

SPORT

School Sports

'SPECIAL' MARK EYES BIGGER TARGETS

A Div double sprint champ wants SEA Games relay spot and will race in world U-20 c'ships

Jeremiah Ong

While youth sprinter Mark Lee had a memorable National School Games (NSG) campaign last week, when he broke decade-long records in both the A Division boys' 100m and 200m, he is hungry for more.

The 18-year-old Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) student is eyeing a spot in the 4x100m relay at the May 12-23 SEA Games in Hanoi, where he will be making his debut in the regional meet.

With his 10.59sec effort at the NSG's 100m final last Friday, not only did Mark break the record of 10.70sec set by Hwa Chong Institution's Donovan Chan in 2012, but it has also helped him meet the 10.60sec qualifying mark for the World Athletics Under-20 Championships in Colombia from Aug 1 to 6.

"I am really excited to go and be surrounded by the world's best," said Mark, whose 200m-winning time of 21.62sec last Wednesday

also shaved 0.13sec off Donovan's 2012 record.

"I want to keep my momentum through the rest of the year and beyond and hopefully then I will be able to dip below 10.50sec."

Helping him get there are his coaches - former national sprinter Hamkah Afik and national decathlon record holder Tang Ngai Kin.

"He doesn't crack under pressure, listens well and is focused," said Hamkah, who won SEA Games silver medals in the 200m (1993) and 4x100m relay (2003), along with two other relay bronzes. "He is very coachable. It's not easy to get somebody to listen and execute perfectly.

"When I was his age, my coach would tell me to do certain things but with all the nerves, it's hard to get it right and you need many races to perfect it. He is special."

Hamkah and Tang have been coaching Mark since he took up track and field as a co-curricular activity at Anglo-Chinese School (Primary) after taking part in the 80m hurdles at a sports meet.

To mould Mark's long-term development, his coaches even had a five-year plan, albeit one that was affected when he could not compete at the NSG in the last two years due to the pandemic.

As Mark's mother, Sim Sze Ki, 53, a marketing professional, put it: "His journey to becoming a sprint champion this year was truly a marathon."

Said Mark: "After the pandemic hit, it felt like all my hard work had gone to waste and it put me in an extremely tough mental battle but I am really grateful for the people around me who helped me push through that period."

Not surprisingly, he described his NSG victories as the ones that mean "everything" as it was his last schools meet.

"I am going to the SEA Games and maybe the Asian Games but nothing beats NSGs," he said, adding that all his friends were there and everyone was cheering for him. Being able to compete at the NSG also helped him get into the necessary mental state, which he can replicate and "improve on it in the future".

While the SEA Games may only be Mark's second international meet, after the Australian Athletics Championships two months ago, Hamkah hopes there will be many more to come.

"Hopefully we can manage his national service and he can get into a good university so he can continue to represent Singapore in the SEA Games, Asian Games, Commonwealth Games or even the Olympics," said the 50-year-old.

"I hope that after his performance in the NSG, the national team will consider him to be a part of their relay team."

Mark certainly hopes so, too, but added: "It's up to my coach, I've done everything I could."

But he also pledged to better himself continually.

"I am just trying to improve myself every day. I am not going to stop here," he said. "For me, this sport is about bettering myself and pushing myself as far as I can possibly go."

jeremiaho@sph.com.sg



Mark Lee (left) matching strides with ACS(I) teammate Xavier Tan before surging ahead to win the A Division boys' 100m last Friday in a superb 10.59sec. Coach Hamkah Afik describes him as "very coachable". ST PHOTO: SAMUEL ANG