THE last time an Asian Games took place, Stephanie Chen, 16, and Suzanne Seah, 20, had not yet picked up canoeing. Now, they are preparing to compete in the women's K2 500m at the quadrangular event — a milestone neither had expected when they took up the sport in 2008 and 2007 respectively.

"I was really nothing — just horrible," said Seah, a second-year sports science and management student at Nanyang Technological University.

"I can't imagine how slow I must have been. I don't even want to remember."

But she can. Her K2 - or two-man kayak - 500m timing then never went under 2min 30sec — something she can now achieve in a single boat.

Chen, a social science freshman at the Singapore Management University, was critical of herself too. "Before joining the national team last year, I really couldn't move the boat.

"Moth has changed since."

In January, the duo were paired together for the first time. They won the women's K2 500m title in 1:59 at the South-east Asia Canoeing Championships.

And just last month, they did a personal best: 1:55 - just off the S$4,907 effort that earned them sixth place at the last Asian Games. China's Zhu Minyan and Ya Limin won gold in 1:46.901.

Their Hungarian coach Balazs Babella, a two-time world champion in the four-man kayak K4 200m, has been credited for improving their technique and times.

Taking time off from school to train full-time has also helped their cause.

"I thought I was training hard but I didn't know what hard training was," said Seah. "Last time, I trained five times a week. Now it's 15 times. In the past, being able to do 10 chin-ups was a great achievement. Now, if you can't do that, you should go hide in a corner and cry."

As a result of the work they have put in both on and out of the water, confidence is not something they are lacking. "It's good to know that you're stronger than half the guys in Singapore. That's cool," said the 1.69m tall and 51kg Chen, showing few signs of nerves ahead of her first multi-sport Games.

Their target is to rewrite their personal best in Guangzhou — which will hopefully be good enough for a top-five finish.

In an event which requires speed, raw power and synchronized stroking, they know that they are not training just for themselves. Said Chen: "You can't let yourself be slower than your partner or you'll be dragging her down. Teamwork will be vital. As the front power, Chen sets the pace, and Seah has to follow — not too fast, not too slow. They have worked on developing synchrony, too."

"She knows I like to conserve energy and win at the last part. I like to hold back till the last 30 seconds of the race," explained Seah. "It's important that we put in our power at the same time." At the Singapore Canoe Federation, there is a belief that no individual is more important than the other — regardless of the event they are in. Asian Games team manager Jason Chew insisted that all six run-baked, Guangzhou-bound athletes be interviewed, or none at all.

And, if the squad resemble a family, it is because there are blood ties. Chen's older sister Andrea, 25, is part of the women's K4 - or four-man kayak — 500m team with Irene Chua, 22, Geraldine Lee, 23, and Annabelle Ng, 27.

Even though the sisters feature in different events, their presence at training is enough to push each other on.

"I know I can't slack when all my sisters are going for training," said Steph- anie, who also has two other sisters in the national team — Abigail, 23, and Sarah, 17. "It becomes a team effort as a family."

Andrea, too, acknowledges that there is a friendly rivalry, but few would have been more proud when Stephanie quali- fied for her first Asiad. "For her to be able to go to the Asian Games in three years is a great achievement," Andrea said.