SPORTS FIRST, SCREEN LATER

Ong insists swimming’s still his priority despite getting taste of fame from movie

By CHAN U-GENE

HE HAS been mobbed by adoring female fans overseas, his Facebook is inundated with about 500 friend requests, and he is one of the stars in a recent local film, Ghost Child.

Arriving for his interview in a black BMW X6, Russell Ong looks every part the fashionable movie star.

Until he steps out of his car.

Decked casually in T-shirt, bermudas and slippers, with his hair tousled after a morning training session, it is clear that the 23-year-old is still a swimmer at heart.

After making an appearance on a few television commercials last year, the national swimmer finally got his chance on the silver screen when he received a text message in September from a representative of a film company requesting him to attend a casting.

Said the former Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) student: “I did it for the experience. I know that not many people will get a chance like this, and it might have been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

Despite admitting that he struggled with the dialogue in the Mandarin-speaking role, he secured the role of Troy, a swim hunk, alongside the likes of Jayley Woo and Chen Hanwei.

Said the film’s director Gilbert Chan: “Russell has a great body and good looks and we knew that teenage girls would love him.

“We also didn’t have to train him for underwater scenes.”

Ong is not the first national athlete to take the plunge into the world of acting. Wushu exponents Picasso Tan and Vincent Ng have both enjoyed stints in show business.

Going in front of the bright lights and camera was nerve-racking, but Ong felt that his sport helped him.

The freestyle sprint specialist, who has competed in front of packed arenas during three SEA Games, said: “Standing under the pressure of the spotlight, and having to regurgitate those lines was a bit intimidating.

“But swimming definitely helped me as I’ve had the experience of talking to reporters and the media.”

Filming took a week and he managed to squeeze six hours a day in between his classes as a second-year fine arts student at the Singapore Management University.

Despite enjoying the new-found thrill of being behind the camera, he never forgot his first love – swimming – and throughout the hectic schedule, he still attended as many morning training sessions as he could.

In contrast to his coy replies about show business, a different, more assured side of Ong emerges when it comes to pool matters. His voice heightens as he declares: “Swimming is my No. 1 priority.”

He learnt to swim at the age of five, but fell in love with the sport only at 14 – after he clinched a surprise gold at the national age-group meet.

Today, Ong, who clocked 22.69sec in the 50m freestyle in 2009, is the only Singaporean to clock a sub-23 time after national record holder Ang Peng Siong (22.69) back in 1982.

Besides the national record, Ong, who stands at 1.78m, also wants to be South-east Asia’s fastest man. He tried three times – in 2007, 2009 and 2011 – to bag the SEA Games gold medal, but finished third each time.

That elusive gold is what keeps Ong, who is the oldest member of the national men’s team, driven.

He says: “It’s this monkey I have to get off my back before I quit and the 22.69 is also very tempting. I feel like if I can devote myself to it, it can be done. It’s only a matter of time.”

Pursuing the dream of becoming No. 1 is more often than not a lonely road with many sacrifices involved. Ong pauses momentarily before naming his late older sister, Tiffany, as his source of strength. She died suddenly, of heart complications, two years ago at the age of 24. Eyes glistening, he offers an apology, before saying: “I couldn’t believe what happened. It’s still a bit raw now.”

Memories of that tragic day, when he heard the news via a phone call from his father, are still fresh.

Ong was pursuing his degree at Melbourne University then. It had been just like any other day – until his room-mate and close friend walked in to hold him, before handing over the phone to Ong.

His friends rallied around him the next few hours, before he caught the earliest flight back home. He added: “She is my constant source of motivation in whatever I do. I just want her to be proud of me.”

Ong, who lives with his parents and younger brother, never returned to Australia. He opted to continue his studies at SMU to be closer to his family. With their support, he has picked up the pieces from that difficult period.

The heart-throb of many adoring young girls, who overwhelmed him with gifts of soft toys and charms, is now attached to a local business owner, whom he refuses to name.

His time in the film business may only have just begun, with director Chan keen on having him back for future projects.

But Ong is keeping his sights on December’s SEA Games in Myanmar. He said: “It’s easy to lose track of goals and I’m fortunate that my parents keep me grounded. Without them, I would never have come this far.”