



THE STRAITS TIMES INTERACTIVE | SPORTS

Feb 13, 2007 Tue

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Feb 13, 2007
SHOOTING

Coaches become shooters

New citizens Fan and Gai to don Singapore colours in air-pistol events

By Alvin Foo

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THEY came to Singapore to coach the national air-pistol team two years ago.

But China-born Fan Xiaoping, 35, and her husband Gai Bin, 38, will soon be donning Singapore colours - as athletes.

They received their citizenship a fortnight ago, and have been earmarked for Project 0812.

The recently-launched scheme aims to land Singapore's first Olympic medal since 1960 at the 2008 Beijing and 2012 London Games.

Said Singapore Shooting Association's president Chng Seng Mok: 'We did not intend to bring them in under the foreign talent scheme. They were hired as coaches to jump-start our air-pistol programme.'

'But we noticed that they were shooting Asian Games medal-standard scores even though they were not training.'

Fan and Gai are eligible to represent Singapore at the 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou and the 2012 Olympics in London.

Competing in next year's Beijing Olympics is subject to clearance from the Chinese Olympic Committee.

Under the rules of the sport's world body - the International Shooting Sport Federation - an athlete can represent his adopted country only after three years of citizenship.

The regulation can be circumvented if his former country gives him the go-ahead to represent his adopted homeland.

The couple, who married in 1998, have been training for three months.

Fan has the more impressive resume, having won four Asian Games golds in 1994.

She has not competed at the Olympics.

Said Fan, whose last competition was in 2000: 'I'll need about three or four months of serious preparation to get back to competitive shape.'

She has a personal best of 391, and has been averaging 385 recently. A 385 would have placed her joint-fourth at December's Asiad.

Gai has also had success at the regional level. He has been averaging 583 in training; world-class shooters manage between 587 and 590.

He is better known in local circles as the man who coached On Shaw Ming to win the Commonwealth Games' 25m centre-fire pistol gold last year.

Fan and Gai do not see age as a barrier for further success on the range.

She said: 'Look at China's Wang Yifu. He was 42 when he won the 10m pistol gold at the Athens Olympics.'

The SSA does not intend to tap more foreign talent. Chng said Fan and Gai would be 'the first and the last' shooters under this scheme.

He said: 'Why go for foreign talent when we can train our own?'

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