

Disability sport in Singapore has enjoyed a boost following the country's hosting of the 2015 Asean Para Games. More para-athletes have been uncovered and The Straits Times looks at the first of three local APG debutants ahead of Sunday's opening ceremony in Kuala Lumpur, where the Republic will field 90 athletes, its largest away contingent.



The 1.37m, 45kg Nur Aini is comfortable in her own skin, proving through her exploits that she is the equal of any able-bodied athlete. ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KIM.

Aini attains powerful lift-off

Thanks to dragon boat strength training, Nur Aini can bench press more than own weight

Alvin Chia

Nur Aini Mohamad Yasli is short in stature, gentle in voice and is covered with muscle. The 25-year-old, who is 1.37m and weighs 45kg, can bench press more than her own weight and, on Monday in Kuala Lumpur, she will become Singapore's first female powerlifter to compete at an Asean Para Games.

Born bow-legged, she underwent surgery in 2003 when she was 10 to insert two metal splints into her legs to straighten them. Running was out of the question, so she chose sports that did not involve

movement on foot. To combat asthma when she was in Primary 1, she started swimming lessons every Sunday morning at Woodlands Swimming Complex.

She tried archery when she was in Nanyang Polytechnic and joined the dragon boat team in Nanyang Technological University, where she graduated with a degree in public policy and global affairs. For her, a life without sport was incomplete.

"Without sports, I feel that I'm just cruising through in life," Aini said. "Dragon boating was tough. Everyone was just taller and much stronger than me physically. I knew that I had a lot of catching up to do.

"So when they went for their runs, I would do my exercises on the rowing machine. And I built endurance through swimming so I didn't lack in that area.

"I'm grateful that my team-mates never treated me differently and I could join their 22-man crew."

Her family initially had reservations about her pumping weights for as Aini, who is an only child, said. "My mum asked if I would end up looking muscular, like a guy. She asked why did I want to try a male-dominated sport?"

Because Aini is short, she is often mistaken for a much younger person, but she handles such incidents with an easy charm. Recently, she went for a buffet dinner in Johor Baru with three friends and she realised that she had been charged the kids' rate. Instead of being of-

fended, she joked: "My friends were jealous of me."

Misunderstandings do not bother her and neither do people who gawk, as they did when she first trained at Yishun ActiveSG's gym. "People would stare at me with a concerned look, thinking 'Are you sure you can do this and lift heavy weights?' But when I started lifting weights, their expression would change and they would look away," said Aini with a grin.

"People have the mindset that disabled people have lesser abilities. But when they see that you have the strength too, they look at you in a different light."

It was at that gym that the Yishun resident was spotted in 2015 by Kala Vanen, a 58-year-old leg amputee who won Singapore's only powerlifting medal – a bronze – at

the 2015 Singapore APG.

Kala invited her for an APG selection trial on July 8 this year. "He told me they were having a fun session," Aini said, "and I just went down thinking that I would just go and say hello to everyone there." But the first timer lifted 35kg (the bronze mark from 2015) in the 45kg category at the trials and two days later she received a call to inform her that "you would be flying in September".

"I asked, 'Flying to where?'" said Aini, who is a business consultant at HP. "I was so shocked, I was going to go for my lunch and just trying to digest everything. I had just come back from my graduation trip to Indonesia, I didn't know how to tell my manager about this because I would have to go on leave again."

But there was no cause for worry.

Her company allowed her to work from home when she had afternoon training sessions every Wednesday and Friday.

To prepare for the competition, she had to be careful about her diet. "I could not eat fried chicken like Popeyes or popcorn chicken for the last two months," she said. "That's the thing I crave the most now. I would even force myself to avoid walking past the frozen food section at NTUC FairPrice."

As the APG draws near, Aini admits that she feels anxious and once even dreamt that she was late for the competition. It is this expected nervousness that her coach Hidayat Osman, 27, is mindful of.

As Hidayat, who views Aini as an unpolished gem, said: "She's teachable and she's got the sports background and the basic strength to be a good powerlifter. Raising the number of weights on the bar for her isn't hard."

"But because she is new to a competition environment, her challenge is to not be mentally perturbed by other disturbances and to lift without technical errors.

"In the long term, she has the potential to be a powerhouse in Asia."

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