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NTUC calls for employers to raise CPF contribution

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IN A long-awaited signal that employees' hopes may finally be realised, the labour movement is calling for employers to consider raising their Central Provident Fund (CPF) contribution – a move that, if it happens, would benefit middle-income Singaporeans.

In addition, low-wage workers could enjoy higher take-home pay and more savings in their CPF accounts as early as next year – with incoming labour chief Lim Swee Say hopeful that the Government will take up the proposal to cut their individual CPF contributions and give top-ups through the Workfare scheme, as early as Budget Day on Feb 15.

Sending what he called a “public signal” to the employer’s federation, Mr Lim said on Friday that, with the strong economic outlook, it was perhaps time to review the issue of employers’ CPF contributions.

In June, outgoing NTUC secretary-general Lim Boon Heng had vetoed the recurrent calls from workers to increase employers’ share, which currently stands at 13 per

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FOUR to lead the quest

WITH ELITE SUPPORT, GLORY BECKONS AT BEIJING 2008

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IF EVERYTHING goes according to plan, as Singapore celebrates its 43rd birthday on Aug 9, 2008, Tao Li will start her swimming programme, Maximilian Soh will be running in Race 1 of the Laser programme, Lee Wung Yew will be shooting down his opening clay targets and Li Jiawei will be warming up for the women’s table-tennis team event as the first day of competition at the Beijing Olympics unfolds.

Until then, over the next 602 days, sports officials in Singapore are planning to do everything in their power to ensure that someone, anyone, breaks the Republic’s winless sequence at the Olympics – a run which stretches back to the time Tan Howe Liang raised a combined 380kg to win the silver medal at the 1960 Rome Olympics.

Though Singapore’s athlete contingent size for the Olympics is likely to number in the double-digit range – 16 went to Athens – the realistic hopes of the nation rest on Soh, Li, Lee and Tao (which should be made into some sort of national jingle, we think).

Looking at past results and future projections, all four are outside shots for a medal.

But with \$7 million available under the recently announced “Glory for the Nation”

project, Team Singapore is hoping that “outside” morphs into “realistic” over the next 20 months.

END OF THE PART-TIME ATHLETE

The oldest of the four, 40-year-old Lee, is a product of the “previous” system, where athletes were pretty much left to their own devices, supported only by the periodic grant and overseas training stint.

As announced by the Government earlier this year, and reiterated by Sports Minister Dr Vivian Balakrishnan last week, the era of the part-time sportsman “is over”.

Like all his serious Olympic opponents, clay-shooter Lee will soon get the chance to train full-time for the Games, supplemented by a full income, with opportunities to train abroad under the best coaching money can buy.

“For the longest time, I have been burning the candle at both ends,” said Lee, who finished 20th at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996.

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THEY MIGHT BE GIANTS: (Clockwise from top): Maximilian Soh, Tao Li, Li Jiawei and Lee Wung Yew.

TODAY FILE PHOTO

FOUR TO LEAD

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"I know I am capable of doing something better, and I would love the chance to train full-time."

Lee noted that many of the world's best shooters, including current No 1 Manavjit Singh Sandhu, only have to worry about hitting that clay pigeon.

"They train and train and go around the world to participate in tournaments. India's Singh is funded partially by his government and is also sponsored by three major private organisations. And he repays the faith by winning medals," said Lee, who shot 106 birds to Singh's 113 at the Asian Games.

Though he is currently ranked 69th in the world, Lee, a schoolteacher, believes that he can get back into the world's top 20 (where he was in 1996) and compete with the Singhs of the world.

And the signs look good for Lee as he has already been told to "concentrate on his shooting" while the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports and the Singapore Sports Council work out a deal with his employers, the Ministry of Education.

The two-time Sportsman of the Year is widely expected to be one of the first inductees into the Glory for the Nation project, which was announced by Singapore National Olympic Council (SNOC) president Teo Chee Hean last month.

Said SNOC secretary-general Chris Chan: "At the Athens Olympics, Lee showed that he is not that far off from some of the world's best, considering that he is only an amateur shooter who has to juggle work and shooting."

"Even the International Shooting Sport Federation officials believe he is one of the best in the world, which is why he was eligible to receive an International Olympic Committee training scholarship.

"If he is not given the chance to train full-time and prepare, we will never know what he is truly capable of.

"It's worth a shot."
Lee has said that he intends to train under Italian coach Marcello Dradi in Bologna and will need to participate at various international competitions this year and prior to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The shooter is also hoping to work with a mental skills trainer, as he did in 1996.

"It really helps; I get in the zone. The mind takes control and everything else is shut out," said Lee.

MIND GAMES AND CLOSE CALLS

But when it comes to near-misses, no one has a better story to tell than paddler Li Jiawei, who came within a whisker of breaking Singapore's drought during the women's singles event at Athens.

In the semi-finals against Kim Hyang Mi of North Korea, Jiawei was leading 3 games to 1 before crumbling to a 4-3 defeat. She also took the lead in the bronze medal match, before losing 4-1 to South Korea's Kim Kyung Ah.

Currently ranked fourth in the world, no one doubts that she is Singapore's best Olympic medal prospect, though her mental strength has been called into question on a few occasions.

Which could be why the Singapore Table Tennis Association (STTA) wants to hire a mental skills coach for Li, who has won Singapore's Sportswoman of the Year title for the past five years.

STTA general manager Jackie Tay said that currently, sports psychologists from the Singapore Sports Council have been helping the paddlers on a periodic basis.

But the STTA is looking at the possibility of hiring a full-time mental coach, which could cost anything between \$30,000 and \$40,000 a year.

HOW MUCH MUST SINGAPORE SPEND ON THE GOLDEN FOUR IN 2007?

LEE WUNG YEW SHOOTER, 40

\$61,000 Projected training stints with top Italian shooting coach Marcello Dradi
\$30,000 Mental skills trainer
\$96,000 Salary, including CPF
\$100,000 Travel, accommodation to 10 major competitions, including World Cup and World Championships

TOTAL: \$287,000

The Singapore Sports Council provides Lee with free physiotherapy services, a dietician and sports medicine assistance. His ammunition is paid for by the Singapore Shooting Association. His equipment has already been paid for.



LI JIAWEI PADDLER, 25:

\$36,000 Full-time salary
\$100,000 Overseas training and competitions
\$120,000 World class personal coach, including accommodation
\$30,000 Mental skills trainer
\$50,000 Full-time physiotherapist
\$50,000 Full-time nutritionist

TOTAL: \$386,000



MAXIMILIAN SOH SAILOR, 18:

\$300,000 Full-time coach with Olympic-winning experience
\$60,000 Cost of sending him for 12 overseas competitions
\$20,000 Four months training stint in Melbourne beginning Jan 2007
\$50,000 Mental trainer
\$12,000 Equipment

TOTAL: \$442,000

GRAND TOTAL NEEDED:

\$1,179,000

TAO LI SWIMMER, 16:

\$40,000 Airfare, accommodations in all five World Cup circuit meets
\$6,000 Singapore Sports School fees
\$18,000 Subsistence allowance
** Estimated training cost to increase if Singapore Swimming Association finds a world class coach for Tao Li*

TOTAL: \$64,000



Mental trainer aside, her minders know that Li will have to enter as many competitions as possible over the next 20 months – firstly to qualify for Beijing.

"With players ranked in the top 16 automatically qualifying for the Olympics in 2008, she will need to take part in as many events as possible to continue racking up points," said Tay.

"To do this, she will need a good team

of professionals to spar with her and to keep her ready for top-level competition throughout."

A personal coach could also be on the cards for Li – if the STTA finds the budget for it, or if she is co-opted into the Glory for the Nation programme. The cost of a top coach? About \$10,000 a month, including accommodation. "They don't come cheap," explained STTA chief Choo Wee Khiang.

MORE THAN JUST STAYING AFLOAT
Cheap is also a word that cannot be used about the sport of sailing, which, pardon the pun, requires boatloads of money at the very highest levels.

But the sport is the main contributor to Singapore's Asian Games glory – making up five of the eight golds – although the competition at Beijing will be up many notches.

Though glory can strike here in several categories, newly-crowned Asian Games champion Maximilian Soh, aged just 18, has set the pulses racing with his promise.

In Doha, the teenager outpaced veterans in the field like South Korean Kin Hokon and Malaysian Kevin Lim to strike gold, despite having raced in the Laser class for just three years.

"The Korean has been sailing since

before I was born," he joked after ensuring his win on the final day of the competition.

And it is this confidence that SingaporeSailing chief Low Teo Ping and executive director Andrew Sanders are hoping to build on.

Said Low: "We have groomed him to think and behave like a champion. All our sailors are groomed in that way."

If Soh is incorporated into the Glory for the Nation project, SingaporeSailing is hoping to hire a top sailing coach, probably from the United Kingdom, which could cost up to \$30,000 a month.

A detailed plan has already been drawn up for the youngster in preparation for Beijing 2008, and officials are hopeful that his National Service responsibilities will not interrupt his preparation.

Officials are planning to have Soh train for four months in Melbourne, where he can sail under harsh wind conditions and race against other world-class Laser sailors.

Said Sanders: "He has decided to put everything else on hold while we prepare him for the Beijing Olympics. That's the commitment he has given and he will need the best support he can get."

SENSATION AND CELEBRATION

Perhaps the most unexpected and celebrated gold of the Doha Asian Games came on Day Seven at the pool.

It was won by 16-year-old Tao Li, who defeated the reigning Asian Games champion and record-holder Zhou Yafei and Chinese favourite Xu Yanwei in the 50-metre butterfly to become the Republic's first gold medalist in swimming since Ang Peng Siong's 1982 heroics.

The good news is that Tao Li's time of 26.73 seconds was a new national record and would place her 13th in the world right now. The bad news is that the 50m butterfly is not an Olympic event, which means that the teenager will have to work harder in the 100m butterfly, in which she finished third at Doha.

However, it is noteworthy that her

bronze-medal winning time of 58.96 seconds would have placed her sixth in the final at Athens, which was won by Australian Petria Thomas in a time of 57.72 seconds.

And if you consider the fact that Tao Li has shaved more than a second off her performance at last year's Commonwealth Games, another big jump could have her competing for a medal.

Said Singapore's most celebrated swimmer Ang, once the world's fastest man in the 50-metres freestyle: "Her technique, her start and even her strokes will need fine-tuning. She will need a world-class coach who will assist her in these areas, and she will need to start soon with the Olympics approaching."

Singapore Swimming Association coaching director John Dempsey added that Tao Li needs a lot more exposure to high-level competition.

"She needs the opportunity to participate in the top international circuit. This will give her the chance to come up against the world's best swimmers so she will know what she is up against at the Olympics in Beijing."

IF NOT NOW, SURELY LATER

But even with the best preparation money and determination can buy, Singapore knows that there is no guarantee of Olympic success.

Said SNOC president Teo: "We have now been able to consistently achieve success in certain sports at the Asian Games and Commonwealth Games. But success at Asian or Commonwealth level does not necessarily mean we can reach the Olympic heights.

"I should stress that success at the Olympics is not assured as the standard of competition is very high. Nevertheless, it is worth the effort.

"If we don't succeed at securing a medal at the 2008 Olympics, we will learn from the attempt and try again."

But what seems certain is that the attempts will be more serious than ever. Which means that Singapore's triumphant return to the podium should only be a matter of time.

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The Bible, Isaiah 41:13

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THE MENTAL GAME IS THE HARDEST TO WIN

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THERE were clearly nerves and why not, for the task was hardly simple: To make history is one of the heaviest of burdens and it has destroyed some of the bravest souls.

On Aug 20, 2004, at the time just turned 23, Li Jiawei (picture) was on the verge of becoming a Singapore hero, if she overcame Kim Hyang Mi of North Korea in the semi-finals of the women's singles table-tennis competition at the 28th Olympic Games.

I settled down at the Galatzi Sports Complex in Athens, desperate to record history. She lost.

She lost again 24 hours later, in the battle for the bronze.

Minutes after her crushing

defeat, I was in the bowels of the arena and I will never forget the moment.

Li was in tears; on the telephone Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong congratulated her on a fine effort and her coach from China, Shi Mei Sheng, matter-of-factly, said his charge lost because she was mentally weaker than her South Korean opponent, Kim Kyung Ah.

After wilting last week against China's Guo Yan in the team event in Doha and Guo Yue in the singles, it remains Li's biggest hurdle, it must be overcome if she is to strike Olympic metal in 2008.

Indeed, as unprecedented talk of Olympic conquest continues to dominate Singapore sport after the spectacular performance at the just-concluded Asian Games in Doha, the question of mental

strength is uppermost in my mind.

With the "Glory for the Nation" project to be formally introduced next month,

our elite athletes are about to be schooled by the best coaches; they will be sent all over the world to experience as much top-level competition as possible; experts will observe and tinker with gait, serve, muscle strength, diet and technique; perhaps sleep patterns will also be manipulated, for these days nothing is left to chance.

By all accounts, money will no longer be a barrier for athletes like Li and swimmer Tao Li, shooting ace Lee Wung Yew and at least a couple of our Asian sailing champions, as they prepare to go for gold in two years in Beijing.

But in the unique heat of battle in the

Olympic arena, with the weight of expectation of an entire nation on the shoulders, how our elite few beat these inner demons is the most pressing task facing our sports chiefs.

After Li and shuttler Ronald Susilo's failure in Athens it is possibly the single biggest stumbling block to Singapore making an Olympic medal breakthrough.

John Dempsey, the straight-talking Aussie in Singapore swimming's employ, will tell you Tao Li is not shirk a challenge and is full of confidence.

No wonder the butterfly darling crushed China's best last week in the pool.

How to ensure the 16-year-old keeps that spunk, how to armour-plate Li and Lee with such an elusive attribute, and the rest of the elite cohort, that is the

But in the unique heat of battle in the Olympic arena, how our elite few beat these inner demons is the most pressing task facing our sports chiefs.

compelling task facing our sports minders.

If experts can successfully hone our ace athletes' mental ability, Singapore has a chance in 2008.

Li especially.
At 25 she is already one of the best players in the game and under the "Glory for the Nation" project, the world No 4 will get much better.

With just 20 months to go, I feel she is our best bet for a medal at the Beijing Games.

She has already beaten world No 1 and reigning Olympic champion, Zhang Yining. While they are already heavily favoured in the table-tennis medal stakes, the Chinese will be under tremendous pressure to deliver at home.

If armed with newly-installed self-belief, a fearlessness, to carry the weight of history and the hopes of a nation, to even face down a home opponent and what will surely be thousands of hissing fans, Li could well make her Olympic mark in Beijing.