

A Prime lesson for Tao Li

British coach wants swimmer in New Delhi to prepare for Asian Games

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SINGAPORE — The Commonwealth Games in India will be part of Tao Li's preparations for the Asian Games in Guangzhou, China, from Nov 12 to 27.

The Singapore swimmer was supposed to skip the 11-day New Delhi Games from Oct 3, as it is too close to the Asiad, but will now jet into the Indian capital to take part in the 50m butterfly.

"I'll only be there for three, four days," Tao Li told MediaCorp yesterday. "The main purpose is to see where I stand, and what I need to fine-tune

for the Asian Games."

Tao Li won the 50m butterfly gold at the Doha Games four years ago in 26.73sec. But to defend her crown, she will have to lower her national mark of 26.64sec by more than a second, for the Asian benchmark of 25.57sec is owned by China's Zhou Yafei.

Tao Li believes her new coach, Barry Edward Prime, can help her get there. The Briton, who joined the Singapore Sports School's swimming academy last month, is aware of the 20-year-old's strong personality.

But Prime, who was part of the Australian and British national set-ups, believes his coaching philosophy of strict discipline, fused with a highly-flexible, patient and honest approach, can bring the best out of Tao Li, who set a then-Asian record of 57.54sec in the 100m butterfly en route to a fifth-place finish at the Beijing Olympics. She became the first Singaporean swimmer to reach

an Olympic final.

"People respond better to positive encouragement, and that's my style," said Prime, 55, whose trainees included former world record holders Nick Gillingham (men's 200m breaststroke) of Britain and Australia's Jade Edmiston (women's 50m breaststroke).

"I may also turn a blind eye sometimes. If I pick on her every fault, it won't be good. I want to build, not break her confidence. And I like her, she's got personality."

Tao Li admitted it wasn't easy at first. "Barry is very particular with the targets he sets. You'll have to re-do them until they're achieved," said the first-year student at the Sports School's thru-train programme with the Auckland University of Technology. "He's very strict, but that's what I need to push me to do better."

To prepare for the Asiad, where she will compete in the 50m and 100m butterfly, Prime has pencilled in the Hong Kong Open (Sept 3-5), a national training camp in Guangzhou (Sept 6-12), the Commonwealth Games, and the Singapore-leg of the Fina World Cup short course series (Oct 16-17).

While kicking and speed are her key strengths, Prime feels her endurance must improve if she is to excel in her pet events, which is why her training routine will increase from about 40km to 70km weekly.

Said Prime: "If you want to be one of the best swimmers in the world, you have got to train like one."



Tao Li and her new coach Barry Prime. KOH MUI FONG