

Tan's stoic, shooting tribe are hotshots in their own right

Sporting Life



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Shooters can't be perfect and yet they can be consumed by it. A 10.0 is considered excellent in diving but, as an Olympic champion said, in shooting it's a score that "sucks". Here, perfection is 10.9 but chasing it too hard can become a distracting and painful burden.

The best behaved tribe at the Olympics stand obediently in a straight line of 50 and never utter a sound. Not a whine, a curse, a snarl. They take their stance one metre from each other but it seems like they never see each other. Only their guns burp, never them.

This is Singaporean Adele Tan's world yesterday. She wanted to be a concert pianist and now she is stuck in a society of shooting stoics. Yet if we pay homage routinely to athletic movement, we should occasionally salute the fine art of stillness. Even if in those stiff jackets they look like a contemplative cult of badly dressed yogis.

About 30 minutes before the start of the 10m air rifle qualification, Tan sits on a chair looking ahead. I see the end of two white objects sticking out of her ears. Earbuds, I think. Listening to Bach probably. Cool.

"No," she said later. "They were earplugs". Just shutting the planet out.

Shooters are finicky people who may not necessarily make entertaining dinner guests. Methodical isn't sexy but it is fascinating. Some spend hours peering at pellets under a magnifying glass. Others, of course, do other things with a glass.

Yesterday, during the event, I get told a story of a European shooter so drunk during a World Cup final that he needed assistance getting dressed.

Did he win, I sneered.

"Of course," replied a former shooter.

When the qualification starts, Tan takes almost two minutes to fire her first shot. Nick Kyrgios, you think, would not neatly fit here. "Yeah," she said later, "I took a long time because at the start I felt that I needed more time to calm myself."

Later, after her score of 625.3



Singapore's Adele Tan took some time to compose herself before her first shot in the 10m air rifle but she finished a creditable 21st. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

leaves her in 21st place, the best finish by a Singaporean at the Olympics in this event, her vocabulary reveals the intensity locked within. Other athletes have mere butterflies in their stomachs, shooters have pterodactyls.

In a 10-minute chat, Tan uses variations of the word "perfect" four times, mentions "emotion" on four occasions and thrice talks of "battles". It's all understandable when you consider she fires 60 times at a target whose inner circle is 0.5mm. Just breathe wrong and you're a millimetre wide and a decimal point lower in your score. Clearly they've taken the term "margin for error" too far.

Indeed, after starting with a low 9.9, Tan puts her rifle down after her third shot and goes to her coach. "I had difficulty in terms of my breathing control," she explained. "And I looked at my coach because I think probably he noticed my shot routine was a little bit off. So I... spoke to him and when I went back I knew that I had to focus on certain things, not the outcome."

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Tan doesn't want to be that person and instead wants to "be a shooter who enjoys every shot like an art performance". Some of them were. After her chat with her

coach, her next four shots were 10.7, 10.7, 10.2 and 10.7.

Shooting doesn't lure fans, it rarely steals headlines, it will never dominate a Forbes rich list and yet the Olympics need it because it is a democratic nation in itself. Maybe that's why it is often the site of any Olympics' first medal ceremony.

If basketballers can be easily identified by their shoe size and a male gymnast's width of shoulder is a giveaway, shooters you cannot tell. They have the musculature of chess players and can be tall, short, thin, paunchy or wear thick glasses. They can be Eglys Yahima Cruz who is 41 or Yang Qian who won gold at 21. Everyone is welcome as long as they are an obsessive.

Tan came to these Games to withstand pressure and she did. Didn't melt or let the occasion own her. Didn't panic or fold. "This is the highest pressure that I had to face so far," she said. "And I did everything that I could. I really did everything I could emotionally."

It was hard to tell, of course, because her face showed nothing. Not a hint of a smile. Not the suggestion of a grimace. Shooters resist the electricity of adrenaline and also the lurch of despair. All they want is evenness. As they lean their heads on their rifles, again and again, hypnotised by their process, they look as unperturbed as a priest hearing confession.

Like everyone at these Games, they're just people trying to give it their best shot.