

# IN FULL SPRINT

In every race, national sprinter and Olympian **GARY YEO** strives to win while surpassing his personal best. The 27-year-old business undergraduate, who has taken a year off to concentrate on the next World Championships, shares the life lessons he has learned on the track.

---

**L**ondon, 2012. In Lane 2 of the running track at the Olympic Stadium, Gary Yeo was doing his warm-up behind the starting block. The Singaporean sprinter was in the third preliminary qualifying heat for the 100m race, alongside big names like Usain Bolt and Yohan Blake.

In the spectator stand, 80,000 people were already waiting in anticipation. Gary could feel the thrill of competing in front of a full stadium in his bones. At the sound of the starting gun, Gary – and the other sprinters – dashed off. In the blink of an eye, he had finished in second place with a time of 10.57s, beating his previous personal best of 10.62s at the World Championships 2011. The timing was good enough for him to enter the first official round – and he returned to the same track two hours later.



This time, Gary was up against Tyson Gay, the second-fastest athlete ever. He was off to a good start. But along the 50m mark, he felt his hamstring seizing up. The sudden tightness in his thigh prevented him from maintaining his speed and he lagged behind. Eventually, he finished in last place, clocking 10.69s. Tyson topped the heat with a timing of 10.08s. "I had a good start but not a good finish," shrugs the 27-year-old. With his timing, Gary was placed 50th out of 54 runners.

While an Olympic medal eluded him, being able to represent Singapore was already "an honour and a dream". He says: "At a world-level race like the Olympics, sometimes you know you can't win given the high standard of other athletes. But just being able to race against top names like Usain Bolt makes me see that they are not just the stuff of legends. They are also human, and this means that if I am disciplined and work hard, I may achieve my full potential one day."

Widely considered as one of the fastest men in the region, Gary had a 2012 that was nothing short of phenomenal. A Southeast Asian (SEA) Games silver medallist, Gary recently won the 100m final at the 2012 ASEAN University Games. He even clocked a new personal best time of 10.44s. In doing so, he became the fourth-fastest Singaporean in the distance. Only sprint legends like U. K. Shyam (who holds the current national 100m record of 10.37s), Canagasabai Kunalan and Muhamad Hosni have clocked better timings.

While these track successes may appear to be bursts of brilliance from the young man, he actually went through years of disciplined training behind the scenes before reaching this standard. "It is not just about luck or talent. To do well in both sports and life, it is about having the discipline to work towards better timings, the perseverance to stick to the path, and the mental strength to overcome any obstacle."

## A DETERMINATION TO SPRINT

With Gary's sporting accomplishments, it may come as a surprise that he failed to make the track and field team when he first entered Victoria School. "I was of a smaller size as compared to my peers and felt that I ran pretty fast," recalls Gary, who was also a former school hockey player. "So, when the time came for us to choose a co-curricular activity (CCA), I went straight for the trials – but ended up not being selected."

To say that Gary was disappointed would be an understatement. He says: "I really wanted to join the track and field team, especially since many of my close friends were there." He decided to stick it out in athletics by turning up

for training, anyway. "I managed to join the training squad instead of the main team." He never missed a single training session. "I trained hard, followed my coach's instructions and gradually improved."

At 14, he finally had a chance to compete. "It was an inter-school 100m race, and Victoria School was in the running for the division title," says Gary, who came in fourth. "While I didn't make it to the top three, it felt really good to be able to represent my school and do my part." They won the overall "C" Division Title for Boys that year. For Gary, there was no turning back – his track career was in full sprint.

Looking back at those days, Gary acknowledges that he did not set out to be a sprint star. "I just felt very determined towards running. As I thoroughly enjoyed the training sessions, I did not consciously set out to be so disciplined on the track," he reveals. "The times spent with my coach and teammates were actually my strongest motivator. While many consider athletics to be an individual sport, teamwork actually played a significant role in my case."

Gary adds: "Sprinters train by themselves to meet their personal targets and eventually, run solo against other competitors. But there will definitely be moments when a sprinter will feel tired and discouraged – this is when the coach and teammates can come in to push him or her to the next set." For the earnest athlete, teamwork has served him well through the years. "Knowing that I'm part of a team only makes me more determined to work harder."

“TO ME, ACHIEVING A BETTER PERSONAL TIME IS ALWAYS MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING THE FIRST TO CROSS THE FINISH LINE.”

## PERSEVERING ON TRACK

While Gary had shown strong potential in his secondary school days, he knew he was still not fast enough. When the then-17-year-old was in Anderson Junior College, he came in first in the "A" Division 100m. But the win was marred by the fact that he did not register an improved personal time.

"To me, achieving a better personal time is always more important than being the first to cross the finish line," shares Gary. "My real competitor on the track should be myself, and not the other sprinters." He knew that he had to continue to push himself, and went on to participate in his first regional sporting event in 2004. During this time, he juggled vigorous training with academic demands, which soon proved too challenging for him to handle.

Gary then decided to switch to studying Information Technology (IT) at Singapore Polytechnic in 2005.

Gary's first major breakthrough in sports came when he earned a spot in the 4 x 100m relay team for the 2007 SEA Games. But although the team felt they had a good chance to score either a bronze or silver medal, they came in fourth. "So, even though we broke the national record with a timing of 40.10s, losing out on a medal was a blow for us," he says. Disappointed, he told himself to train even harder. In 2009, the national team consisting of Gary, Muhammad Elfi Mustapa, Lee Cheng Wei and Amirudin Jamal, clinched the silver medal at the 4 x 100m relay at the SEA Games in Vientiane, Laos. The timing of 39.82s set a new national record that year.

At the 2011 SEA Games in Palembang, Indonesia, the national men's team once again scored a silver medal with a timing of 39.91s. With Gary as anchor, they only lost by a hair's breadth to Indonesia. Meanwhile, no one really expected Gary – who was also participating in the 100m event – to win any medal at all. "After all, Singapore had not won any sprint medal in the past decade," he says. But a month before the race, Gary and his coach, Melvin Tan, had felt that they had a real chance with the timings that he was registering. "We were quietly hoping for a medal, and when I achieved a silver medal with 10.46s, it was not a surprise but a validation of our hard work in training."

The two silvers helped Gary end 2011 on a high, after juggling studies, training, and even a knee injury for the better part of the season. The same year, he also competed in various major competitions like the Asian Indoor Athletics Championships and the World Indoor Championships in Istanbul. He even rewrote the national record for the 4 x 100m relay with his team when they clocked 39.58s at the Kanchanaburi leg of the Asian Grand Prix in May.

"Perseverance matters," observes Gary. "I daydream a lot about going faster and attaining better timings. Then I tell myself that I can do it." The crucial thing, for Gary, is not to be let down by any setbacks – be it a busy schedule or sporting injuries. "As an athlete, I tend to miss many classes in school. For a major competition, I can lose up to four weeks at the start of a semester. So I always have to put in more effort to catch up, and apply the consistency with which I train into my studies. It helps that I have supportive classmates who are willing to guide me along." He adds: "With injuries, I just see it as a chance to come back stronger. No matter what kind of obstacles

there are, having a positive outlook can help you stay mentally strong. When you feel you can do it, half the battle is won."

## STRIVING FOR PERSONAL BEST

Gary has taken the bold step of deferring the final year of his undergraduate studies at Singapore Management University (SMU) to train full-time. He explains: "Our national relay team is trying to qualify for the World Championships. If we qualify, it will be a significant step ahead for Singapore athletics as no team has qualified for it in the past. Also, it will signal our country's desire to do well in athletics."

For Gary, this means intensive training sessions of up to 10 times a week. "We will be doing full-day trainings, with breaks in between," he shares. "It will include predominantly gym, sprint and relay training, long intervals as well as core workouts." In 2013, he will also participate in the 100m and 4 x 100m relay at the SEA Games in Naypyidaw, Myanmar. "I'm aiming for gold in each event. In the relay, winning is very possible as we've bettered our national mark."

After that, he plans to bring the curtain down on his running career when Singapore hosts the SEA Games in 2015. "When I go overseas to compete at major games, the crowd is not made up of Singaporeans. Running in front of the cheering home crowd at the new National Stadium will definitely be a rewarding swan song for me."

When the time arrives, he believes he will have no regrets. "I will miss running, especially the training." But Gary, who recently got engaged to his childhood sweetheart of 13 years, adds: "However, I know that my sporting experience has equipped me well for any challenge I choose to undertake in the future. The ability to work hard and persevere while keeping the faith will ensure that I do well – be it in studies, work or life."

“WHEN YOU FEEL YOU CAN DO IT, HALF THE BATTLE IS WON.”

“WITH INJURIES, I JUST SEE IT AS A CHANCE TO COME BACK STRONGER.”

## VALUES

Discipline • Perseverance • Teamwork • Tenacity

## REFLECTION

1. Gary had to make some tough decisions when he was assigned to his school's hockey team instead of his preferred track and field. How do you rise above disappointment and other forms of conflict?
2. In his pursuit of excellence in athletics, Gary has had to balance many demands and challenges. How do you manage long-term goals against short-term setbacks? How do you set a "do-not-cross" line in your endeavours? How do you stay mentally strong?