

TODAY EXCLUSIVE

Much change in Olympic sailing squad

Project 0812 team set for renewal as a number of old guard eye different pursuits

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LAST August, six sailors flew the Singapore flag at the Olympic Games sailing competition in Qingdao, China.

TODAY has learnt that five of the six are unlikely to feature in four years' time in London.

The five are all members of SingaporeSailing's 14-strong Olympic squad that are part of Project 0812, a \$7-million-Government-led initiative to help athletes win medals at the 2008 Beijing Games and 2012 London Olympics.

Beijing Games sailing team captain Koh Seng Leong (Laser) has pulled out of the squad, while Xu Yuanzhen (men's 470), Lo Man Yi (Laser Radial), Toh Liying and Deborah Ong (women's 470) will take a break to focus on their studies.

Men's 470 trio Chung Pei Ming, Benjamin Tan and Teo Wee Chin, who are also part of the Project 0812 programme, have decided to concentrate on their studies and have targeted a spot in the 2016 Olympic Games.

That means as many as eight of SingaporeSailing's 14-strong Olympic squad may not feature in the battle for places at the London Games.

SingaporeSailing have targeted a medal in London, and the national sports association are confident they will remain on track despite the latest development.

"Renewal is an important aspect of high performance and sports develop-

ment," said SingaporeSailing president Low Teo Ping.

"New talent will come through and we've started our strategic plans for 2012 and have already identified sailors since October last year."

Two-time Olympic Laser sailor (2000, 2008) Koh, 25, has decided to retire from Olympic sailing to concentrate on his events management company and studies at the Singapore Management University.

"Part of the reason for my retirement is also due to my back injury as my doctor has advised me not to strain it too much," said Koh, a silver medallist at the 2006 Asian Games.

"I've no regrets giving it up. I was among the top 40 sailors in the world at the Olympics, and I'll still compete at the Asian Games in 2010."

NO TIME TO WASTE

Former national sailor and 1994 Asian Games gold medallist Benedict Tan said that a hiatus is normal for top sailors, with cyclical training and competition plans allowing them to peak before any major Games.

But the 41-year-old, who finished 36th out of 86 competitors (Laser Standard) at the 1996 Atlanta Games, feels Singapore's sailors would need more time to play catch up.

"If you're up there

(with the top sailors), three years before the Olympics is a safe time to start training," he said.

"If you're not up there, you should start three months after the Beijing Games. Usually, you will not win a medal at your first Olympics.

"In 2008, you should be a contender in the top 20, then 2012 will be the real attempt.

"Sailing is just like playing chess, you have to know all the different permutations and experience counts."

According to SingaporeSailing CEO Andrew Sanders, they work with sailors on a four-year Olympic cycle.

The first two years are dedicated to studies, with the third and fourth year focused on full-

time training and competition.

They've identified youngsters Justin Liu, Sherman Cheng, Griselda Khng, Scott Glen Sydney and Elizabeth Yin as potential Olympians, and Sanders said: "We always train two to three sailors in each class.

"The next generation is coming through and we're working with the Singapore Sports Council and will make an announcement on the Olympic squad in the coming weeks."

Olympic sailor Toh (left) is pursuing further studies while Beijing Games captain Koh has retired, as a new wave of young talent prepares to step into the breach for London 2012.

WEE TECK HIAN

