



IRON CHEF

Former cook-turned-boxer hopes to serve a gold-medal winning dish in Myanmar

Report by SAZALI ABDUL AZIZ
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His job is to dish out beatings in the ring.

So perhaps it isn't a surprise boxer Ridhwan Ahmad is as adept with a spatula and wok in his hands, as he is with a pair of gloves over them.

Ridhwan, 26 next week, who is gunning for the men's lightweight (60kg) gold at next week's South-east Asia (SEA) Games in Myanmar, spent three years as a cook at popular eatery Spize at Simpang Bedok.

"I'm ok as a cook lah, not bad," he said with a sheepish smile. "I liked cooking pasta dishes most back then, but now I prefer to do pastries."

Ridhwan fondly remembers his time working in the kitchen, and reveals that it even indirectly led him into boxing.

"There was a television at Spize that usually screened football matches for the customers," he explained.

"Sometimes, after midnight, there would be classic boxing matches on the sports channels instead - those from the black-and-white era - and they caught my interest a bit.

"At the same time, all the uncles hanging out there watching those classic matches, always brought up coach Kadir's name.

"I went on the Internet and found his boxing school, and that's how I got started."

The "coach Kadir" Ridhwan refers to is Syed Abdul Kadir, the 1974 Sportsman of the Year who won a gold medal at the 1971 SEAP Games and a bronze at the 1974 Commonwealth Games.

Kadir, who is the team manager for the Singapore boxing contingent in Nanyang Polytechnic, says very little has changed in his protegee when he first walked into his boxing school.

"I started working with him when he was about 18 and he's still the same now," said the 65-year-old, who is also the president of the Singapore Amateur Boxing Association.

"He keeps to himself and doesn't talk too much, and he's very, very hard-working.

"The other fighters here are no slouches when it comes to training too, but they can't match him."

Ridhwan won his first SEA Games medal two years ago when he bagged a



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- Ridhwan Ahmad (below)

TNP PHOTOS:
CHOO CHWEE HUA



bronze in Palembang, Indonesia.

Kadir reckons the boxer can do one better in Myanmar.

"The difference between him now and two years ago is confidence," said the former featherweight.

"You can see it just from the way he walks.

"He's now stronger, more matured... The way he's shaping up, he should be able to improve on the bronze."

Ridhwan attributes this new-found confidence to overseas exposure.

This year, he won a bronze medal at the Taipei City Cup in August, and then won the top prize at an invitational boxing tournament in Adelaide last month.

The tournament in Adelaide took place during a month-long camp in Melbourne for all five of the Singapore boxers competing at the SEA Games.

SPARRING

Said Ridhwan: "The highlight of the Australian camp was the sparring.

"I did almost 100 rounds in total with more than 20 sparring partners, and these guys were not just average fighters."

In peak physical condition, Ridhwan believes he is also mentally tougher now.

"Having that self-belief and ability to deal with pressure is the biggest difference in me, I think," he said.

"It's something I learnt from coach Kadir, and also from reading biographies of different fighters."

Throughout the interview, Ridhwan was articulate and thoughtful with his answers.

You wouldn't have been able to tell that as an 17-year-old, he quit his me-

chatronics engineering course in Temasek Polytechnic after just one month.

"I was simply lazy... Very clever right?" he said, with a wry smile.

But that's all in the past now.

In April, he graduated from Nanyang Polytechnic with a diploma in Sport and Wellness.

And he wants to cap off the year with glory in Myanmar.

"Whatever match I fight or tournament I take part in, I aim for the highest achievement," he said.

"In fact, I don't just want to win. I want to be remembered.

"Sometimes, you win gold and a year or two later, nobody remembers.

"I want to create an impact. Leave a mark. I want to show what Singapore boxing is all about."

FACTFILE

Name: Muhd Ridhwan Ahmad

Date of Birth: Dec 14, 1987

Height: 1.69m

Weight: 60kg

Favourite athlete:

Sugar Ray Leonard

Favourite food: KFC chicken

Pet peeve: Hypocrites

DID YOU KNOW?

For the first time since the 1980s, the boxers at the Nanyang SEA Games will not be wearing helmets. The rule change was handed down in June from international body Aiba in light of scientific research which showed not wearing helmets actually reduces risk of concussions.