

TRACK AND FIELD DESPERATE TO SEE LIGHT



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Sport is in the doldrums and 2010 Youth Olympics has to be its spark

THE oldest national record in Singapore's track and field book was finally eclipsed on Tuesday night in Kuala Lumpur, and the news was greeted with mixed feelings when it filtered through to the TODAY sports desk.

There was relief, that Abdul Hakeem Abdul Halim had finally done it, posting a time of 14.45s in the men's 110m hurdles to shave 0.31s off Osman Merican's mark of 14.76s, clocked at the 1966 Asian Games in Bangkok.

There was also some embarrassment, that it had taken 42 years for the record to be broken, by a 21-year-old who set a new mark that was still more than half a second off the SEA Games record – a time of 13.91s set by Malaysia's Rayzom Shah Wan Sofian at the 2007 SEA Games in Korat.

If the state of Malaysian football is giving our neighbours palpitations, then the abysmal standard of track and field in Singapore is a cause for concern for sports fans here.

Singapore Athletic Association (SAA) president Loh Lin Kok is banking on the 2010 Youth Olympics to spark a new generation of talent in the sport.

But with a little over 18 months

to go to the Games, the clock is ticking down fast for the SAA to come up with a team capable of doing the host nation proud.

The success of table tennis, sailing, swimming, football and bowling over the last few years has been the perfect marketing and promotion tool for the respective national sports associations in their quest to attract sponsors, and more importantly, young talent, from what is already a very small pool.

All the while, Singapore track and field has been falling behind. While the foreign sports talent scheme has worked a treat for table tennis and football, and thrown up a superstar in swimming with the rise of Tao Li, the SAA and their trio of adopted Singaporeans have been mired in controversy.

Two of the three field throwers, Du Xianhui and Dong Enxin, have already quit the country and returned to China.

Shot put ace Zhang Guirong no longer receives funding from the association because of a dispute over contractual obligations and trains on her own in China.

Wide-eyed youngsters will want to be like Tao Li, none of them will consider any of the throwers role models.

While the impressionable Singapore child may well want to follow in the footsteps of Asian Games sailing gold medallists Sherman Cheng or Sarah Tan, or bowling World Cup winner Jasmine Yeong-Nathan, or Lions' striker Indra Sahdan, they do not

have anyone in track and field they can call hero.

At one time youngsters in the country had so many track and field stars to look up to.

In 1951, Ng Liang Chiang won Asian Games gold in New Delhi in the men's 110m hurdles, while triple jumper Tan Eng Yoon was also a stand out during the period.

In the 1960s, 100m sprinter C Kunalan was a household name on the continent, and Singapore also boasted a Merican, of course.

Chee Swee Lee was a 400m queen and one of the biggest names in all of sport in the country in the 1970s, while high jump star Nor Azhar Hamid flirted with world class leaps for a brief period at the time.

Over the next three decades, we've failed to produce similar stars.

In 1995, M Rameshon won bronze in the men's marathon at the SEA Games in Chiangmai, clocking a time of 2hr, 24min and 22sec. Today, aged 43, he is still Singapore's No 1 in the event.

The Singapore Sports School have high hopes for Shahrir Mohd Anuar, Liang Wei and Jared Lim. All three sprinters are aged 15 and Shahrir, who won gold at the 2007 International Children Games, is at the head of the pack.

They have a little over 18 months to get ready for the Youth Olympics.

Singapore track and field, once the country's most glittering of sports, is counting on them for a revival. And so are the SAA.

Singapore are counting on the Sports School's athletes to revive track and field. OOI BOON KEONG



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