

XTRA THE SPRINT OF LIFE

SHE'S A FIGHTBACK KID

Amanda Choo beats the odds to become S'pore's top woman sprinter

CHRISTIE LOH
christie@mediacorp.com.sg

HER small half-moon eyes are fixed on a spot on the tabletop. Or a wall in the distance. Then, there are her hands, slowly battering my namecard, the only idle object within reach.

As the minutes tick, staying still is clearly seldom on Amanda Choo's (picture) schedule.

She will run round the track, do weights, play tag – but fold her legs for an hour-long chat? That's rare for Singapore's newly-crowned queen of the 100-m dash, whose time of 12:21 seconds last week snipped 0.2 seconds off the 18-year national record of 12:23 seconds.

Her waking hours are split between national training six days a week and schooling at the National Institute of Education (NIE). What little time left is shared among her family and boyfriend.

So, when the energetic star, turning 20 next month, is fidgety during the interview in the balcony of her Upper East Coast condo, I'm not really surprised.

Success has not come easy for the 1.59m tall athlete, who could pass off as a 16-year-old cool cat in her black tee and black tailored knee-length shorts.

Besides the fact that she's smaller built than most women sprinters and flat-footed, injuries kept Amanda away from big races for three straight years. First a torn arch at 16, then a liver-related virus the next year, followed by a torn hamstring at 18.

Each blow came just after Amanda clocked her personal best. Yet, the setbacks only served to make her "more determined to fight back".

Also, her coach of six years, Mr Loh Chan Pew, 62, never allowed her to wallow in self-pity, pushing her to break the fear of the "pain barrier" that holds back many injured athletes.

"She really got perseverance," says the coach, who is a two-time silver medalist in the 4 x 100m relay at the Southeast Asia Peninsula (Seap) Games.

The irony is that during training, Amanda is the "weakest", he says, because sometimes she cannot complete the training schedule while others can.

In fact, this "bargain queen" tends to haggle for fewer sets on days when she is exhausted from school, where training to be a PE teacher is more active than roosting in a classroom.

"But come competition, all her strength will come out," he says. Referring to her "game temperament", he continues: "The bigger the game, the better



ERNEST CHUA

HARD TALK

OPPRESSED

"I feel the oppression ... when you tell people you're in sports, they tell you 'You better focus on your studies'."

VERY TOUGH

It's tough to be an athlete in Singapore because the "level of support is very limited ... you don't see the public coming down to watch races because 'no medals, no point coming down'."

GOALS, GOALS, GOALS

Our sports organisations are "too achievement-

based" in "setting goals for us to win medals when they should be setting goals that are personal — for example, record-breaking times".

GLAMOUR

It's fine for athletes to be glamour pin-ups "as long as you don't lose your focus and continue to have the passion and drive".

BIGGEST FEAR

That I won't be able to maintain my timing. I don't want people to see it (the new national record) as a fluke".

she is. Some people are super at training time, but the moment they get to the real race, they cannot run – their legs are soft."

Amanda, however, is quick to admit she is not all tough-as-nails. She had wrestled with religious issues, asking God why hurdles came one after another – including the sudden death of her uncle, Colonel Bernard Tan, a 39-year-old who collapsed at the tail end of the Singapore Biathlon in March last year.

Eventually, faith won, says the Catholic girl, who schooled in CHIJ (Toa Payoh) for 10 years.

Suddenly, Amanda's eyes lights up and she scurries off to get her training log-

book. Within the pages of the book, which she carries nearly everywhere with her, is a newspaper clipping about the late Col Tan posthumously receiving a Public Administration Medal (Silver) (Military) for his service to the nation.

"I used to tell myself, I'll either train very hard, die and meet him. Or I'll train very hard and break the national record for him," says Amanda, recalling what motivated her in recent months and led to her dedicating the record-breaking run to her late uncle. "I owe a lot to the people who supported me a lot."

Family, undoubtedly, is a key pillar for her. They show up without fail at all her meets. On training days, dad Eddy

Choo, who is a property manager at Marine Parade Town Council, ferries her from point to point.

"Her parents' support is first class," says Coach Loh.

Signs of a close-knit household are evident in their home filled with religious imagery. Elder sister Nicola, 27, has put her art-teaching skills to practice by dot-painting a mural of the four-member family on the living room wall.

"In her life, the top three priorities are God, family, then training," says Alvin Yeo, 23, NIE classmate and Amanda's boyfriend for over a year now.

Theirs is not the typical boy-girl relationship. Dating a national athlete with a jam-packed schedule often means not having much time together and no late nights out, says Yeo.

Over the past year, his girlfriend was home for no more than two weeks at a stretch as she travelled for regional competitions in places such as Jordan, Japan and Bangkok.

As a result Amanda, who enjoys Chinese food and beef, has developed a craving for prawn mee soup. Aside from food, the couple tries whenever they can to go for movie marathons.

Other times, it's a play or a dress-up-for-a-nice-dinner night. The usual track-pants, shorts and T-shirts are ditched for a dress, heels and make-up.

"I'm quite proud of the fact that I can transform," Amanda says as our conversation wraps up and she has to get ready for a tag rugby game at school this same evening.

Still, the hospitable host offers to show the photographer and I around the apartment. In her room, two things catch the eye: A colourful collage of photos by her bedside and two shelves of neatly lined trophies and medals scooped up since she started running at 10.

She must be eyeing more medals. Actually no. It's more important to improve her personal time to hit under 12 seconds eventually, Amanda says.

But with champion blood coursing through her veins, she doesn't deny hopes of becoming the third generation of the Choo family to enter the Seap Games. In 1965, her grandfather Choo Chin Meng clinched a silver medal in shooting. In 1973, her uncle took a gold medal in judo.

Will Amanda get a chance to go to the SEA Games in Korat, Thailand in December? Within weeks, she will find out if the Singapore National Olympic Council is convinced of the women sprinters' appeal to go.

"If I can go, then it'll be really cool because it'll be the third generation."

And if she can't? Well, why bother asking this of a girl who knows how to get what she wants.