



Singapore captain Luo Nan is pumped up after scoring against Thailand. His goal helped the Republic overcome an insipid first-half display in their final round-robin match. ST PHOTOS: LIM SIN THAI

CHAMPIONS AGAIN

Singapore fight back after early setback to clinch 23rd straight water polo title



SEA GAMES 2009, LAOS

December 9-18



AT THE GAMES

BY JONATHAN WONG

+VIENTIANE: In the end, it did not matter if they had trailed Thailand. For the gold medal was as good as hanging around their necks.

But try telling that to the Singapore water polo team after their hard fought 8-5 comeback win yesterday.

Because, even though the nation's 23rd straight gold medal and the first of the South-east Asia (SEA) Games in Laos was in the bag, they had another record to preserve - their unbeaten run in the competition since 1965.

An insipid first-half performance saw them trailing 2-3 to the Thais in their final game of the four-team round-robin tournament. It was also the first time they had trailed in the tournament, having comfortably beaten Indonesia and the Philippines 14-5 and 8-1 respectively.

What followed was a rollicking by coach Lee Sai Meng at the break as he reminded his players of their proud heritage.

Said centre-back Yip Ren Kai, who again put up a dominating display in defence: "At that point it wasn't about the gold medal any more. It was about pride and protecting Singapore's legacy."

Within a minute of the restart, veteran shooter Terence Tan equalised with a delicate lob from eight metres out. Teammates Lin Diyan and Kelvin Ong, both

left with only the opposing goalkeeper Jitvisut Hunchati to beat, squandered the chances to score.

But, with just 34 seconds of the quarter remaining, centre-forward Eugene Teo outmuscled a defender to score and help Singapore regain the lead.

Further goals from captain Luo Nan, Alvin Lee and two by Lin's younger brother Diyang completed the turnaround.

Said Singapore National Olympic Council (SNOC) secretary-general Chris Chan, who watched the drama unfold from the stands: "It felt like it was the final. Thankfully our boys came through in the end."

The scene after the final whistle in Vientiane's aquatic stadium where the Singapore players embraced each other was in stark contrast to the gloom during the interval.

They also performed their now-customary ritual of throwing the Republic's chef de mission (this time it was Jessie Phua, who sportingly accepted the polite request) into the pool.

The unscheduled dip did not dampen her mood. Said a smiling Phua: "I would love to be dunked into the pool any time for a gold medal!"

Yesterday's gold for Singapore was also the first medal to be awarded at the Games. The opening ceremony is scheduled for tomorrow at the National Stadium.

The players received their medals from Lao Standing Deputy Prime Minister and chairman of the 25th SEA Games organising committee Somsavat Lengsavad, Singapore's ambassador in Vientiane Benjamin Jeyaraj William and SNOC vice-president Dr Tan Eng Liang.

Joked coach Lee, who has won six gold medals himself, as he watched his players walked up to the podium: "It's the first time I've been to a Games and not gone home with a medal."

Praising the nation's "ever-dependable water polo team", Phua said: "It's a nice start to the Games for us."

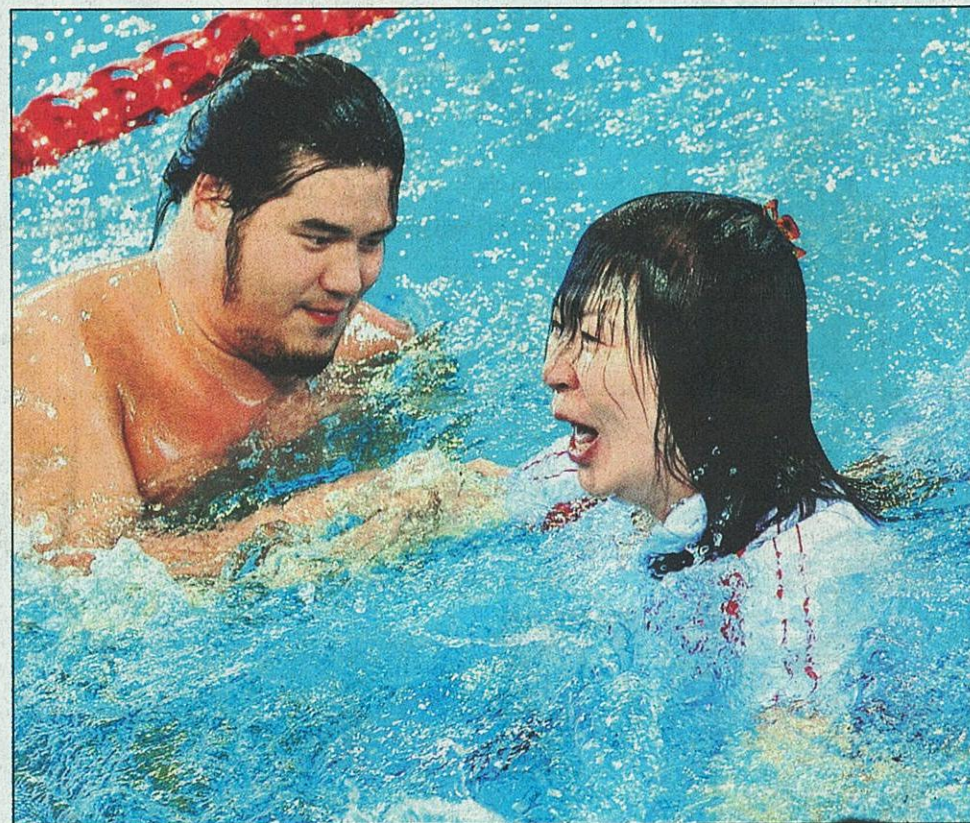
Said captain Luo: "Hopefully this will set the tone for the rest of the country and motivate them to win more golds."

While his teammates posed for photographs, yesterday's celebrations were a poignant one for the veteran Tan, who sat quietly by himself on the walkway.

Having been a member of six winning teams since 1999, he has decided to retire. "It's been a really emotional experience and it's starting to hit me now," he said as his voice broke slightly.



The Singapore water polo team members proudly wearing their gold medals, which were the first to be awarded at the South-east Asia Games in Laos.



Singapore's chef de mission Jessie Phua (right) being helped out of the pool by player Lin Diyan, after she was dunked by the team members who were celebrating the victory in customary style.

Gathering himself, he added: "This last medal is for Sharon, my new-born daughter."

After 10 years and countless memories, Tan walks away from the sport a contented man. But the journey has just begun for debutant Samuel Loh.

Clutching his gold medal tightly to his chest, the 20-year-old said: "I finally feel

part of the water polo family and I'll remember this moment for the rest of my life."

He is now part of a proud Singapore tradition - one that expects nothing less than victory and a gold medal in water polo at the SEA Games.

jonwong@sph.com.sg