Accident victim Koh keeps his nerve to bag Laser Radial silver

BY MARC LIM
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In Doha

THE gold may have escaped his grasp, but Laser Radial silver medallist Koh Seng Leong is probably the hero of the Singapore sailing team, who have done admirably well at this Asian Games.

Only in October last year, the 23-year-old was lying in a hospital bed—wondering if he would ever sail at the top level again.

He was about to stop his motorcycle at a traffic light in Katong when the passenger door of a stationary car suddenly opened and hit him.

The impact made him fall on his left side, and he skidded for a few metres.

He managed to get up, but the bone in his left index finger was shattered.

He also fractured his middle finger and dislocated his thumb.

He severed nerves in his left hand and had cuts and bruises on his legs and right hand.

“My first thoughts were about the South-east Asia Games,” he said, recalling the ordeal.

“Then it hit me. I probably would never be able to sail again.”

The injuries ruled him out of last December’s SEA Games in Manila, where he was a shoo-in for the Laser gold.

Maximilian Soh took his place and won.

He spent a week at the Singapore General Hospital, where Dr Tan Puay Ling of the Department of Hand Surgery treated him.

“It was very difficult and I was feeling very low,” he said.

He underwent a second surgery to drain a wound after he developed an infection.

“But slowly I got my strength back,” he said.

“Much of my recovery is down to the good work of Dr Tan and her staff.

“During my hospital stay I realised how much sailing meant to me. I missed it. It was my life.”

He turned to part-time coaching, before slowing getting back to full competition level.

Only in July this year was he ready.

The Singapore Management University student still cannot fully bend his left index finger—and probably will never be able to do so.

It is short—and shrivelled. But doubts over whether it would hamper his sailing were banished in Doha.

He had a bad start, not claiming a win until the sixth race.

He continued to struggle and was lying fourth, five points off a medal, going into the last three races.

He fought back with third, first and first to snatch the silver.

SMILING AGAIN: (Above) Seng Leong after winning the silver medal in Doha; (left) recovering in hospital after the accident in October last year.

China’s Xu Lijia, the sole woman among the 11 competitors, took the gold with 31 points, two ahead of him.

His teammates teased him: “Don’t worry Seng Leong, you’re first in the men’s category.”

Yet, they know that there is no shame in losing to Xu, who is the Laser Radial world champion.

Said Soh, who won the Laser title in Doha: “His story and how he fought back inspire us all. I’m proud of him.”

He added, half in jest: “But if he wants the Laser back, good luck. It’s mine.”

Koh, whose brother Terence won a silver in the men’s 470, has set his sights on winning a medal at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

Qualification will start next year. He may remain in the Laser Radial or return to the Laser.

He said: “Either one is fine with me. As long as I get to sail, that’s good enough.”