

PERAK

By T. AVINESHWARAN

avinesh@thestar.com.my

Photos by SAIFUL BAHRI and AZHAR MAHFOF

As good as gold for the Silver State

Diver Jun Hoong has done Perak proud by winning the silver medal with partner Pandelega Rinong at the Olympic Games in Rio

OLYMPIC diver Cheong Jun Hoong's family waited with bated breath even though her event started at 3am Malaysian time.

What does a little loss of sleep matter when your child is about to perform on a world stage at the Maria Lenk Aquatic Center in Rio de Janeiro during the Olympic Games.

Jun Hoong's father Cheong Sun Meng, 54; mother, Leow Lai Kun, 50; and sister Cheong Jun Yeong, 23, were hoping for the best after she dropped out of contention in round four of the women's 3m-springboard synchro event where she partnered Nur Dhabitah Sabri earlier this week.

Younger sister Jun Yeong, said she spoke to her sister after the springboard event and knew in an instant that Jun Hoong was under pressure and not happy with her performance.

"I just told her to calm down and relax, not to give up and give her best shot in the platform event. She just told me she would try her best and at that moment, I knew she needed her own space before her next event."

Jun Yeong did not call her sister again. She knew Jun Hoong could feel their love and support for her.

"While most people in our neighbourhood were sleeping at 3am, we cheered her on."

The Ipoh-born Jun Hoong put aside her earlier disappointment and delivered Malaysia's first medal of this Olympics together with national diving belle Pandelega Rinong at the Rio Games with a silver medal in the women's 10m-platform synchro.

"When the results were announced at 3.45am, we couldn't contain ourselves. We just screamed for joy!

"We were so excited and happy for here. China are champs in diving but to finish closely behind them is an achievement," said Jun Yeong, who just completed her tertiary education in England.

Her parents, who have always been supportive of Jun Hoong's ambitions, said they could tell instantly she wasn't herself in her first event.

"She wasn't smiling and was under pressure. In the second event, she was under pressure too but she did her dives pretty well.

"When she won the silver, I was surprised but all her hardwork and sacrifice has paid off. As a father, I'm very proud of her achievement," said Sun Meng, a vegetable wholesaler in Perak.

Sun Meng said Jun Hoong's fascination with aquatics started at the age of four when he sent her for swimming class.

Their home is only five minutes away from the Ipoh Aquatics Complex and, once upon a time, the complex was her second home.

Jun Hoong's first stepped into the diving pool at the age of nine when the then-state diving coach Zhou Xiyang suggested she try her luck in diving.

"The coach told her she had the size and height for diving and should try it out" said Jun Yeong.

During her days in Perak, she used to train



Jun Hoong (left) and Pandelega Rinong pose with their medals after the women's synchronised 10m platform diving final in the Maria Lenk Aquatic Center. — AP Photo

five hours a day from Monday to Saturday. At a young age, she dealt with a very hectic schedule as she had to go to school, training and then tuition classes.

"Whatever we asked of her, she would do. Like any eldest child, she is the responsible one. She was quiet and can be quite blur at times," said her mother Lai Kun.

Other than diving, Jun Hoong plays the piano and draws well too, but due to her diving, her other hobbies take a backseat.

Until she was 13, Jun Hoong trained in Ipoh with Zhou.

In 2004, realising that she had the potential to become a diver for the country, the Bukit Jalil Sports School offered her a chance to study and train there.

"After she went to Bukit Jalil, it was just training and she didn't get to spend much time with us. To this day, she only gets to come back to Ipoh once or twice a year.

"Once she stepped into diving, we encouraged her to continue and not give up. This is a once in a lifetime thing. If you stop half-way, it will be wasted. My parents told her that she could pursue her education anytime," said Jun Yeong.

Jun Hoong coped well in Bukit Jalil but training under different coaches every year

stunted her growth a little and in 2006, she had to skip the Asian Games in Doha after sustaining a back injury that required a long recovery.

Her mother recalled that Jun Hoong thought of quitting the sport in 2009 due to an injury to her anterior cruciate ligament and pressure from the National Sports Council to step up her performance.

Knowing that she couldn't train, she decided to continue her studies in Mass Communication at Universiti Putra Malaysia. She was questioned by some of the council members if she was serious about her diving career.

"They told her that she would be kicked off the team if she did not step up, but national diving coach Yang Zhuliang knew her potential and told them it would be a mistake to drop her.

"She didn't want to disappoint her coach, so she gritted her teeth and told herself that she would not quit," Lai Kun says.

Yang was and is still something of a father figure to Jun Hoong as he is the reason why she is doing well in the world diving scene.

Last year, she was left out of the World Championships in Kazan, Russia, in July at the last minute after she injured both her

heels while training in China.

She came back to action in the Diving World Cup in Rio in February this year and earned slots for Malaysia in three Olympic events.

Under Yang's tutelage, Jun Hoong has grown from strength to strength, and Jun Yeong says the Chinese coach is very dear to her sister.

Yang seems to have faith in his protege's abilities as he has entered her for three events – 3m springboard individual and synchro and 10m platform synchro – in Rio.

Sun Meng said he initially wanted his daughter to study law, but after realising her potential in diving, he decided to let her pursue her own life choices.

"She was a quiet girl then, but now she is sociable. She is able to make fun of people and have fun with people.

"Right now, she is at her peak. I think she can go on for two more years. One thing about this girl – she doesn't know what the end means.

"She keeps on going and whenever there is a bump in the road, she is able to overcome it," he said.

Jun Yeong said the family opted not to go to Rio because her father needed to take care of his business.

"She is used to staying on her own and I'm sure she is doing fine in Rio. We call and video chat with her every day.

"Whether it's live or on TV, our love and affection for her is still the same. She will always be a champion in our eyes."



Jun Hoong (right) and Pandelega Rinong during the women's synchronised 10m platform diving final. — AP Photo



Jun Hoong's father Sun Meng, 54, mother Lai Kun, 50, and sister Jun Yeong, 23, watching a video of Jun Hoong and Pandelega receiving Malaysia's first medal at the Rio Games – a silver medal in the women's 10m platform synchro. — SAIFUL BAHRI/The Star

www.rattandecor.my

RATTAN DÉCOR

MOVING OUT SALE

0% EASY PAYMENT
Maybank • AmBank • With purchase above RM2,000

Visit the nearest showroom now (10 am - 8 pm)
Rattan Decoration Marketing Sdn Bhd (538959-X)
SUBANG:
223A, Jalan 2A, Kampung Subang, 40150 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia. T. +603-7846 3315
GPS. 3°8'23"N 101°32'54"E (3.13972, 101.54833)
BALAKONG:
Lot 1918B, 1918 Furniture Mall, Jalan KPB 7, Kawasan Perindustrian Kg. Baru Balakong, 43300 Seri Kembangan, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia. T. +603 8961 1608
GPS. 3°1'36"N 101°44'27"E (3.02667, 101.74083)