



**Dynamic duo:** Malaysia's Pandelega Rinong (left) and Cheong Jun Hoong in action during the women's synchronised 10m platform final at the Maria Lenk Aquatic Centre. **Top right:** Debutant Nur Dhabitah Sabri finished ninth among 12 divers in the 10m individual platform.

# Reaching for a higher platform

## Divers have come of age since their humble beginnings

By LIM TEIK HUAT

OUR divers have again showed they can be depended on to deliver at the world stage.

From a bronze through Pandelega Rinong in the 2012 Olympics in London, diving stepped up to provide a silver in Rio through the women's 10m platform synchro duo, this time through Pandelega and her partner Cheong Jun Hoong.

It was a masterstroke of diving coach Yang Zhuliang who opted to leave out the most experienced member, Leong Mun Yee, after Jun Hoong-Pandelega dived consistently to claim silver at the same outdoor venue during the Diving World Cup in Rio in February.

Zhuliang was convinced that Jun Hoong-Pandelega would repeat the podium splash again in Rio. Jun Hoong-Pandelega did not disappoint as they grabbed the first ever synchro Olympic medal – and also the first for the Malaysian contingent in Rio on Aug 9.

The signs were already there for diving to deliver. Malaysia has bagged medals at the World Championships stage before this.

Pandelega then partnered Mun Yee to a historic first – a bronze in the 10m platform synchro at the 2009 world meet in Rome.

The duo repeated the feat in Barcelona in 2013 and it was Pandelega who stepped onto the podium for her first individual medal – bronze in the 10m platform in Kazan, Russia last year.

Amazingly, the rapid progress diving made as a medal contributor on the highest stage comes after just four Olympic cycles.

Before 1994, Malaysia had no facilities, no athletes and no history in the sport except for a one-off participation at the

1971 SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur.

It is due to the Jaya '98 programme (to prepare athletes for the 1998 Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Games) which started in 1994.

Former National Sports Council (NSC) director general Datuk Wira Mazlan Ahmad, who played a big part in the resurgence of diving, recalled that the involvement started with Chinese coach Li Juirong, who was attached to the Kuala Lumpur Amateur Swimming Association at that time being recruited to train a group of youngsters from scratch.

"We singled out diving for the Jaya '98 programme as the sport suited small-built athletes. With a proper programme, we believed we could win medals in the 1998 Commonwealth Games.

"Diving started from scratch. We had to build facilities, including dry gyms and also introduce programmes in Perak, Kuala Lumpur, Sarawak, Sabah and Penang. One of the criteria in selecting divers was for them to leap from a 10m platform without showing any fear.

"We are talking about seven, eight-year olds being told to jump off a platform. Many were afraid but the ones who showed no fear were shortlisted for the next stage.

"We also realised divers spent more time developing their acrobatic skills on dry land rather than in the pool."

After the basic facilities were in place in Cheras, more coaches from China were brought in and Malaysia managed to send divers – for the first time in 24 years – to the SEA Games in Chiangmai in 1995.

Malaysia returned home empty-handed from Chiangmai but hopes were raised

when Farah Begum Abdullah won the country's first-ever medal – a silver – in the Jakarta SEA Games two years later.

The breakthrough came in 1999 in Brunei when Yeoh Ken Nee and Farah claimed gold medals. Diving has not looked back since then as a major contributor for Malaysia in the SEA Games.

National divers made their Olympic debut in 2000 with four qualifying for Sydney. The divers followed up with three bronze at the Asian Games for the first time in Busan in 2002.

At the Commonwealth Games, 3m springboard specialist Ken Nee and the 10m platform synchro duo of Bryan Nickson Lomas-James Sandayud claimed historic silver medals in Melbourne 2006 for the first time.

Pandelega capped a major achievement when she won the country's first Commonwealth Games gold medal in the 10m platform in New Delhi in 2010. Malaysia should thank Zhuliang for turning our divers into winners on the world stage despite the limitations.

"We still lack good facilities. This year we had to spend long periods in China because our usual venue in Bukit Jalil was closed for renovation.

"We do not have many options with our small number of divers and they have to train for more than one event.

"In China, there are at least 10 world-class divers for each event. If the regular ones do not meet expectations, they are replaced immediately for the next major competition.

"With these restrictions, we have achieved so much and we hope we can get better," added Zhuliang.