

A programme in tatters

Steven Yeo's assessment of young athletes a wake-up call for SAA's technical team

After nine months in the job Singapore Athletic Association (SAA) chief executive officer Steven Yeo's view, that track and field in the country will be in the doldrums for some years to come, is depressing.

If his dire forecast was meant to be a warning for technical director C Veeramani and his team of coaches at the association, then I hope they get the message.

Yeo issued the damning indictment on the state of track and field at junior level in an interview with *The Straits Times* last week.

The 16 athletes shortlisted for the Youth Olympic Games are well short of the benchmarks set by the SAA, and he bemoaned the lack of talent coming through the ranks.

Yeo predicted Singapore will struggle to make an impact in athletics at the SEA Games and Asian Games based on the strength of the current generation of young sprinters, jumpers and throwers.

It brings into sharp focus the role SAA's technical department has been playing in developing young track and field talent in Singapore.

Veeramani and his team are responsible for shaping a programme to first, ensure mass participation, then identify potential and finally, give the handpicked youngsters every chance possible to eventually get to the top.

It is not working out.

Ironically, less than two years ago, SAA chief Loh Lin Kok predicted a bright future for the sport.

In an interview with TODAY in November 2008, he claimed the SAA had embarked on a programme to develop local talent, both for athletes and coaches.

The programme actually started in 2005, according to Loh, and at the time he said the results were already beginning to show.

Sixteen months on, the programme has collapsed, if Yeo's assessment is correct.

The programme could have been affected, as SAA's funding from the Singapore Sports Council (SSC) has been frozen for FY2009/10.

But SSC have always maintained that athletes with talent will not suffer and they would help them individually.

If the SAA had identified the athletes being



One of Singapore's young talent in track and field is Shahrir Mohd Anuar, 17, who set a new record in the boys' 'B' Division of the Inter-School Track-and-Field Championships last year. TODAY FILE PHOTO

groomed as worthy of financial support, and recommended them to the SSC, they should still be on the radar.

Maybe Yeo's withering comments on the production line of track and field was timed to send a wake-up call to the talent scouts in his association.

Singapore have talented youngsters in track and field.

Discus thrower Alan Teh has promise. The 17-year-old from Hwa Chong Institution College bettered his personal best of 47 metres (discus, 1.5kg) with a heave of 49.96m to win gold at the inaugural Asean Schools Games last July in Supanburi, Thailand.

He has been undefeated at schools' level since 2006, when he set the championship record of 47.23m in the 'C' Division.

Sprinters Shanti Pereira and Eugenia Tan, both 13 and from the Singapore Sports School, did well enough at the Wala Championships last weekend in Perth to suggest they could go on to greater things.

Shanti clinched the bronze in the under-14

200m with a time of 25.84sec, going under her own national under-15 record of 26.03s set last August.

Eugenia finished fourth in the 100m for under-14, clocking a new personal best of 12.23s. The time is faster than the national under-15 (12.74s), under-17 (12.39s) and junior (12.26s) records.

Shahrir Mohd Anuar, 17, from Raffles Institution College, clocked 10.90s at last year's Inter-School Track-and-Field Championships, a new record in the boys' 'B' Division.

I am sure all of them will disagree with Yeo.

Indeed, track and field is one of the most popular sports at schools' level, there are always at least a couple of raw gems in every cohort.

The SAA are set for a leadership battle, with Tang Weng Fei taking on Loh in elections that must be held by June.

Whoever comes out on top, it is crucial he installs a top-class youth development programme quickly. leonard@mediacorp.com.sg

The writer is executive sports editor at MediaCorp.

