



I WANT TO PRODUCE A MALAYSIAN OLYMPIC CHAMP

DIVING coach Yang Zhuliang tells *Timesport's* Ajitpal Singh how he turned an inconsistent Cheong Jun Hoong into a world champion in the 10m platform in Budapest on Wednesday.

Question: In the past, Cheong Jun Hoong was known for being inconsistent in competitions. How did you turn her into a world champion?

Answer: It is not easy for a new diving nation to produce a world champion. The standard in the world meet is very high and one must perform near-perfectly to finish on the podium.

There is a big story behind Jun Hoong's success. In the past, she had issues performing well in competitions. Jun Hoong has a history of injuries. She could not train much due to injuries to her wrist, heel, shoulder and knee, and thus she could not work on strengthening her technique. She used to make mistakes in individual events during competitions.

However, she was always more confident in the 3m springboard and 10m platform synchro events.

In the build-up to the World Championships, she initially spent countless hours practising for the springboard before she picked up a back injury.

So, we had to forget about the springboard. She then focused on the platform. Jun Hoong did a lot of harness training in the dry gym to tighten her routines and technique.

Frankly, I did not set a target for any of the divers in the World

Championships. I just wanted them to perform what they practise in training. Like I said, I am grooming them for the 2020 Olympics.

Q: What did Jun Hoong say to you when she was declared the world champion?

A: Jun Hoong came running and gave me a big hug. She was close to tears and I almost broke down as I was just as surprised as her. To me, it was a sign of progress for Malaysian diving. I knew that one day I will produce a Malaysian world champion.

I am so happy for Jun Hoong as she is very hardworking in training. She has matured into a good diver and I believe she will attain more success in the upcoming years.

But my mission here is not over yet. I now want to produce an Olympic champion.

Q: How many world champions have you produced since becoming a coach?

A: In all, I have produced seven world champions but Jun Hoong is my first outside China. When I was coaching in China, I produced six world champions with Chen Lixia being my first at the 1994 world meet in Rome.

However, Jun Hoong's success is very special to me as I have finally achieved my goal to pro-

duce a world champion outside China. Jun Hoong's win is huge as many regard China as untouchable in women's diving.

Diving is not an easy sport. A diver must start from young to master all the basic skills. It takes countless hours in the pool and dry gym to improve. I have seen many divers just waste away as they could not handle the pressure that came together with training.

Q: Is Jun Hoong's win a sign of China's decline in the platform event?

A: No. They are still the strongest nation in women's diving. Jun Hoong must work even harder now as China will be back for revenge in the next competition.

A new form of pressure will now hound Jun Hoong. Everyone will be watching her as she is a world champion.

She needs to overcome the pressures that will come from being the best in the world. It is not easy but I will do my best to help her face these pressures and continue to perform consistently.

As for China, they have at least 10 divers of equal quality in each event. We may see China entering a different set of divers for the next priority event after this failure.

Q: Do we need more coaches in the national set-up?

A: We have four coaches in Malaysia. Zhang Yukun and I are coaches under the Podium Programme while Huang Qiang and Li Ten come under the 'Kita Juara' Sea Games programme. We handle a total of 15 divers.

Obviously, we need more coaches. Preferably, we need specialised coaches for each event. It will help Malaysia in the long run in producing a bigger pool of champion divers.

Q: Are there enough diving facilities in Malaysia?

A: Nope. In Malaysia, there are no proper harness training facilities. Conducting training in Malaysia is tough as sometimes these facilities are used for other things. As a result, we often need to change our training programme.

And because of this, we al-

ways need to go to China to train as facilities there are complete.

This has to change as Jun Hoong's win will definitely encourage more youngsters to take up the sport. There are many youngsters in Malaysia with potential but unfortunately, they do not train enough. We need better facilities to keep producing quality divers.

The newly renovated diving venue in Bukit Jalil is a good start, but we also need adequate facilities in other states. Like I said, a diver needs to start young and to encourage them, we need more training facilities.



Coach Yang Zhuliang