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PHOTOS: JASON HO

LIVE YOUR SPORTING DREAM

TOP COACHES, DEDICATED STAFF AND COMPREHENSIVE FACILITIES AT SINGAPORE SPORTS SCHOOL MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR STUDENT-ATHLETES TO OPTIMISE THEIR SPORTING CAREERS

HELPING STUDENT-ATHLETES MAKE A SPLASH

The head coach of the Singapore Sports School's Swimming Academy, Mr Clive Rushton, thinks long-term. And he wants to help his student-athletes achieve "long-term success rather than success next month".

"If you go for success next month, you may end up hampering their career development," said Mr Rushton, who captained the Great Britain team at the 1972 Olympic Games. Since 1975, he has coached several successful international teams and groomed more than 75 international and world-ranked swimmers. Under his charge, the Swimming Academy has groomed talents such as Olympic finalist Tao Li and SEA Games gold medalist Amanda Lim, who is now gearing up for the Youth Olympic Games in August.

Mr Rushton said that Sports School is focused on delivering Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD), where the student-athlete's sporting development is precisely coordinated with his or her physiological development.

"Some sports, like gymnastics, are early specialisation sports. But others, like rowing, are late specialisation sports. Swimming sits in the middle. You learn to swim early. You learn the techniques early. But your peak could be in your mid-20s. So, you can enjoy a long career path, if managed well," said Mr Rushton.

He explained that under the LTAD model, the type of exercise, training and competitions that student-athletes are given have to relate closely to their developmental stages. It's about doing the right thing at the right time to ensure that they realise their full potential and enjoy rewarding sporting careers.

It also means that even if two athletes are of the same age, their individual programmes might differ.

"It could be something as subtle as shorter sprints for one and longer sprints for the other," he said.

And while the Swimming Academy takes on the responsibility of tailoring the programmes to fit each individual, a lot is expected of the student-athlete as well.

"We place a lot of responsibility on the swimmers to apply themselves," he said. "We don't wield a big stick at them. We don't force it on them. The motivation, that spark and that desire to succeed must come from them, not their parents and not us. We're just here to provide the guidance."

Mr Rushton believes student-athletes need to know "they are here for a purpose".

He said: "It's not a hobby. It's a lifestyle choice. They wake up at 5.45am and they're in the pool by 6.15am. Two hours in the morning and two to two-and-a-half hours in the afternoon. They also have lessons and homework. It's a very, very full lifestyle. So, they must have clear goals."

BECOME THE BEST ATHLETE YOU CAN BE

Even the best talents need grooming. And the Sports School's Sprints and Hurdles coach, Mr Viatcheslav Vassiliev, or Coach Slava, prides himself on being able to spot and groom talent.

He said that when he first saw a struggling young hurdler named T Piriya on the



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track years ago, he knew that she had what it takes to reap gold.

Earlier this month, at the Pahang Open in Malaysia, Piriya, now 17 and a Sports School student-athlete, broke the national 400m Hurdles record, which was set in 1984. She clocked 62.74 seconds, beating the previous mark of 62.8 seconds.

"Now the challenge is finding sporting meets for her to compete in — meets where she faces real competition. These days, she finishes first and the runner-up is several seconds behind. We will find the right competitions for her, and sponsors too," he said.

Another of Mr Vassiliev's young charges, 15-year-old hurdler Goh Wei Ning, is also in top form. Earlier this year, she broke the national Girls' Under-17 100m Hurdles record twice within a month.

Mr Vassiliev said that in time to come, the boys, too, will prove their mettle.

"I have spotted three, maybe four of them, who are now in Secondary 1, 2 and 3. In the next two to three years, we can expect great results from them. I am very sure of that."

Mr Vassiliev, who hails from Russia, has a master's degree in Physical Education from the State Institute of Physical Culture & Sport. In his youth, he represented Georgia and the Soviet Union on the track and was the former Georgian record holder in the 110m Hurdles. He also coached the Georgian national team and the Russian junior team. Prior to joining Sports School, he coached in Malaysia for seven years.

As a coach, he has observed that every parent believes that his child has talent and that some parents think talent alone will bring success.

He said: "I believe that talented athletes must be trained by a talented coach. Then we see results. Without a coach, maybe they can do well at a low-level competition, but there is no further development, no future."

"Sports School is the best place for development. We have everything a student-athlete needs to produce results. The track is good. The gym is good. We have a sports science team, physiotherapists, professional coaches ... Everything is here. Young athletes come here and they can realise their potential."

STUDIES AND SPORTS DO MIX

Ask Secondary 1 student-athlete and golfer Rachel Cheang how she is faring in school, and she will tell you that she is doing "quite well".

And by that, she means that she is getting straight As. Along the way, she has also scooped up this year's National Inter-school Golf Championship "C" Division Team title, together with Golf Academy teammate Dion Lim.

Rachel's mother, Mrs Esther Cheang, is "very pleased with her early success" at Sports School.

Before the PSLE results were released, Rachel already had her eye on Sports School. Attending a three-day orientation camp at Sports School during the year-end school holidays sealed the deal for her.

"There were bonding activities, classes and training. I could see that the studies here are not so different from other schools. I was



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interested in coming here because I want to do well in my studies and in sports," said Rachel, who was introduced to golf by her father only a year ago.

When she found out that she scored an aggregate of 265 at the Primary School Leaving Examinations, Rachel had her pick of secondary schools.

"My parents and I had many discussions on which school I should go to. I decided on Singapore Sports School and they respected my decision," she said.

Rachel is now on the Sports School's newly-introduced International Baccalaureate track, a pathway targeted at academically-able students, which leads to an internationally-recognised pre-tertiary qualification.

She said: "It's a six-year programme and that gives me a longer time at Sports School. If I go on the 'O' Level track and then leave after four years to attend Junior College, I won't have



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the same kind of training support there. I want to maximise my time here. I aim to be the best recognised female youth golfer."

She trains at the Raffles Country Club and the Singapore Island Country Club. "My coaches say that my swing is more consistent now," she said. "They take videos of our swings and then show them to us to help correct our mistakes. I've seen ridiculous mistakes that I never knew I was making."

But coming to Sports School was clearly no mistake. Said Rachel: "My mother has told me that she is proud of me and although the decision I made to come here may not have been the decision that she would have wanted me to make initially, I have proven to her that I can do it."

Mrs Cheang added: "We're very pleased with her early success and we are glad that we have made the right choice in enrolling her at Sports School."

GO FOR GOLD

Swimmer Malcolm Low, who had studied at Anglo-Chinese School (Primary), was posted to Raffles Institution. But he knew that it was not for him. He chose to attend Sports School instead. And that was a decision that has been paying off for him both in and out of the pool.

In the past few months, he has smashed all of his personal best timings, including shaving 4 seconds off his earlier record for the 200m individual medley.

At the ASEAN Cup Inter-Club Age Group Swimming Championships held in Brunei last month, he won three gold medals — for the 200m individual medley, the 50m backstroke and 100m backstroke events.

Last month, he came in second in the 100m backstroke event at the National Inter-Secondary School Swimming Championships. Incidentally, he was the youngest competitor in that event where most of the swimmers were Secondary 2 students.

On the academic front, he has topped a Mathematics module, a fact that his parents must be especially happy about.

Said Malcolm: "I am very passionate about swimming and I am glad that I can balance my studies and sports at Sports School."

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"It's easier to find balance here than it was in primary school," he said.

"In primary school, if you miss a class, well, you missed it. When you come back, there's a stack of homework waiting for you on your desk. And you won't know how to do it because you didn't attend the lessons. Here, everything is planned out around your competition schedule. You won't miss anything."

This week, Malcolm will be in Thailand for three days of competition; next month, he will be heading for Manila for the SEA Age Group Swimming Championships.

"The competition in Manila is a serious one!" he said. He is not yet certain which events he will be fielded in but he has medal hopes. He is also looking forward to the next Youth Olympic Games (YOG), when he will still be within the age group to compete. YOG competitors have to be between 14 and 18.

For the inaugural YOG, which kicks off in Singapore in August, he will have to be contented with cheering on his compatriots from the stands. He said: "I'll be watching every event with my friends from the Swimming Academy. In four years' time, I hope I will be in the pool."

SINGAPORE SPORTS SCHOOL OPEN HOUSE

Find out more about the Singapore Sports School learning experience from student-athletes, the academic faculty and sports coaches. The Open House also provides a glimpse of Sports School's world-class sports facilities and boarding at Olympus Lodge.

Date: May 22, 2010
Time: 12.30pm to 6.30pm
Venue: Singapore Sports School, 1 Champions Way, Singapore 737913
Enquiries: Call 6761 8666 or 6761 8651
Admission and registration: www.sportsschool.edu.sg