

# DETERMINED TO DO THEIR PART

Para-athletes Aini and Toh put their experience and influence to good use



**Kimberly Kwek**  
In Birmingham

Nur Aini Mohd Yasli was lifting dumbbells at a gym in Yishun one day when the budding powerlifter was approached by a fellow gym user who advised her that she should be doing cardio exercises instead of weights.

She said: "I'm not sure what his real intentions were. But I'd like to think that he was concerned because I was alone and he thought I might injure myself so I appreciated the concern."

"But sometimes people get turned off because they might think they were not given a chance to try."

Although the incident, which took place soon after she picked up powerlifting in 2017, did not stop her from pursuing the sport, she realised that such encounters might have a different impact on someone else.

After she shared her own experiences, other women started telling her that they too felt intimidated when they went to the gym, which is typically a testosterone-fuelled environment. This then prompted Aini to offer to accompany them during workouts.

The 29-year-old explained: "I thought that it's only human to share that we athletes even at this level, we do face this kind of scrutiny at the start but that shouldn't stop you from achieving your end goal."

She recalled the kindness and encouragement of fellow national powerlifter Kalai Vanen, who would sometimes accompany her in the gym when she first started powerlifting. This, she believes, gave her the confidence to train



Above: Nur Aini Mohd Yasli training at Toa Payoh ActiveSG gym for the Commonwealth Games, where the powerlifter has to compete in the up to 61kg category.



Left: Toh Wei Soong after training at Farrer Park Swimming Complex. He wants people with disabilities to be viewed equally in society.  
ST PHOTOS: ARIFFIN JAMAR, LIM YAOHUI

alone eventually and she hopes to be able to do the same for others.

"When you go into new territory, where everyone is quite used to the environment except for you, you feel like everyone is looking at you," she said. "Sometimes you need company to make you feel comfortable."

Like Commonwealth Games-bound Aini, swimmer Toh Wei Soong also hopes to use his influence to educate others.

The S7 50m freestyle bronze

medallist at the 2018 edition, who is also in Birmingham, wants people with disabilities to be viewed equally in society.

The 23-year-old said: "We have no real obligation to do so but we have such a preeminent position to help educate people and why is it so important to have integration in sport?"

"Why is it important to respect people with disabilities? Not because they have disabilities but they are people as well."

"We have such a precious insight into that. Why should we not share it? Why should we not make the effort to help others like us? We are just like everyone else albeit we do things in slightly different ways."

This is one reason why the National University of Singapore undergraduate is excited to return to the Commonwealth Games, which run their para sport programme alongside the one for able-bodied athletes. It is the only major multi-sport event to do so with the Paralympics, Asian Para Games and Asean Para Games, all conducted separately from the Olympics, Asian Games and SEA Games.

He said: "I have very fond memories of the Commonwealth Games 2018 because it was the first Games I went to that had integrated accommodation, training venues, dining halls and so on. To me, the Games have always been, ever since they started doing integrated events, a demonstration of how amazing the experience can be when you have integrated sports events between able-bodied and the para."

Going into the Commonwealth Games, Toh is hoping to build on his Paralympics experience in Japan, where he finished fourth in the S7 50m fly final and seventh in the 50m free final, as he works towards Paris 2024.

He said: "All those years of effort have gone to good use... Essentially I have reached one of my dreams so going into the Games this year and building off the momentum of Tokyo, there's a sense of excitement and passion that now I'm of a Paralympic standard and a Paralympian."

Last year's Paralympics were also an eye-opening experience for fellow debutante Aini, who was inspired by the abilities of her fellow competitors.

"It's amazing how they are consistent at every competition and the Paralympics. It's still something I'm trying to master as I train more and go for more competitions."

The Commonwealth Games will be slightly different as there are only two weight categories: women's lightweight (up to 61kg) and heavyweight (above 61kg).

This means that Aini, who usually participates in the women's up to 45kg event and whose personal best is 81kg, will be competing against lifters from other weight classes.

But she is looking forward to the experience, saying: "It'll be interesting because I've never met other competitors from the other categories."

"Usually, I'm pretty confined with the competitors in my category itself, there are also things to learn from the other categories."

kimkwek@sph.com.sg