

## OLYMPIC GLORY

# A study in persistence

Korean fencer Nam hopes her story will inspire Singapore's Youth Olympic hopefuls

**TANYO-HINN**  
yohinn@mediacorp.com.sg

AS SINGAPORE'S athletes gear up for the inaugural Youth Olympic Games in August 2010, top South Korean fencer Nam Hyun Hee has one word of advice for them: persistence.

Nam made history at the 2008 Olympic Games when she became Korea's first female medallist in fencing (individual foil), winning silver in Beijing despite being slapped with a ban by her federation in 2006 for undergoing plastic surgery.

Speaking to TODAY, the 27-year-old said yesterday: "There was some problem with the Korean Fencing Federation when I underwent plastic surgery to correct an ailment with my eyelid.

"As a result, I was suspended for six months. The netizens showed a lot of support for me and it made me even more determined to succeed. They had more faith in me than my own national association, so that above anything else spurred me on to prove them wrong."

Flown in by top local fencing club Z Fencing, Nam arrived in Singapore on Wednesday and will be here until Sunday, conducting clinics.

She was part of the Korean side that won the women's team foil event at the 2005 world championship in Leipzig.

In December that year, she underwent plastic surgery be-

cause she felt her eyelashes were impeding her vision.

But she was slapped with a two-year suspension — later reduced to six months — by the Korean Fencing Federation and dropped from the national side for failing to inform authorities about her surgery and for missing training.

The 2006 Asian Games champion encountered more difficulties when she rejoined the national team to prepare for the 2008 Olympics. She said: "I had to cope with muscle injuries in my leg and the changes in coaching techniques."

She persevered, and even picked up yoga earlier this year to aid her training.

It all came together in August in Beijing. The diminutive 1.54m-tall Nam caused a huge upset when she beat four-time Olympic gold medallist Giovanna Trillini of Italy 15-10 in the individual foil semi-finals.

She only just missed out on gold, losing 6-5 to another Italian, Valentina Vezzali, a five-time Olympic gold medallist.

"I knew I would be up against bigger and more experienced European opponents at the Olympics, but with my smaller Asian physique, I had speed on my side," Nam said yesterday. "I worked very hard on that aspect, as well as my mental strength."

Her gritty performance convinced Z Fencing co-founder and director Wong Toon King that



Olympic silver medallist Nam shows students of Z Fencing the way forward. OOI BOON KEONG

she was the perfect candidate to launch the club's programme called "The Best Inspire".

It is an initiative to help Singapore prepare a team of fencers for major Games, starting with the 2010 Youth Olympics.

The Games will see 3,500 athletes aged 14 to 18 years from over 200 countries taking part in the 26 Olympic sports here.

Nam says that aspiring Singapore fencers had an advantage over Koreans because of the well-equipped fencing schools here, but added it would be useless if mental strength was lacking.

"You have to be persistent and not give up. That is how I did it," she said.

Nam's talk on "What it takes to be an Olympic champion" is open to the public today from 8pm-10pm at Z Fencing's high performance centre at United Square Shopping Centre. Admission is \$58.85 per participant. Visit [www.zfencing.com](http://www.zfencing.com) or call 6352 6010 for further details

## NAM LEAVES CLAYTON, JEPHINE STARRY-EYED

She did not speak a word of English, but South Korean Olympic fencing silver medallist Nam Hyun Hee still managed to inspire Clayton Chu and Jephine Wong. Yesterday, Clayton and Jephine, both 15, met Nam at a clinic organised by Z Fencing at their high performance centre at United Square.

Clayton, a student at NUS High, sparred with Nam, and the national under-17 team member said: "She was so solid all-round. Her point control was very good, and it was very difficult to get points off her. Almost immediately, you could see the huge gap in standards."

Jephine, a national under-17 fencer from Singapore Chinese Girls School, added: "My coach (James Wong) is one of only two Singapore fencers to have qualified for the Olympics.

"After meeting Nam, who is my idol, my aim now is to quali-

fy for the Olympics, as well."

The two youngsters are part of Z Fencing's pool of students — more than 500 of them — set to benefit from Nam's five-day visit here. The visit is part of Z Fencing's launch of "The Best Inspire" programme, an initiative to help Fencing Singapore prepare a team for the 2010 Youth Olympic Games.

Z Fencing's co-founder and director Wong King Toon said the club have drawn up a talent development programme for the 2012, 2016 and 2020 Olympics, and the 2010 Youth Games.

It includes a five-tier developmental pyramid and a training programme based around world-class coaching and sparring, overseas training and competitions, intensive training camps and mental and physical conditioning.

The first three years of the initiative is estimated to cost about \$3 million. TANYO-HINN