

Coronavirus pandemic

# A DIFFERENT ARENA



Among the brave and selfless healthcare professionals working through this Covid-19 pandemic are a netballer, hurdler, dragon boater and silat exponent. Assistant Sports Editor Low Lin Phoong speaks to Singapore athletes Carmen Goh, Ang Chen Xiang, Vanessa Tan and Atiq Syazwani Roslan, who have stepped up to help the country in the battle against the deadly disease.

### CARMEN GOH, 29, NATIONAL NETBALLER

Like any happy-go-lucky teenager, Carmen Goh was delighted when school classes were cancelled in 2003 owing to the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars). But the deadly disease that infected 238 people and killed 33 here also left an impact on the 13-year-old.

"I was in Secondary 1 then and I remember vividly from watching a TV drama that there was a doctor who treated a Sars patient and didn't wear shoe covers and died," said the 29-year-old, a senior resident at the National University Hospital's (NUH) accident and emergency department.

Her memory of Sars and her grandfather, who suffered from lung disease and died when she was young, played a part in her decision to pursue medicine as a career.

The initial lack of information and uncertainty surrounding the coronavirus – and its links with Sars – led to Goh feeling some trepidation and fear.

But assured by the medical protocols and protective gear in place, she has since eased into her role on the front line, spending her shifts supervising a team of medical officers, taking swabs for potential Covid-19 patients, treating those with symptoms such as fever, coughs or respiratory illness, and seeing non-virus patients.

Goh, who last year won a silver medal at the Philippines SEA Games and competed at the Nations Cup and Netball World Cup, also tries to join her team for Zoom training sessions in the evenings.

"The days and nights may seem like a blur for busy healthcare workers like Goh as Singapore continues to see hundreds of virus infections a day, but occasionally a patient can help cut through the daily grind.



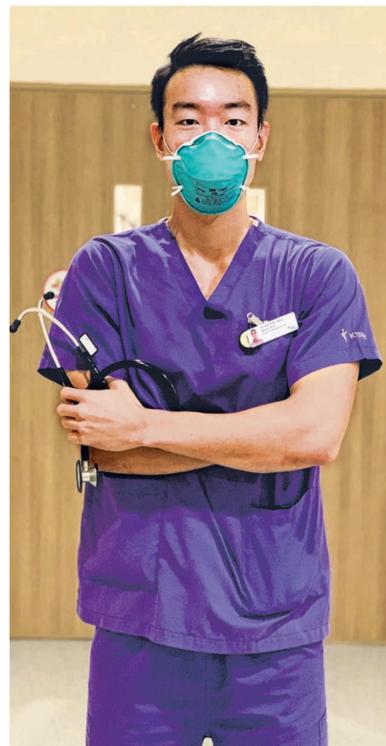
Goh told The Sunday Times: "An old lady I saw a few weeks ago came in with weakness in her arms and legs (stroke symptoms) and I asked her why she took so long to come in and her answer really struck me.

"She said 'I know you (the hospital) are very busy and I don't want to burden you further'. In fact, she started with 'sorry doctor for making you busier'. It's a reminder that sometimes we see it as a shift but what we do matters."

Trained in a sport where teamwork is key to success, Goh also noted the dedication and hard work of her colleagues and other healthcare workers on the front line.

She added: "I have colleagues who volunteer to work on their day off... people who volunteer to work in infectious zones so those with elderly parents or young kids don't have to, everyone is doing what they can to help.

"When you are faced with such an enemy that does not discriminate, so unseen yet so powerful, everyone who steps forward can play their part and show that there is extraordinary strength in numbers and teamwork."



ANG CHEN XIANG, 25, NATIONAL HURDLER

It is not easy to have a good bedside manner when one is wearing goggles, an N95 mask, a medical gown, and has "really small eyes," as is the case with Dr Ang Chen Xiang.

A medical officer at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital's emergency department, he often encounters worried and scared patients during this Covid-19 crisis, such as the father and son pair who had been in contact with a virus patient.

He treated the father, who was so anxious that his vital signs were elevated.

"It's difficult to convey emotion and empathy while wearing the full PPE (personal protective equipment) and I try to smile through my eyes, but they are really small, so they're closed when I'm smiling!" chuckled the 25-year-old.

In the fight against Covid-19, working shifts doing swab tests and caring for coronavirus and non-virus patients.

Wearing the PPE for up to 10 hours daily while treating patients can be draining and exhausting, but the humble young doctor said "whether they are Covid patients or not, our goal is to help them recover."

"We know that what we do is essential and important for the people we help, and for our country. When I see patients recover, see the vibrancy and colour return to their faces, it's very heartwarming and very satisfying."

Aside from work, Ang, who competed at the SEA Games from 2015 to 2019 and holds the national 110m hurdles record of 14.25sec, tries to squeeze in a daily training session with his younger brother and coach Ding Hui – safe distancing measures included.

He works out in his home gym or on the front line, when they insert swabs into nostrils and with the latter adjusting the training regimen if he is too tired.

He is grateful for the support from his family, who prepare healthy meals such as rolled oats and quinoa to ensure he is fed when he returns after a 10pm-8am overnight shift.

### TINY EYES BUT BIG HEART

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DR ANG CHEN XIANG, Singapore 110m hurdles record holder, sharing a light moment amid the tough conditions.



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF LIM KWEE KUANG, TAN WEE BOON, TAN JI XIUAN, DYAN TJHIA, ATIQ SYAZWANI ROSLAN, SINGAPORE GENERAL HOSPITAL, NETBALL SINGAPORE, ST FILE

### VANESSA TAN, 26, NATIONAL DRAGON BOATER

When the Covid-19 pandemic first hit Singapore months ago, Vanessa Tan's mother was so concerned that she told the 26-year-old, a medical laboratory technologist at Singapore General Hospital's (SGH) pathology division, that she would fully support her if she chose to leave her job.

But the national women's dragon boat captain did not flinch, as she wanted "to stay on to support the hospital's efforts in fighting the pandemic."

"The risk is always there, and so the worry will always be there," she said. "However, adequate protection such as donning the proper PPE (personal protective equipment) and strict infection control practices are in place to ensure the safety of lab staff."

"Beyond that, it is largely a personal responsibility to ensure that safety procedures are followed so we do not get ourselves infected and pass the virus on to our family."



### ATIQ SYAZWANI ROSLAN, 26, NATIONAL SILAT ATHLETE

On her first day at the Woodlands Lodge 1 workers' dormitory, healthcare assistant Atiq Syazwani Roslan found herself breathless and drenched in sweat as her full protective gear left her feeling like she had "run a marathon."

Her discomfort worsened during the fasting month of Ramadan (April 24 to May 23), as she could not drink or eat during her shift.

"I knew it was going to be tough and I tried to plan my food intake better, eat more in the morning and try to pace my work... if I was not well, my colleagues were understanding," said the national silat exponent, who won a silver and bronze respectively at the 2017 and 2019 SEA Games.

The 26-year-old had signed up for the front line of the Covid-19 battle when the call for volunteers came, despite the role being outside her field as a physiotherapist at Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

"When my head of department asked whether I wanted to volunteer, my first question was, 'why not?' said Atiq, who had already been considering how to contribute to the fight. "I can't save the whole world and help everyone, but if I can make a difference to someone, I'm happy."

After spending a month at Woodlands Lodge 1, she was redeployed to two other foreign worker dorms, Westlite Juniper and Westlite Mandal. All three were identified as Covid-19 clusters.

Her role as a healthcare assistant involves conducting mass screenings, assisting doctors, registering and monitoring patients, and performing swab tests.

Aside from the challenge of trying to communicate with patients while decked in full medical gear, Atiq had to overcome an initial fear of contracting the virus which saw her cleaning her hands excessively and showering a few times a day.

While her parents are supportive of her work, she has had to distance herself from them as a precaution.



haps the inadvertent silver lining to the Covid-19 dark cloud."

That also leaves less time and energy for virtual training workouts with her teammates but Tan, who won a bronze at the World Dragon Boat Racing Championships in Thailand last year, said she is "motivated to keep my sport going."

Of her 22-member team, three others work in healthcare as a physiotherapist, cardiac technologist and a nurse, and their captain Tan said she is "very proud of them for the work that they do."

She added: "I admire fellow athletes for their courage to take on the battle in the front lines which shows the true embodiment of an athlete – a fighter till the end."

Tan may seem like an unlikely combatant in her white lab coat, but she believes in the "great significance" of her job and others who are working behind the scenes.

"Those that run the routine lab tests and essential services workers who are not directly involved in Covid-19 management are equally as important as those in the front line," she said.

"The satisfaction comes from seeing patients benefit from the work that we do. The laboratory is a busy environment and while we are mostly used to it, there is still the constant pressure to do our work well because making any mistake could cost lives."



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## Asean artistic swimmers show solidarity with Zoom group workout

### Nicole Chia

South-east Asia's national artistic swimmers are used to representing their respective countries at various sporting events, and yesterday was no different.

But instead of competing for medals at a major Games, the swimmers were teammates in a group workout conducted over Zoom and broadcast live on Facebook.

The regional event, organised by the Singapore Swimming Association (SSA), was led by 15 athletes from Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia and Singaporeans Debbie Soh, Miya Yong and Ariel Sng.

SSA's vice-president of artistic swimming Steve Chew said the objective of the workout was for the artistic swimmers in the region "to show their solidarity, unity and enthusiasm and to inspire others during this Covid-19 pandemic."

Each swimmer took turns demonstrating and leading the various exercises, which focused on areas such as core strength and flexibility.

For some, like Sng and Brunei swimmer Hafizah Ahmad, the session was a timely source of motivation. The latter, whose teammate Jacqueline Lim also joined the workout, noted that Brunei's senior artistic swimming team comprised just the two of them.

Said Hafizah: "Being able to practise with a lot of people really builds that team spirit that we've never really had.

"We don't have a coach, so it keeps us motivated that we can still take part in things like this."

Sng, who turned 19 yesterday, said: "When we're training with swimmers from the other countries, it pushes us to want to do better to show our best sides to people.

"This also motivates us when we go back into the water, when we compete with (them) and can all see one another again."

The swimmers created a group chat to plan the workout and had two rehearsals prior to yesterday's session. Soh, 22, found it a "good initiative" as it allowed the swimmers to get to know one another better, as she noted that it can sometimes be difficult to match their faces to their names at competitions.

The five-time SEA Games gold medalist added: "Not every edition of the SEA Games (includes) our sport, so being able to see everyone from all the different countries being united and working together is really great."

Malaysian swimmer Zylane Lee agreed, saying: "I don't know when the next SEA Games with artistic swimming (last contested in 2017) will be, this shows that we are motivated to keep this sport going and I hope this event will invite more interest from the young ones, and that the sport will have a long future."

Eighteen Asean artistic swimmers, including three Singaporeans, displaying their exercises on land over Zoom. PHOTO: SINGAPORE SWIMMING ASSOCIATION

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## Weekly tweetbits



### BALANCING ACT

Singapore's taekwondo exponent Chelsea Sim doing the shoe balance challenge at home during the circuit breaker. WATCH: bit.ly/3diRR4j

### CAUGHT ON CAMERA

Manchester United's Marcus Rashford impressing even his own teammates with a no-look back-heel pass during training. WATCH: bit.ly/2ZSsq5M

PHOTOS: INSTAGRAM/CHELSEANNSM, INSTAGRAM/HOUSEOFHIGHLIGHTS, TWITTER/MANUNIT

### SportingLife

## On medical front lines, athletes do a tour of duty



Rohit Brijnath Assistant Sports Editor

As he lay dying in Belgium in 1917, Captain Noel Chavasse dictated a letter to his fiancée. In 1908 he'd run the 400 metres at the Olympics and now as a doctor in World War I would become one of a handful of men to win two Victoria Crosses.

Duty propels some athletes, it has taken them to war, and now, in a time of Covid-19, it draws them to a new front line. Duty has led Atiq Syazwani Roslan, a physiotherapist and Singapore silat exponent, to exchange a competition uniform

for a PPE at worker dormitories; it has taken a local hurdler, Dr Ang Chen Xiang, 25, from the track to the emergency department. And they are not alone.

These are people in medicine and so healing is their job and yet some are volunteering for specific roles that might put them in closer reach of the virus. As athletes, whose bodies are their instruments, there is an in-built instinct for self-preservation and yet as medical practitioners their inclination is to step forward. Duty isn't just a legal obligation, says the online dictionary but also a moral one.

Across the planet, without fanfare, stories are emerging of athletes joining the global scrap. Maxime Mbanda is an Italian rugby player and a surgeon's son who volunteered as an ambulance driver. Jo Brigden-Jones, an Australian kayaker, is doing land work as a paramedic. Dorra Mahfoudhi, a Tunisian pole vaulter and fifth-year medical student, is helping her nation's Covid-19 task force.

This is not remarkable and yet it is meaningful because duty always has a heft to it. Sport breeds a certain selfishness because it is primarily about standing out and

apart. Athletes, in a way, have to be self-absorbed, single-mindedly consumed by their weight, diet, sleep, improvement, and it makes for a "me-first" world.

But like war, this pandemic asks for everyone to weigh in, to put self-interest aside, to recognise the greater good. And when athletes arrive on the front line, when they insert swabs into nostrils and tend to their fellow citizens, they reiterate that. They are serving the very community which cheers them.

We often see athletes as entitled even if it is a small, if significant, minority. Nevertheless, an athlete

in a white coat, her spikes exchanged for stethoscope, powerfully refutes any idea of privilege. It is a symbolism which matters in such a time. As stories emerge of occasional athletes breaking social distancing and lockdown rules, and self-indulgent scraps in sporting leagues over pay cuts, these athletes give sport a shine.

For athletes, who often speak of stepping out of their comfort zone, the pandemic is a tutorial in precisely that. This fight is bigger than anything they know. As an arena right now, the hospital is unrivalled in its intensity and

athletes will be grateful for any lessons they might carry from field to clinic.

As the kayaker-paramedic Brigden-Jones said in an interview, the similarities between both professions are evident "because there are a lot of situations where you need to perform under pressure." Without stretching the parallel too far, sport has virtues which can be of value in medicine: calmness amid chaos, stamina, decision-making, patience.

But sport is mostly a joyous activity, where "babe" is an exaggerated idiom and no one goes home in body bags. If one word separates these professions then it is in how they interpret "loss".

Defeat is not dying. Once this pandemic passes, the athlete-doctors will be left with many things, including a fresh perspective. Sport will be the same and yet, for some, forever different.

In a story so legendary it is mentioned even on his biographical page in the Australian War Memorial website, the legendary cricketer Keith Miller, who flew the Havilland Mosquitoes in World War II, was once questioned on how he managed pressure on the field. His reply was suitably dismissive. "Pressure," he explained, "is a Messerschmitt up your arse."

This story of Singapore's athletes on the front lines by my colleague Low Lin Phoong is a valuable one. It tells us this fight needs every working hand. It reminds us fame gives no one immunity, it informs us that athletes aren't one-dimensional people.

There is no winning bonus here for them, no glory, no parade, no adequate sleep hours. This is real life and its harsher repercussions. No medal is to be given out, but respect is to be found. For they have done the most elemental thing: they have answered duty's call.

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