Fencer Kia Tikanah Abdul Rahman features in the third profile of The Straits Times’ series on Team Singapore athletes at the Tokyo Olympics.

SINGAPORE’S FENCERS IN TOKYO

KIRIA TIKANAH ABDUL RAHMAN, 21
Event: Women’s foil individual
World ranking: 207
Competition date: July 24
First opponent: Nicole Kaylin Heise (world No. 60) or Coco Lin (No. 50)
Olympic career: Debutant

ANITA BERTHER, 20
Event: Women’s sabre individual and team
World ranking: 40
Competition dates: July 25, 26
First opponent: Alice Volpe (No. 40) or the United States’ Lee Kiefer (No. 97)
Olympic career: Debutant

*The competition dates take place one day before the teams compete.

P.O.V.

Kia Tikanah Abdul Rahman

Age: 21, born Aug 16, 1999
Height: 1.6m
Weight: 59kg
Fencing: Foil
Eye colour: Hazel
Hair colour: Black

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

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

Sazzali 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 that houses Blade Fencing Club. It is unfussy, unassuming and, for the past decade, it has also represented the cocoon for Kia Tikanah Abdul Rahman’s metamorphosis. She first walked through the rusted pine doors at Blade aged 10, post 1.4m and 30kg, a shy but smiling, talented but gawky fencer, unsure of how good she could get or how far she would go in the sport.

Today, Kia has stretched out by 30cm and put 20kg onto a lean, slim, athletic frame. She still carries a lot and is still a bit reserved. But, with blade in hand, she knows exactly where she will flower next - to Tokyo to fence with the world’s best in the Olympics.

Plenty else has changed with Kia over the years spent honing her craft at the smallest 10m x 7m training space at Blade. Even her weapon of choice.

At age 12, the switch from the epee to the foil and later came to realise it was a more natural fit. With the lighter, more flexible fullfoil, fencers have only the opponent’s torso to aim for and this results in quicker duels and exchanges. 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 Kia. “So it suited my personality a bit more – I’m not super aggressive.”

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

“She now’s more mature, a bit more introspective, and I think the biggest difference is in her confidence, she now has within,” said the former national fencer. “That feels good.”

This, said Koh, was what propelled her at the Asia-Oceania Olympic Qualifying Tournament in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in April. There, Kia made a mockery of her world ranking – 207 – by outpacing a series of higher-ranked opponents from Thailand, the Philippines and Uzbekistan to earn her spot in Tokyo. She became just the second Singaporean fencer to qualify for the Olympics, joining fellow fencer Anita Bertheimer, who had sealed her ticket only a day earlier.

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

Up till 2017, among her biggest achievements was winning the Schools National Division III. Two years later, barely 15, she won the gold medal in 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 she had long known Kia had it in her. In fact, he had charted her road map to the 2024 Olympics as far back as 2016. Then, she won a competition that featured in Commonwealth territories in South Africa, where she also beat England’s top-ranked Cadet (under-17) fencer. The competition opened Koh’s eyes to Kia’s potential.

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

Kia conceded that trying to make the switch up to top-level competitive fencing, where “mental fortitude, focus and psychology” are more pertinent, 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 hypobaric 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 a three sessions a day for two weeks straight.

A photo we took after a workout, she has been on a “diet” 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 top two seeds in her event, Kia will likely face one of two fencers ranked above her – Hong Kong’s Michelle Lin (world No. 90) or Kaylin Heise (No. 82) – in her preliminary heat. Progress, and her reward is a date with one of the top four seeds – world No. 1 Ana Maria Popescu of Romania or No. 2 Chul-in Song of South Korea.

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

But Kia wants to make the most of her new opportunity.

“I’m looking forward to fencing with the world’s No. 1 or No. 2. That would be very exciting,” she said. “But I know I have to try to pass the first round first. I have faced Coco and Kaylin before... Until I think I’m ready I’m fresh.”

Kia is confident she will be, and that her coach’s final tune-up strategy will pay off. Rested and relaxed, she is ready for her to emerge from the chrysalis in Tokyo.

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