

ASIAN GAMES 2023

An ancient Chinese tale tells of a race among animals, with the sequence they finished determining the 12-year zodiac cycle's order. First came the rat, then the ox, the tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster and pig. At the Sept 23-Oct 8 Asian Games in Hangzhou, Singapore's 431-strong contingent will also be racing for honours. *The Straits Times* features 12 athletes, each corresponding to one of the animals of the Chinese zodiac. In the fifth profile of the series, David Lee chats with water polo player Mounisha Devi Manivannan.

OF FIRE AND PASSION



Dragon

- Energetic
- Fearless
- Warm-hearted

DESIGN: CHNG CHOON HIONG
ST PHOTOS: CHONG JUN LIANG, MARK CHEONG

Q You are 1.57m – that's uncommon for a goalkeeper. Does height matter for a water polo goalie?

A Typically, goalkeepers are quite tall and they have a large wingspan, which is advantageous. To make up for my shorter wingspan, I need stronger legs and faster reaction time, which are aspects I focus on during my training.

Q Goalkeepers rarely get subbed off, unlike the other positions – can you describe water polo from a goalkeeper's perspective?

A I see everything. I have to see everything to be able to assess the full situation across the pool and direct the defence where necessary. If I'm on the bench, I observe the game and provide my teammates pointers and feedback on how to improve our attack and defence. I'm also the loudest cheerleader because I believe in keeping our morale and energy high.

Q What makes a good water polo player and team?

A Water polo is described as a combination of swimming, football, basketball, rugby and even wrestling. It requires endurance, strength and speed. A good player should be a competent swimmer, have good ball-handling skills, and good ball and game sense to anticipate opponents' movements. Most importantly, (one needs) to be a good team player

and perform under pressure.

A good water polo team has good communication and chemistry among the players, and one built on trust and support for one another.

Q What is the biggest misconception about your sport?

A Many people think we can play water polo while standing on the pool floor. My friends always ask me if I jump off the pool floor. That is against the rules and actually impossible because the pools are usually three metres deep.

Q Singapore is not expected to win a water polo medal at the Asian Games. What is your target and what is the mentality like going into a Games with no medal expectation?

A There might be no expectation of us, but ask any athlete and no one ever goes into a competition expecting not to win. Hard work is wasted on those who do not believe in themselves.

My target is to do my utmost to win, to do everything in my power to help my team, to leave the pool with no regrets.

Q You were into ballet and classical Indian performances like bharatanatyam (dance) and veena (string instrument) when you were young. How did these influence your sports career and personality?

FACT FILE

NAME Mounisha Devi Manivannan

AGE 23

ASIAN GAMES EVENT
Women's water polo

ACHIEVEMENTS
SEA Games silver (2019, 2023),
Inter Nations Cup gold (2022)

FIERY PRESENCE

I apparently give off an intimidating aura sometimes, and dragons can be quite intimidating, no?



MOUNISHA DEVI MANIVANNAN, women's water polo goalkeeper, on how similar she is to her zodiac sign.



Goalkeeper Mounisha Devi Manivannan relies on having a faster reaction time as well as stronger legs to offset her relatively shorter wingspan.

A Since young, I've always pursued my passions in and out of school. The support from my family empowered me to continue exploring and pursuing various interests, and helped me figure out what I was truly passionate about.

Otherwise, I might not have ventured out on my own to find my "calling" in water polo, even if my family still doesn't know how the sport is played. I feel like I've grown into someone who readily takes risks and seeks out novel experiences, which has been great for my sports career.

Q You are a fourth-year medical student at the National University of Singapore. What is a typical day like for you, why do you persist and how do you cope?

A Most of my time is spent in hospitals, rotating through different clinical specialties. A typical day in the hospital can start at 7am and end at 6pm.

Currently, we train eight to 10 times a week, with double sessions on some days. Our morning sessions are from 5.30 to 7.45am, after which I'll head to the hospital for my clinicals. Night training is 7 to 9.30pm.

Discipline and passion keep me going. It helps that I have an extremely supportive and understanding team who are like my second family. My coaches understand when I need days off during exam season or when I

need to leave training early to reach the hospital on time... my teammates are super supportive and celebrate all my small milestones with me.

Q What is one thing you have to take with you for overseas competitions?

A My passport. I know it's the most obvious, but I have a funny story. For my first overseas competition in 2018, I left home without my passport and realised only when I was on my way to Changi Airport via MRT. I rushed home and was super late for the reporting time. Since then, my friends always remind me to pack my passport the day before.

Q Tell us more about your pet cat Bru.

A Bru is my little brother! He's super cheeky, curious and attention seeking. He especially loves to sit with me when I study. He really brings my family a lot of joy and comfort, and he's an emotional support for all of us.

Q In what ways are you like your Chinese zodiac animal – the dragon?

A My friends like to describe me as someone who is outspoken, brave and clear-headed. Also, I apparently give off an intimidating aura sometimes, and dragons can be quite intimidating, no?

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