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**THE STRAITS TIMES**

## **Budding stars united in chasing their dreams**



From left: Tennis player Clare Cheng, fencer Lau Ywen and squash player Sneha Sivakumar met at the 2012 Olympics as young journalists. PHOTO: JAMIE KOH

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[Nicole Chia](#)

They arrived at Kallang Wave mall last Tuesday one by one, sharing a group hug and exclamations of delight upon meeting.

But this hour-long gathering of Clare Cheng, Sneha Sivakumar and Lau Ywen was no ordinary outing among friends - it was a reunion five years in the making.

Chosen to attend the 2012 Olympics as young journalists under the McDonald's Champions of Play programme, of which The Straits Times was a partner, they are now carving their own sporting paths.

Ywen, 17, won the women's sabre fencing gold at the recent SEA Games while Games debutante Sneha, 16, bagged a silver and two bronzes in squash in Kuala Lumpur. Clare, 14, is the top-ranked

local tennis player in her age group and is targeting a semi-final spot in the WTA Future Stars tournament, which starts tomorrow.

Much has changed since the five days spent together in London, but not the chemistry among them.

They have kept in touch through social media - Clare recalls following Ywen and Sneha's progress at the SEA Games through Instagram, and congratulating them when they won medals.

The Methodist Girls' School student, who has twice represented the Republic in the ITF World Junior Tennis competition, said: "We may not meet often, but we're still quite close and stay updated on one another's lives through social media."

As the girls chuckled as they scrolled through old photos of the London trip, Raffles Girls' School student Sneha noted that it did not feel like five years since they last met.

Ywen agreed, saying: "(Clare and Sneha) are the kind of friends who while you haven't talked to in a while, when you meet them again, it's like you saw them only yesterday."

The United World College of South-east Asia student revealed that while the trio had little in common when they first met, they now have more to talk about because of their shared experiences as national athletes. "That mental and psychological journey that you go through is uniform for everyone across all sports," she added.



From left: Clare Cheng, Sneha Sivakumar and Ywen Lau were selected from some 200 hopeful applicants to attend the London 2012 Olympic Games as McDonald's Champions of Play "Young Journalists".PHOTO: MCDONALD'S CHAMPIONS OF PLAY

The trio were unequivocal in how their Olympic experience five years ago had benefited their sporting pursuits.

In London, the girls visited the athletes' village and watched Singapore swimmer Tao Li and American swim legend Michael Phelps compete on sport's grandest stage.

Sneha also met American swimmer and multiple Olympic medallist Dara Torres, while Ywen interviewed Venezuelan Ruben Limardo, the men's epee champion.

Clare, who hopes to represent Singapore at the SEA Games, said: "The experience inspired me to train harder. I learnt a lot from interacting with athletes like the American archery team and Champions of Play participants from other nations."

Being at the Olympics as a 12-year-old helped Ywen prepare mentally for her first major sporting event two years later - the 2014 Asian Games, where she was the youngest member of the Singapore fencing contingent.

So while Incheon was "massively scary", the environment of bright lights and a big crowd did not intimidate her as much because it was similar to what she had seen in London.

Ywen, who finished 12th out of 16 competitors in the individual sabre at the Asiad, said: "Competitions are so much more than just your physical skill. It becomes a mental game and seeing the bright lights and experience that other athletes had to go through at the Olympics allowed me to see what professional sport is like.

"I don't think all young athletes get the chance to really see that."

Sneha named one of the valuable aspects of the experience as understanding the emotions that athletes felt and how they prepared.

"After seeing the level at the Olympics and learning how the athletes got to where they are today, I just want to do the best I can in whatever I'm doing," she added.

"Hopefully one day squash will be included in the Olympics, and I can go back there as an athlete."

An hour later, after exchanging promises to arrange a longer catch-up session soon, the girls parted as each made her way to training.

They left separately, in the same way they had arrived, united by the pursuit of their sporting dreams.