



National pencak silat exponent Iqbal Abdul Rahman is tipped by head coach Sheik Alau'ddin as one of three athletes he hopes can win a title at next month's SEA Games in Hanoi. The 28-year-old will be competing in the artistic category. He is a world champion and four-time Asian Championships gold medalist. ST PHOTO: SYAMIL SAFARI

# IQBAL WANTS 1ST GOLD FOR SELF AND S'PORE

Silat exponent has many top prizes but he has yet to taste SEA Games success in 5 attempts

Sazali Abdul Aziz

National pencak silat exponent Iqbal Abdul Rahman is a world champion and four-time Asian Championships gold medalist, but a SEA Games triumph has eluded him in five attempts.

The 28-year-old, who competes in the artistic category, is out to change this at the biennial competition from May 12-23 in Hanoi.

"No athlete wants to finish second or third, and I want to be on top of that podium," he told *The Straits Times* in a recent interview

at the national silat squad's training base at the OCBC Arena.

"This is my sixth SEA Games, so I feel it is about time I clinched that gold medal.

"I feel like my motivation level heading into this (edition) is so much more than previous ones."

A silver at the last edition of the SEA Games in the Philippines in 2019 is Iqbal's best showing. He also won a bronze in 2015.

Many of the traditional powerhouses in silat are nations in South-east Asia, such as Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia, so competition at the regional level is often as fierce - or even tougher - as at

the world level.

Still, Sheik Alau'ddin, head coach of the Singapore squad, believes Iqbal has what it takes to triumph in Hanoi.

He has seen Iqbal blossom from the time he picked up silat at the age of seven, to the athlete he is today.

"You can see the enthusiasm he has for the sport. He wants to be first, in front, in training and in competition," said Sheik, a two-time world champion and silat icon from the 1990s.

"He has been here awhile, he has always had good discipline and he has also developed leadership qualities."

Sheik, who is also the chief executive officer of the Singapore Silat Federation, said Iqbal is one of three athletes he hopes can win a ti-

tle in Hanoi.

He has set a target for the team to return with three gold, three silver and six bronze medals from the 16 events.

Although he declined to name which two athletes in the tanding (match) category he has pinned his hopes on for the other two triumphs, he hopes up to five can reach the final of their respective weight classes.

They are part of Sheik's "usual suspects" - namely reigning world champions Sheik Ferdous, Sheik Farhan, Nurul Suhalla and Hazim Yusli.

Iqbal, however, noted that preparations for this edition have been challenging for the entire squad, given the lead-up has clashed with the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

Despite not eating and drinking from dawn to dusk, he still trains twice a day, five days a week.

"Most of us have never had this situation before, so we struggled a bit at the start," he said.

"But, from the second week, we've managed to pick up the pace and pull through."

Sheik believes this could benefit his squad.

"Training during this period is all about mental strength," he said.

"It's about persevering and not thinking, 'I have to go slower or less intense because I am fasting'."

"Besides, if we can manage (the challenge), why can't we manage other tough situations during competition?"

"It makes the athletes stronger in their minds, hearts and bodies."

Iqbal's men's artistic single event is among the first - on the eve of the Games' official opening ceremony - so he could be in contention for Singapore's first gold in Hanoi.

He said: "It would mean a lot if I could grab that first gold for silat and it would be amazing if I am able to win the first gold for Singapore."

"I'm looking forward to going in and aiming to be the first to succeed."

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