

# TIME TO PUT FINE POINT ON EXAMS

It's back to the books for Kiria, who is juggling studies and fencing as she qualifies for Games

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Hours after becoming just the second Singaporean fencer to qualify for the Olympics, Kiria Tikanah Abdul Rahman was not thinking about Tokyo, but Wi-Fi signals.

Specifically the strength of those in the hotel she will be serving her stay-home notice in.

The second-year chemistry student at the National University of Singapore will have to sit for three online examinations upon her return to Singapore last night.

And while the world No. 207 had achieved what was almost unthinkable in Tashkent on Monday night – upsetting a series of higher-ranked opponents to secure a berth at the Tokyo Olympics – the

scale of her achievement had yet to dawn on her.

The 20-year-old had topped the women's epee competition at the Asia-Oceania Olympic Qualifying Tournament, her 15-13 win over Kazakhstan's world No. 97 Ulyana Balaganskaya allowing her to join teammate and woman foilist Amita Berthier in Tokyo.

When asked in a phone interview with *The Straits Times* some two hours later if she realised what she had achieved, Kiria replied: "Honestly no. Even when I got the final touch (and winning point) it was like, 'Oh, I won'."

"It took me a while to realise that it meant I'm going to be an Olympian. There was almost like a lag."

Her coach of almost 10 years, Henry Koh, chuckled as he told ST:

"Fencing is a very stressful, frustrating, emotional sport.

"But one thing unique about Kiria is that she won't shout or cry, she just takes everything in."

Which would explain her understated, calm answer when she was asked if she was stressed by her upcoming exams.

"As long as the Wi-Fi (in quarantine) is strong enough, I think I'll be OK," she said.

She did confess, however, that juggling her studies and sport was "very difficult" but having supportive professors willing to arrange make-up exams when she has competitions, helps.

In preparation for the Olympic qualifiers, Kiria ramped up her training from 13 hours a week to about 19 from late last year. She lengthened her training sessions with her club, tripled her individual sessions with Koh and also spent more time in the gym. She also postponed one of her exams.

This dedication is made all the

more impressive considering she did not take a gap year or time off from her studies, as some other athletes chasing their Olympic dreams have done. So how does she do it?

"The No. 1 thing for me is to manage my own expectations," she said. "I understand that because of my fencing, I have to make sacrifices. With so much training, my expectations (of academics) are not insanely high, they're just reasonable. I may not be the top graduate in my cohort, but that's OK, because of my other achievements in fencing."

Blade Fencing Club's Koh, who has coached Kiria since she was 11, cited her "resilience and hard-working attitude" as her key strengths.

The 46-year-old former national fencer, who won individual and team foil bronze medals at the SEA Games in 2003, said that the fact that he was not able to coach Kiria in person in Tashkent made her win feel even more special.



From left: Kiria Tikanah, her coach Henry Koh, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong, and MCCY parliamentary secretary Eric Chua, during a training session at the OCBC Arena last month. PHOTO: COURTESY OF MCCY

As the official live streaming lagged by up to 20 seconds, Koh had to devise a way to communicate with Kiria. With national coach Andrey Klyushin using his phone to broadcast the match in Tashkent live to Koh via Zoom, Koh displayed basic symbols and colours on his screen – which she could see from the piste – to coach her remotely. They even practised it for several weeks in Singapore before the competition.

"Even though it's through the phone, the contrast in colours made the symbols very bright and clear," explained Koh.

"I had three computer screens on here in Singapore, and had the

help of my daughter... it was a real team effort all round."

Koh said he was also proud of the fact that Kiria has honed her skills entirely in Singapore.

"A lot of people thought it could not be done, and even I thought it was very hard," said Koh, who also credited the work done by the Singapore Sports Institute in helping Kiria.

"It might have been easier to go overseas where there's a more competitive environment, but that said, partly because of necessity we did it this way, and we managed to do it. It's an amazing feeling."

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