What are the reasons behind the recent smashing success of Singapore's sailors? No, not just a hunger for gold medals but also a sailing body that believes the sport is a perfect way to impart life skills and values. Really.

LIFESTYLE reports.

Sailing for gold: Members from the Singapore keelboat team which won gold at the Asian Games make waves together. (From left) Justin Wong, 20; Benedict Tay, 27; Roy Tay, 23, and Teo Wee Chin, 19. The fifth member, Ivan Tan, 34, has returned to Perth, where he lives.
The golden boys

IT’S 10 in the morning on New Year’s Eve and four blurry-eyed young men are trying out to a docked boat in their flip-flops, totting Crumpler bags.

Like other newly bumped boys fresh out of their teens, they make fun of one another, pepper their sentences with the occasional expletive and youthful slang.

The only difference between these four and their testosterone-filled peers is this – they are national heroes.

Teo Wei Chin, 19, Justin Wong, 20, Rendref Tay, 22, Roy Tay, 23, won a gold medal at the Doha Asian Games last month where they topped the keelboat sailing competition.

The fifth member of the team, Ivan Tan, 24, lives in Perth where he has a motor sport business.

There are real camaraderie among these guys. They have known each other for years, although that was the first time they were sailing the same boat.

Singapore Sailing’s tryouts for a team event like keelboat is such that members are picked individually instead of as a team. The selection panel decides who is best at doing what, and whether the group dynamics will work.

Outside of sailing, these young men also hang out together, playing mahjong, soccer or computer games.

The nicknames given to them by one sailing official seem to describe them well: Wei Chin is Bones (he’s skinny); Justin is Hickey (tanned); Rendref is Beaver (hyper); Ivan is Bubble (he’s on the heavy side); and Roy is Beefcake (he spends a lot of time pumping iron).

Roy, who is now studying sports management at the Melbourne Institute of Business and Technology and who started sailing at 13, is also the unofficial spokesman of the group.

“Too the media where, what,” reports Wei Chin when Roy suddenly realizes he’s been doing all the talking.

But on the sailboat, it’s the youngest in the group who calls the shots. Wei Chin, a full-time national serviceman and the skipper, and the most earnest-looking is the decision-maker, while the rest of the crew feeds him information.

“I treat them very nicely,” says the former Raffles Institution student with a wide grin.

“Because he knows if he doesn’t, there’ll be a mutiny on board,” jokes Roy.

Of course, they just as soon turn serious to drive home the importance of teamwork, communication and mutual respect.

“Whatever happens out at sea is settled out at sea,” adds Roy, who studied at Marie Stella High School and Victoria Junior College.

Because of the keelboat’s larger size, everything is magnified. “You can get caught in ropes. Dislocate your shoulder,” says Rendref, an accounting student at Singapore Management University.

At this point, the guys point to Wei Chin. After a couple of laughs, they finally sober up to explain that the skipper dislocated his shoulder once when they dunked him into the sea for kicks.

“I have loose joints,” he says, struggling his shoulder.

Another time, the shoulder came unhinged again when they were doing a manoeuvre out at sea while training in Melbourne. “I tried to put it back, but it was too soft,” says Roy.

“You don’t even have medical training,” rails Wei Chin.

The topic turns to girls, and one of the guys blasts out a female name.

The quiet Justin, who has barely uttered a word, suddenly goes red. He is dating a fellow sailor but she has to remain unnamed because “her Mum doesn’t know about it,” says the Nanyang Polytechnic sports management student, squirming in embarrassment.

A few other female sailor’s names are tossed around and Rendref gets ribbed about one of them.

“Eh, that one cannot write!” he shrieks, suddenly standing up and pointing to my notebook.

What about Roy, the heart-throb seafarer? “Some like to swing in their own backyard; I don’t,” is his quick reply.

The fact is, dating isn’t easy for a competitive sailor.

“Sailing limits your social life. You either study or sail,” says Rendref. Which explains why the sailors’ social circle is confined largely to the fraternity.

The quartet will split $60,000 for winning at the Asian Games, a booty courtesy of the Singapore National Olympic Council’s Multi-Million Dollar Award. They have pledged 20 per cent of the money to Singapore Sailing to promote sailing.

But no frivolous spending. At least, that’s what they claim.

It will go to paying school tuition fees, for investments, charity and a few pump-and-press yourself items like an Xbox 360 and a new 32-inch LCD TV – both for Rendref.

For now, the new year resolutions have been made: Justin wants to get a driving license, Rendref wants to lose some fat, Roy wants to invest in a fish farm and Wei Chin just wants to spend more time with his family.

And of course, everyone wants to be better sailors than they already are.