

Koh gets it right

After the disappointment of a SEA Games silver, he books his country an Olympic spot

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HE SUFFERED a freak injury to his left hand after an accident in 2005.

With his left hand weakened, national sailor Koh Seng Leong was forced to use a modified technique to do battle.

He struggled to master it, and it all finally fell into place during training in Melbourne two weeks ago.

And the fruits of all the hard work paid off handsomely yesterday, as Koh clinched Singapore a spot in the Laser Standard event at this year's Olympic Games.

On the final day of competition at the Laser World Championship at the Gosford Sailing Club in Terrigal, Australia, Koh finished in 23rd place in the silver fleet with 174 nett points from 10 races.

Including hosts China's automatic spot, the Laser Standard event at the Olympics will feature 40 countries and 29 had already qualified last year.

Twenty-five countries were in Melbourne battling for the 10 remaining spots and Koh finished fifth among the nations vying for an Olympic place.

South Korea, Switzerland, Japan, Malaysia, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Russia, Hungary and Guatemala also qualified.

Koh was grateful to Olympic Laser coach Brett Beyer for working on his technique.

Speaking on the phone from Terrigal yesterday, Koh said: "I've been trying to learn this technique that Brett came up with involving a better utilisation of my body weight, movements and steering to sail faster and better in strong conditions.

"But it just didn't happen until a few weeks ago in Melbourne when it finally clicked. Still, I was nervous before each race, but once I got on water I was fine."

Koh, who missed out on the SEA Games gold last December when he faltered on the last day of competition in Pattaya, added: "I quickly left the disappointment of the SEA Games behind. I had a nice Christmas party at my place, and got back to focusing on qualifying for the Olympics."

It has been a tough road back for the 24-year-old.

Back in 2005, a car door swung open and hit his motorbike, leaving him with two fractured fingers, a dislocated thumb and severed nerves in his left hand. The injuries, coupled with a chronic back problem, meant a new sailing technique was required, along with different equipment and training and competition programme.

"Sailing wise, he's limited in a sense because of his injuries," said coach Beyer. "He's weaker physically on his left side, and something like a bad flight or cold wind can cause his old back injury to flare up.

"So we've had to modify his technique to allow him to race more aggressively in the strong conditions. It's not a massive change, but a significant one."

To prepare for Terrigal — where winds can reach 40 knots and waves go as high as four metres — Koh bulked up from around 70kg in 2006 to his present 78.5kg.

Now he has a chance to fly Singapore's flag in Qingdao, China, where the Olympic sailing event will be held in August.

Said SingaporeSailing president Low Teo Ping: "I cannot think of any other athlete in any sport in Singapore who has his kind of mental strength. He's had his problems with injury and bad luck, but he keeps coming back each time. In my eyes, he's a model athlete."

Singapore have already qualified for the men's 470 event, after Roy Tay and Chung Pei Ming finished 20th at the World Sailing Championship last July.

Tay and Chung, and two other pairs, will do battle in a sail off to decide which duo will represent Singapore at the Olympics.

But with Asian Games champion Maximilian Soh out of the squad, Koh is the only other experienced Laser sailor in the national Olympic team and is expected to get the nod for the Olympic sailing competition.

Said Beyer: "Seng Leong must now reduce his weight to the low 70s. We'll also fine-tune his gym and diet programme and his technique for the lighter conditions expected in Qingdao."

Koh returns to Singapore today, but soon he will be off to Sydney, and then Europe, for training and competition, which will stretch all the way to June. For now, he just wants to let his hair down.

"I'm looking forward to some pineapple tarts as I missed Chinese New Year," he said.

As for his chances in China, he added: "Some say talk of winning an Olympic medal is far-fetched.

"Not for me. Once you're at the table, anything is possible. It's a clean slate and your chances are as good as anyone else's."