

IQBAL 'BEYOND GRATEFUL'

Emotional silat exponent cries with relief after finally securing gold at his sixth outing

**Deepanraj Ganesan
In Hanoi**

As his score of 9.96 flashed on the screen yesterday, Iqbal Abdul Rahman hunched over, covered his face in his hands and began to cry.

He had just won the men's artistic singles (tunggal) final, narrowly edging out Thailand's Ilyas Sadara (9.93), and the waves of relief and vindication flowed as freely as his tears. Five previous appearances at the SEA Games had yielded a silver and bronze medal for the pencak silat exponent.

A gold was finally his.

It was also Singapore's first gold at the Hanoi Games and Iqbal, with the national flag draped around his shoulders, ran to his coach Muhammad Fiqri and gave him a bear hug.

Iqbal, 28, was still emotional 20 minutes later when speaking to the media. He said: "No words to describe. I am beyond grateful. I'm always confident and always feeling great about my capabilities.

"I did not have the slightest doubt about myself. I was confident I would give my everything and I managed to do that."

He had claimed a silver in the men's artistic singles at the 2019 Games in the Philippines and a bronze on home soil in 2015.

Iqbal said: "A lot of my teammates and coaches said sixth time's the charm. I didn't have a target, didn't tell myself that I wanted to win the gold. I told myself that I

wanted to give everything in the arena and I didn't want to go back to Singapore with any regrets."

Despite a full trophy cabinet – Iqbal won at the 2018 World Championships and has four Asian Championship titles – this triumph at the Bac Tu Liem Gymnasium was hugely significant.

He noted: "It means everything to me. The SEA Games (gold) was the only thing that I was missing. Emotions were high. I didn't even see my scores and I was hearing the cheers from my teammates. The moment I heard the loudest cheers, I knew the gold was mine."

He added: "It's too early for retirement. I still have a long way to go. I wasn't that emotional during the world championships. It (tears) was probably because the tension was high.

"The gold is not just for myself but for my teammates. I promised them that I would give my best."

Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong, who is in the Vietnamese capital and shared a warm embrace with Iqbal after his winning routine, said: "I hope the trail that he blazes as the first gold medal (winner) for Singapore will set an example for many others to come.

"His gold is also a story of great resilience and determination. This is his sixth time at the SEA Games and I am so proud of him for showing grit and tenacity. I hope he inspires many more Singapore athletes to do the same."

In the men's artistic doubles



Iqbal Abdul Rahman proudly showing off his SEA Games gold after edging out his Thai opponent by 0.03 of a point in the men's artistic singles (tunggal) final at Hanoi's Bac Tu Liem sports hall yesterday. It "was the only thing that I was missing" for the world and multiple Asian champion. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

(ganda), brothers Hazim Zaque, 18 and Haziq Zaque, 20, scored 9.905 to clinch silver, just behind Malaysian duo Taqiyuddin Hamid and Sazzlan Yuga's total of 9.950.

Hazim said: "Our goal was to

make our parents proud and we're happy with a silver on our debut. We will train harder and come back stronger to win gold next time."

The trio of Amirah Sahrin, Iffah

Batrisyia Noh and Nur Ashikin Zulkifli took bronze in the women's team (regu) event after they finished joint third with Malaysia.

Nur Azlyana Ismail and Sharifah

Shazza Samsuri were also awarded joint bronze after finishing third alongside Malaysia in the women's doubles (ganda) event.

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