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THE UNASSUMING STAR

LIM HEEM WEI made history when she became the first Singaporean gymnast to qualify for the 2012 London Olympics. The 24-year-old discusses the challenges of training hard for competitions – and how she triumphed through determination, hard work and a desire for excellence.

When national gymnast Lim Heem Wei awoke some mornings, it was to an immediate overwhelming sensation of pain. Day after day of relentless stretching, twisting, bending and leaping was taking its toll on her body as she prepared for competition after competition.

However the petite athlete has always been known for her mental determination to overcome whatever obstacles that come her way – and that includes pain. Since she debuted in competitive gymnastics at the 2001 Southeast Asian (SEA) Games, her body has endured a litany of injuries. Over the phone, she casually brushes them aside. “They are not life-threatening,” the 24-year-old says. “Besides, injuries are part and parcel of sport – it



shouldn't stop anyone from continuing to work hard."

Her nonchalance towards her injuries may be surprising to some. While sprains and strains are all too common for serious gymnasts, she has been through much worse. In 2007, she suffered a stress fracture to her lower back. The next year, she fractured her left foot while training for the Asian Gymnastics Championships.

Still, she persisted in competing in the team event. The National University of Singapore (NUS) business undergraduate explains: "I didn't consider backing out because my team would have been affected." Eventually, the team won bronze. But her recovery was severely compromised. By 2009, she knew she had to undergo bone graft surgery – or risk not being able to walk properly in the future. Two screws were implanted in her bone.

Recovery was long, painful and difficult. At 20, she was already considered old in the gymnastics world. Most gymnasts peak in their early to late teens. In her long absence from training, she had also put on weight. After being in a cast for seven weeks, she had to cope with regaining the flexibility and range of her ankle, rebuilding her physical fitness, and scheduling physiotherapy and rehabilitation sessions into her already- hectic routine. All of this could easily have spelled the end of her gymnastics career, but she refused to give up.

Finally, Heem Wei's determination paid off when she competed at the Artistic Gymnastics World Championships in Tokyo in 2010. That qualified her for the Olympic test event held in January 2012, where she did well enough to qualify for the 2012 London Olympic Games. She made history by being the first Singaporean gymnast to win a spot in the games. "To be able to qualify and then participate in the Olympics was a dream come true," she says.

At the Olympics, Heem Wei gave a strong and poised performance before a full arena, with her parents sitting proudly in the stands. She achieved a combined score of 50.7999 on four apparatuses – the balance beam, uneven bars, vault and floor – and finished 45th out of 98 competitors. While she did not qualify for the all-around final, it was a credible result considering that Heem Wei was Singapore's first representative at the event.

Heem Wei's remarkable trajectory to the Olympics is a story that truly inspires. While it may be a tale marked by physical pain, she has shown how a strong dose of determination, sheer hard work and a desire for excellence have gotten her to where she is today.

TEAM ENCOURAGEMENT

When Heem Wei started Primary One at Singapore Chinese Girls' School (SCGS), her teacher, Ann Ravi, noticed how lively and energetic she was. The self-professed tomboy, who is a middle child with two sisters, recalls: "I would climb trees, ride bicycles and play with dogs. I even had a boy's haircut! So Mrs. Ravi asked if I was keen to join the gymnastics team."

At the time, Heem Wei did not even know the difference between handstands and cartwheels. But curiosity pushed her to say yes, and she started spending two afternoons every week at gymnastics class. "The training involved running, jumping and tumbling around the gym," says Heem Wei. "I think my parents were glad that I found an avenue to unleash my energy in a productive way."

Heem Wei enjoyed the trainings, as her seniors doted on her. With her parents' loving support, Heem Wei continued doing gymnastics throughout her primary school years, even joining the Singapore Amateur Gymnastics Association when she was

10. At 12, she was given the opportunity to compete in the women's team floor exercise and balance beam events at the 2001 SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. "It

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was a big leap for me. Unlike my teammates, I had only participated in local competitions before." She was also the youngest in the team.

Before the start of each event, Heem Wei remembers being jittery and nervous. But she quickly looked to her teammates for guidance and reassurance. "I saw how everyone, especially my leader, Low San May, remained calm and composed. Since they could deal with the pressure, I was sure I could too." For Heem Wei, the camaraderie she felt with her team also spurred her on. "Even though we didn't win any medals in that SEA Games, just working towards a common goal made the training journey worth it. I also gained experience from participating."

Her passion for her sport is evident. "Gymnastics is a perfectionist sport. Unlike other sports, we are expected to deliver our skills in an almost flawless form," mulls Heem Wei, who adds that she admires the Russians for their ability to execute their skills with power, elegance and precision.

DAILY DRILLS IN DISCIPLINE

After her first SEA Games, Heem Wei considered quitting the sport. She had observed that, compared to other gymnasts of her age, she was merely average. "I wasn't exceptionally flexible or strong – there were so many gymnasts around me who displayed more talent," she states emphatically. Yet, that did not stop her from trying her best. "Talent wasn't going to drop from the sky. I knew that I had to make up for any intrinsic shortfalls with sheer hard work. I just kept working, working, working towards it."

Naturally, it was a task easier said than done. But Heem Wei put her mind to it. She trained four to five hours every day, six times a week. "Sometimes, it got so tough I didn't even feel 'human' anymore," she admits. As she trained, she had to manage her studies, first at SCGS, then at Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP). The Sport and Wellness Management diploma student even sacrificed time with family and friends just to train. "Social engagements like movie dates and personal activities like surfing the net definitely took a back seat."

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Little wonder that thoughts of giving up regularly flashed through her mind. "But to me, there were two ways about it – I could give up, or I could go all the way," she reflects. "Once I decided not to take the easy way out, I knew I had to push through and get by. If you only put in 50%, you cannot expect a miracle in the competition results."

For a young Heem Wei, discipline had a lot to do with it. "There are only 24 hours in a day. I had to know what I expected of myself – to do well in competitions and to score a place in a local university – and be disciplined enough to work towards it. Just as I worked on my strengths and weaknesses in gymnastics, I studied the best I could in school."

Each time Heem Wei struggled in training, she would think of everyone who supported her, like her parents, coaches and schools. "I figured that I had to at least give my best shot in overcoming all my challenges, be it physical or psychological. It wouldn't be fair to them if I gave up just like that."

She remembers one of the toughest decisions she had to make – whether or not to defer her O-level to train full-time for the 2005 SEA Games. It was with the support of SCGS principal Rosalind Heng that she eventually decided to do so. Heem Wei adds: "She even allowed me to train at the High Performance Training Centre, and counted that attendance and effort as my



CCA. I had to work hard to repay that level of trust she accorded to me.”

Her hard work paid off, as she became part of the women’s team that won Singapore’s first team gold in the Philippines in 2005. She would eventually score two more gold medals in the 2007 and 2011 SEA Games. Locally, she also scored a series of gold medals at the Singapore Gymnastics Open Championship in 2011.

Besides five SEA Games, Heem Wei also competed in two Asian Games (2006, 2010). Before her success at the London Olympics, her defining achievement was winning the Republic’s first-ever gymnastics silver medal for the women’s balance beam event at the New Delhi Commonwealth Games in 2010.

HUMILITY IN EXCELLENCE

Heem Wei has good reason to be proud of her sporting achievements, but she remains grounded and modest. “I definitely did not walk this journey alone,” she says. “Besides my parents and my former principal, I also have

NYP and NUS, the Singapore Sports Institute (SSI) medical team, Singapore Amateur Gymnastics Association, as well as my two coaches – Yuan Kexia and Zhao Qun – to thank.”

She cites the Chinese gymnasts as her inspiration in humility. “They are such great gymnasts but never come across as arrogant or overconfident.

Even when they win, they do not snub other athletes.” Heem Wei also saw how they respected their coaches by always addressing them formally, and she applied those standards to her coaches.

With her Olympic successes solidly behind her, Heem Wei is now at a stage where she has to carefully consider her future. “It was a privilege and an honour to have been able to compete at the highest platform, and it will always be a wonderful memory.” After she graduates from NUS, she looks forward to competing in the corporate world for a change. “I would like to do something related to business, but I hope to give back to the sport, probably as a gymnastics coach or an international judge.” Interestingly, she is also longing to try out water sports like windsurfing, sailing and wakeboarding – all activities that she never got to try because of her unflinching commitment to gymnastics.

The sport remains close to her heart. “I feel that gymnastics has shaped me to become a disciplined, diligent and down-to-earth person,” she says contemplatively. “Beyond that, it has nurtured my emotional resilience. From my injuries, I’ve learned that things don’t always go the way we want them to go in life. But it is possible to remain tough mentally, pick ourselves up, overcome the challenges, and move on.”

VALUES

Perseverance • Humility • Diligence

REFLECTION

1. It took a strong will to overcome injuries and naysayers in gymnastics. There were times that she thought about giving up. But she was determined to go the distance. On the back of that will, Heem Wei became the first Singaporean to qualify as a gymnast at the 2012 London Olympic Games. Have you been in professional situations where you have had to persevere through adversity? What values helped you stay true to your goals or dreams? Have you mentored or counselled a colleague or friend in similarly difficult situations? How did you help motivate them?
2. Great athletes rise to the top of the podium with commitment, talent and a community of support from people who care. Through their experiences and their role models, athletes have learned to be gracious in winning and noble in defeat. How have you handled success? Have you graciously acknowledged the people who have helped you along the way? Do you make an effort to be a good role model to your friends and colleagues? How would people describe you as a leader or mentor?

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