



BY
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NO EFFORT SPARED IN PREPARING SEA GAMES GOLF TEAM

TWO FAMILIARISATION TRIPS AND NAMING FORMER WINNER JOSHUA HO AS HIGH PERFORMANCE COACH ARE PLUS FACTORS

TWO crowns weigh heavily on the heads of the members of Singapore men's South-east Asia Games golf team. The team title at the 2017 Games in Kuala Lumpur and this year's Putra Cup double triumph (Nicklaus Chiam in individual and team) in Vietnam have placed a hefty load on the four-man squad.

So if James Leow, Low Wee Jin, Nicklaus Chiam and Hiroshi Tai feel intense pressure with a month remaining for the 2019 Games in the Philippines, it is understandable.

Also because the four golfers are relatively new and will be making their SEA Games debut with the knowledge that they will be the team to beat, especially for heavyweights Thailand, Malay-

sia and the hosts.

Knowing the challenge ahead, the Singapore Golf Association (SGA) has already started to work on that warning with two important moves.

First, the appointment of Joshua Ho, a member of the triumphant 2017 team, as the high performance manager, should act as a catalyst for the quartet as the former national golfer can share his experiences with the players.

Second, the SGA's slating of two familiarisation trips to the venue could provide the quartet with some "home comforts" and the right conditioning.

Currently on the first familiarisation trip to the Phil-

ippines, national coach Matt Ballard believes that sorting out things that relate to local conditions and course understanding would be a major plus.

He says: "We are here devising strategies and golf shots required to navigate the venue for each player, to ultimately prepare as best as we can in both AM and PM conditions with different winds.

"This trip is mainly for data information collection to help our players train

and prepare when back in Singapore for the upcoming event as it is my belief that the quality of our preparation is within our control.

"By identifying the varying grass playing surfaces we will encounter, weather conditions, course layout, green mapping, elevation changes, varying shots required for the venue, sourcing quality local food and gymnasium options among other things will help our players be prepared for the week."

He added that removing the concerns, apprehension and doubts of the players early is of high priority to ensure they are suitably comfortable when they arrive fully prepared to compete.



photos: Singapore Golf Association

From left to right: James Leow, Nicklaus Chiam, Hiroshi Tai and Low Wee Jin.

"This will have a direct effect on their positive mental state when faced with varying situations in the SEA Games," he said.

In between the two familiarisation trips, Ballard and Ho will be holding a three-day intensive training camp in Singapore.

The two instructors will put the team through competitions on courses in Singapore with similar grass conditions to that of Luisita in the Philippines.

Says Ballard: "On top of targeting training for each individual, along with team-bonding sessions organised during the camp, we hope to build team character and team morale and

instil appropriate values within the quartet before leaving for the Philippines."

He emphasised that the ultimate goal is to defend the gold medal with a completely fresh and new team.

Says Ho: "We hope to keep the team focused on our goals. As the team are made up of rookies, it is easy to get overwhelmed by the occasion. Matt and I aim to keep the players relaxed and process-focused.

"We will also be staying at the Athletes' Village, which will be a completely different environment as compared to previously when we stayed in hotels."

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— NATIONAL COACH MATT BALLARD

LEOW WILL BE A MARKED MAN

Singapore's James Leow will be the target for SEA Games rivals when he tees off at the biennial event in the Philippines next month.

The Arizona State University student finished joint-fifth – the best by a Singaporean since Choo Tze Huang finished tied-seventh in 2010 – at the Asia-Pacific Amateur Championship last month in Shanghai.

It was a bitter-sweet experience for Leow because after his brilliant birdie on the 16th hole on the final day, he slumped to a costly double-bogey on the last hole.

On the disaster hole that denied him a play-off for the title, Leow said: "I had a tough second shot from the thick rough. I wanted to lay up with a nine-iron and keep the ball on the fairway around 110-125 metres for a good birdie chance.

"The rough caught my club and I ended up in the rough again. For

my third shot I had 128 metres into the wind. But as I struck the ball, it took off higher than normal and ended up in the back hazard.

I took a penalty and finished with two putts for a double.

"Still, it was my career-best finish in a major championship after finishing sixth at the Nomura Cup in 2015."

However, the Shanghai experience has given Leow confidence for the SEA Games. He said: "I felt my game has come a long way now from where it was after National Service. Course strategy and short game have been my biggest focus for the past months. I'm currently working on different ball flights, one-way misses and lag putting (distance control for long putts)."

"I have been prepping up my game. I'm confident for myself and the team for the SEA Games. I believe we are all on the right track."

SO MUCH BUZZ ABOUT OLYMPIC GOLF

RORY McIlroy has committed himself to playing for Northern Ireland in next year's Olympic Games.

Tiger Woods (right) wants to qualify for the quadrennial Games in Tokyo next summer.



The Singapore Golf Association, in conjunction with the Singapore Professional Golfers' Association, is keen to see a Singaporean share the honour with the two former world No. 1s.

Golf at the Olympic Games has suddenly captured the hearts and minds of the sporting fraternity throughout the world.

In fact, there was a major buzz about it in Singapore when the country's most popular golfer Mardan Mamat almost made it to the last Games when golf made a return to the major event after 112 years.

Mardan was in the reckoning at one time, then out, then was an alternate, then in and finally just lost out.

The selection criteria for the Olympics are such that even fringe players have a chance to make it for the Olympics.

The event will feature 60 golfers with qualification based on the Official World Golf Rankings for men as of June 22, 2020 and will be held at the Kasumigaseki Country Club, about an hour's drive northwest of Tokyo.

The top 15 golfers will qualify automatically, though countries are limited to four golfers who can qualify this way.

After that the remaining sports go to the highest ranked players from countries that do not already have two golfers qualified, with a limit of two per country.

With 15 Majors and a cabinet adorned of Green Jackets, Woods, 43, still harbours Olympic aspirations.

He said recently: "Making the Olympics team is a big goal. I don't see myself having too many opportunities other than next year."

Woods sits 10th in the world rankings, behind six other Americans.

McIlroy, who pulled out of the 2016 Games because of fears about the Zika virus, says: "I'm excited to play the Olympics and call myself an Olympian. Coming to such a golf crazy country like Japan helps. It's a really good atmosphere and seeing the enthusiasm of the fans makes me look forward to playing in the Olympics."

When golf returned to the Olympics in 2016 in Rio after it was last featured in 1904, it was viewed as a major success, in more than one way.

There was on-course drama when Justin Rose edged out Swede Henrik Stenson for the men's gold medal after they were tied entering the final hole of the four-round stroke play event.

American Matt Kuchar shot a final-round 63 to claim the bronze medal in front of a massive crowd.

It was stated that in terms of US television ratings, more people watched the final round on NBC than having watched the final round of that year's US Open, British Open and the US PGA Championship.

The players, many of whom stayed in the Olympic Village also seemed to have enjoyed playing for their countries in search of mere medals instead of huge prize money and FedEx Cup points.

Winner Justin Rose of England summed it up best when he said after receiving the gold medal: "To be honest, this is where all he players wanted to be. There's no money. There's not much else to play for, really, other than right up here.

"And yet somehow the guys really enjoyed the whole Olympic experience. I think that says it all."