manila four years ago will understand his passion.



Juggling work and sport is not easy for lecturer Wong, who uses a book in place of a discus to demonstrate his technique. ST PHOTO: STEPHANIE YEOW

“My body is not what it used to be.”

JAMES WONG, who turns 41 next month

The source of his consternation is obvious. At the 2007 Games in Korat, the Republic brought home just one (Zhang Guirong in women’s shot put) of the 45 track and field golds on offer.

Since Wong clinched his maiden gold in 1993, athletics has won 14 SEA Games titles, all from throwing events. He accounts for more than half the haul.

“It speaks volumes of the current state of athletics,” he said. “I don’t think I can go on winning till I’m 50.”

Though unlikely to challenge his national record of 59.87m set 10 years ago, Wong is untroubled.

During practice two weeks ago, his throws hovered around the 53m mark, just over a metre short of Thai Sawasdee Wansawang’s winning throw (54.13m) in Korat. Sawasdee and compatriot Num-

somboon Kvanchai (runner-up in Thailand) remain Wong’s chief rivals.

Said Wong: “I wouldn’t have come back if I didn’t think I could win.”

While he admits he is no longer at his peak – his release speed has fallen some way short of the 30-plus metres per second he averaged in his heyday – his technique in manipulating the 2kg metallic plate remains intact.

He continues to use the hyper-spin models, where the bulk of the weight (85-88 per cent) is found at the rim. Because of the weight distribution, such discs spin faster, producing greater angular momentum and in turn stability, and travel further. But only if thrown correctly.

He watches each throw with fastidious care, observing the angle of its trajectory, the shape of the discus. “You can always improve your technique,” he said. “You just have to keep pushing yourself.”

At the National Sports Complex in Vientiane, James Wong does not need to throw a discus to prove anything. But he will. He cannot help himself.

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Athletics: Veterans and youngsters

- Matthew Goh (long jump),
- Muhammad Amirudin Jamal (100m, 4x100m)
- Poh Seng Song (100m, 4x100m)
- James Wong (discus)
- Scott Wong (discus)
- Sean Lim (pole vault)
- Stefan Tseng (triple jump)
- Rachel Isabel Yang (pole vault)
- Teo Hui Juen (javelin)
- Wan Lay Chi (discus)
- Zhang Guirong (shot put)
- Izwan Firdaus, Lee Cheng Wei, Muhammad Elfi Mustapa, Gary Yeo (4x100m)

Medal tally at 2007 Games:
One gold, one bronze