

Home crowd the inspiration behind double canoe gold

Charmaine Ng

Lucas Teo had been here before. With the end in sight in the K1 1,000m race, and his closest rival – Thailand's Wichan Jaitieng – matching his every move, his mind flashed back to the 2011 SEA Games.

Making his Games debut then, the 25-year-old lost the gold when he finished five seconds behind Wichan in the same event.

At the Marina Channel yesterday, he was determined not to let history repeat itself.

But as he entered the final 300 metres, the aching pain from his overworked arms became hard to ignore.

His arch-rival threatened to pull away. Then, he heard the cheers.

Sitting on the bank on the channel, a small but partisan crowd of about 250 people made their voices heard. They screamed his name and slapped cheering sticks against each other as they rose to their feet, anticipating a tight finish.

Fuelled by the roars of the crowd, Teo powered to victory in a new personal best of 3min 43.036sec – more than two seconds ahead of his Thai rival – to win a his-

toric men's canoe gold, the first for Singapore in SEA Games history.

"I started to up my pace and he (Wichan) started to slow down a little bit, giving me the edge," said Teo, who is in his third year at the

National University of Singapore.

But he admitted that he could not have done it without the crowd's support.

He said: "I heard all the cheers and it spurred me on in the last

part... I knew my parents, friends and relatives were here."

The medal was a result of five years of hard work and patience.

At the last Games in 2013, he missed out on the opportunity to

stake a claim for the title as the event was not contested.

"This time round was my biggest chance to win it... I really wanted the gold," said Teo.

For the Singapore canoe team, the loud and proud home support was a welcome change to the silence that greets them when they train at the channel.

Brandon Ooi, 20, and Bill Lee, 29, who powered to victory in the K2, also paid tribute to those cheering them on.

Said Lee: "In the last part of our race, we really were quite spent.

"So to have the home crowd behind you, that was really what made the difference."

Before the win, Ooi had won only bronze medals in the past editions of the Games – from the K1 500m in 2013 and K2 200m and 1,000m in 2011.

With two momentous wins on the first of three canoeing competition days, coach Balazs Babella is confident ahead of the races tomorrow and on Tuesday.

"This is what we needed. It's something that will make the others do better than they ever could," said the 37-year-old Hungarian.

While Singapore took the gold

in the K1 and K2 races, they finished empty-handed in the remaining K4 and C1 events.

They were won by the Thailand team and Indonesia's Marjuki respectively.

Singapore did not participate in the C2 race which was won by Myanmar's Htike Win and Wai Sai Min.

For the Republic's athletes, however, the landmark wins are a shared contribution by the team.

"Without them, the two golds would have not been possible. Without them training on the water every day, pushing each other, Brandon, Bill and Lucas would not have been able to win anything," said Babella.

As the afternoon sun blazed down on the spectators, the three kayakers received their gold medals against the backdrop of the city's skyline.

But the thing that stood out the most was a white styrofoam sign stuck out of the fervent crowd, declaring: "Lucas Teo K1 1,000m GOLD". It was not fancy – written with a red marker. But it was heartfelt – and it proved all the difference in the world.



ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

Lucas Teo found a second wind in the K1 1,000m final after he heard the words of encouragement shouted at him from the crowd. He went on to finish in a personal best time and also avenged his defeat by a Thai rival in the 2011 Games.