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Singapore's first, and 600th, gold

Jonathan leads teen brigade to 10m air rifle triumph, the first of S'pore's five

By Terrence Voon

IN BANGKOK - HE ADMITS to being a nervous wreck in finals, and never shoots well.

Yet, Jonathan Koh held his nerve in the biggest final of his 17-year-old life to bag not one - but two gold medals for Singapore at the South-east Asia Games yesterday.

His triumphs sparked a golden landslide for Singapore, who shot to the top of the medal tally after winning five shooting golds yesterday.

Yet, in the 10-metre air rifle final at the Sport Authority of Thailand's shooting range in Bangkok, the Raffles Junior College student was a picture of despair.

Frowning repeatedly after each shot, he would look nervously on the floor, not meeting the eyes of teammate Ong Jun Hong next to him.

One would never have guessed that he had started the afternoon as the runaway leader, after a stellar 593 in the morning's qualification shoot.

He began the final a full three points ahead of Jun Hong, who closed the gap to two at one stage as the duo duelled for the gold.

In the end, the debutant finished with 97.6 points from 10 shots for an overall total of 690.6.

Luckily, the 19-year-old Jun Hong could do no better, firing 97.5 for a 687.5 total to settle for silver.

'I'm usually very nervous and stressed in finals, so I never do well - whether or not I'm in the lead,' Jonathan confessed later.

Kudos to the rookie.

He outdid his more experienced teammates Jun Hong, the individual silver medallist at last year's Commonwealth Games, and Zhang Jin, 19, who teamed up with the former to land the pairs' bronze in Melbourne.

Earlier in the day, the three teenagers combined to make history twice over.

They shot 1,767 in the team event to earn Singapore's 600th SEA Games gold.

A smiling Jun Hong said: 'Air-rifle shooters like the number 600, because our maximum score is also 600.'

They were a whopping 14 points ahead of second-placed Thailand, who had 1,753.

In doing so, they also ended the Republic's 34-year wait for a gold in the pistol and rifle events.

'I knew about the records, but I didn't think about them as I shot. My mind was a blank,' said the bespectacled Jonathan, who joined the national squad only last year.

The competition started on Tuesday, well ahead of next Thursday's opening ceremony, because regional shooters have to attend the Asian Championships in Kuwait next month.

This has given shooters like Gai Bin a useful competitive run-out ahead of the Olympic qualification event.

The China-born pistol specialist added an unexpected third gold in the 10m air pistol final, which was held over from Tuesday owing to a lengthy protest.

Few expected the second-placed Singaporean to overhaul rival Tran Quoc Cuong, who was leading by four points at the end of Tuesday's qualification.

But he fired a sparkling 99.4 in the 10-shot final to clinch the gold with a total of 674.4.

Tran sank out of contention after a poor 92.7, and had to settle for bronze.

Instead, it was Jakkrit Panichpatikum, who made it a nerve-racking finale for the 39-year-old Gai.

He was leading the Thai by just 0.4 point after the penultimate shot, when he found his hands shaking uncontrollably moments before his last shot.

'I waited for him to fire first. And, when the home crowd groaned, I knew I had a chance,' he said.

As it turned out, Jakkrit had managed only a poor 8.3 to finish on 672.3.

With that in mind, Gai steadied himself to fire a perfect 10 - and seal the win with 674.4.

'I had to control my trembling, it's normal for many shooters,' he said.

'But this is a very exciting and special win for me.'

With the men's trap individual and team golds, the team have met their five-gold target.

They have also surpassed Singapore's largest gold haul from shooting, the previous best being the four firsts by the men's trap and double trap teams in Jakarta 1997.

With five days to go, the gold rush may not be over yet.

Said a beaming team manager Lim Meng Kiaw: 'The golds for the rifle and air pistol events prove that our youth programme is bearing fruit.'

'We now have a pool of shooters, who have many years ahead of them.'

'They have a lot of potential to do well in many SEA Games to come.'



PERFECT 600: (from right) Ong Jun Hong, Jonathan Koh and Zhang Jin at the 10m air rifle team event's medal ceremony. Jonathan beat Jun Hong in the individual final. -- ST PHOTOS: EDWIN KOO

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