

Fencer Kiria Tikanah Abdul Rahman features in the third profile of *The Straits Times*' series on Team Singapore athletes at the Tokyo Games.



Kiria Tikanah earned qualification for Tokyo 2020 after upstaging higher-ranked rivals in April at the Asia-Oceania Olympic Qualification Tournament in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

#### SINGAPORE'S FENCERS IN TOKYO

**KIRIA TIKANAH ABDUL RAHMAN, 21**  
Event: Women's epee individual  
World ranking: 207  
Competition date: July 24  
First opponent: Hong Kong's Kaylin Hsieh (world No. 82) or Coco Lin (No. 90)\*  
Olympic career: Debutant



**AMITA BERTHIER, 20**  
Event: Women's foil individual  
World ranking: 60  
Competition date: July 25  
First opponent: Italy's Alice Volpi (No. 4) or the United States' Lee Kiefer (No. 5)\*  
Olympic career: Debutant

\*The competition draw takes place one day before the event begins.

**SCAN TO WATCH**  
Kiria Tikanah's thrust for glory  
str.sg/time17



# POINT IN TIME



Kiria Tikanah Abdul Rahman aged 10 (left) when she was still a foil fencer. She is now 21 and headed to the Tokyo Olympics as an epee fencer. PHOTO: COURTESY OF KIRIA TIKANAH ABDUL RAHMAN

Maturity and confidence, quietly cultivated, have changed fencer as she aims to take flight

Sazali Abdul Aziz

Somewhere along Bukit Timah Road, situated between a fast food drive-through and a busy traffic intersection is a quaint little shop-house unit that houses Blade Fencing Club.

It is unfussy, unassuming and, for the past decade, it has also represented the cocoon for Kiria Tikanah Abdul Rahman's metamorphosis.

She first walked through the rustic pine doors at Blade aged 10, just 1.41m and 30kg, a shy but smiley, talented but gawky fencer, unsure of how good she could get or how far she would go in the sport.

Today, Kiria has stretched out by 30cm and put 28kg onto a lean, slim, athletic frame. She still smiles a lot and is still a bit reserved. But, with blade in hand, she knows exactly where she will flutter next – to Tokyo to fence with the world's best at the Olympics.

Plenty else has changed with Kiria over the years spent honing her craft at the modest 15m x 7m training space at Blade. Even her weapon of choice.

At age 12, she switched from the foil to the epee and later came to realise it was a more natural fit.

With the lighter, more flexible foil, fencers have only the opponent's torso to aim for and this results in quicker duels and ex-

changes. With the epee, the entire body is a target so movements are slower and more calculated.

"You have to be more careful of being struck yourself," said Kiria. "So it suited my personality a bit more – I'm not super aggressive."

Henry Koh, her coach since her switch to the epee, said that while her physical transformation is most obvious, her mental one has been more impactful.

"Now she's more mature, a bit more introspective, and I think the biggest difference in her is the core confidence she now has within," said the former national fencer. "That feel inside."

This, said Koh, was what propelled her at the Asia-Oceania Olympic Qualifying Tournament in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in April.

There, Kiria made a mockery of her world ranking – 207 – by upsetting a series of higher-ranked opponents from Thailand, the Philip-

pinas and Uzbekistan to earn her spot in Tokyo. She became just the second Singaporean fencer to qualify for the Olympics, joining foilist Amita Berthier, who had sealed her ticket only a day earlier.

Kiria cannot help but chuckle, almost in embarrassment, at how scarcely believable the jumps in her resume read.

Up till 2017, among her biggest achievements was winning the Schools National A Division title.

Two years later, barely 19, she won the gold medal on her SEA Games debut in the Philippines.

And now at 21, while juggling her studies as a second-year chemistry student at the National University of Singapore, she is about to step onto sport's grandest stage.

Even as she tries to make sense of it all, Koh proudly shared that he had long known Kiria had it in her.

In fact, he had charted her road map to the 2024 Olympics as far

back as 2015. Then, she won a competition that featured 15 Commonwealth territories in South Africa, where she also beat England's top-ranked Cadet (Under-17) fencer. The competition opened Koh's eyes to Kiria's potential.

"What I'm very proud of is that to this day, we have hit all the milestones we set, on the dot or earlier," said the 46-year-old, who added that he also takes immense pride that Kiria's talent has been nurtured entirely in her local habitat, without any extended training stints abroad.

Kiria conceded that trying to make the step up to top-level competitive fencing, where "mental fortitude, focus and psychology" trump strength and even skill, has been a steep learning curve.

That is why she is game for anything that can give her an edge in Tokyo. Upon returning from Tashkent, she utilised a portable

sauna to aid in recovery. In training, she dabbled with a mechanical breathing apparatus and hyperbaric chambers.

Her sessions have also been ramped up in frequency as well as intensity. As a final push before Tokyo, Koh put her through the wringer with up to three sessions a day for two weeks straight.

For a week, she has been on a "detox" so her body and mind can take a break from fencing before she departs for Tokyo tomorrow.

The Olympics' finalised competition draw is not out yet but, as one of the two bottom seeds in her event, Kiria will likely face one of two fencers ranked above her – Hong Kong rivals Coco Lin (world No. 90) or Kaylin Hsieh (No. 82) – in her preliminary bout. Progress, and her reward is a date with one of the top two seeds – world No. 1 Ana Maria Popescu of Romania or No. 2 Choi In-jeong of South Korea.

Koh declined to reveal the target he has set for her, insisting that whatever her showing, she has already exceeded his expectations by qualifying for the Olympics ahead of time.

But Kiria wants to make the most of her rare opportunity.

"I'm looking forward to fencing (with) the world No. 1 or No. 2. That would be very exciting," she said. "But I know I have to get past the first round first. I have faced Coco and Kaylin before... (and) I think I'll be ready if I'm fresh."

Kiria is confident she will be, and that her coach's final tune-up strategy will pay off. Rested and relaxed, a vibrant version of her is ready to emerge from the chrysalis in Tokyo.

msazali@sph.com.sg