



25th SEA GAMES, LAOS VIENTIANE 2009

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(From left) Terence Tan, goalkeeper Nigel Tay and Yip Ren Kai blocking a Filipino shot as Singapore's solid defence stood out. ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI

ALMOST THERE

Polo boys will win 23rd straight gold by beating Thais today

"It was a near-perfect performance in terms of defending," beamed centre-back Yip Ren Kai. "We wore them down and never gave them a good look at goal."

After conceding a soft goal to their opponents near the end of the first quarter, Singapore tightened their defence and the Philippines went goalless for the remainder of the game.

Said Singapore coach Lee Sai Meng: "Our defence was fantastic today. Everyone played their role perfectly."

A major contributing factor was Yip, whose blocks and interceptions drew applause from his teammates on the sidelines at the aquatic stadium in Vientiane.

One key play early in the second quarter – as he propelled his muscular 1.85m frame into the air to swat away a pass to opposing centre-forward Dale Evangelista who was poised to score – summed up his contribution.

Even wide attacker Alvin Lee, who scored two goals yesterday, helped out at the back as a makeshift centre-back while Yip took a breather. "It was a real team effort," said Kenneth Wee, who chipped in with two goals, including the opener in the first minute.

When the defence was breached, the Philippines found goalkeeper Nigel Tay in unbeatable form. A double save which in-

cluded a clearance off the line in the closing minutes exemplified his defiance in the water.

While the defence was iron-clad, Singapore were also clinical in attack. They took advantage of their numerical advantage when the Filipinos were punished for ill discipline, to add to their goal tally.

"That smashed their confidence," said Tay. Added Yip: "We were very patient today and didn't rush to take our shots."

Besides composure, noted coach Lee, his players were very deliberate in their play, not allowing their rivals to dictate the play or launch quick counter-attacks.

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VIENTIANE: They say goals will win you matches, but it is the defence that wins titles. Or in this case, the South-east Asia (SEA) Games gold medal.

And Singapore's water polo team proved that adage to be correct, as they routed their main rivals the Philippines 8-1 yesterday.

Barring an epic collapse today, Singapore's win, combined with Thailand's 8-11 loss to Indonesia yesterday, means the Republic can almost taste a record 23rd consecutive water polo gold medal.

They will confirm the country's first gold of these Games today if they beat the Thais in the final match of the four-team, round-robin tournament.

It should not be too difficult a task, given Singapore's current form. Said Singapore captain Luo Nan: "If we play like we did today, there won't be any surprises tomorrow."

Also, Singapore outclassed Thailand 10-5 in the final of the Singapore Water Polo Invitational Open – a SEA Games warm-up – barely three months ago.

Luo and Co.'s performance in the win over the Filipinos, the 2007 silver medalists, had many, including chef de mission Jessie Phua and Singapore National Olympic Council secretary-general Chris Chan, purring.