

Next sprint king in the making

Already a member of the national 4x100m relay squad, 17-year-old Calvin Kang is tipped for stardom

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IT HAS been almost six years since UK Shyam rewrote the national record for the century sprint, when he clocked 10.37s in Aug 2001 in Beijing.

No one has looked capable of matching that feat since, not even Shyam himself. The time still stands as the current record.

But if Singapore Sports School's Georgian sprints and hurdles coach Viatcheslav Vassiliev is to be believed, 17-year-old Calvin Kang could well be the next big hope of Singapore sprinting, with the potential to better Shyam's national mark.

"Calvin has huge potential and I don't think there is anyone in his age-group with the same amount of promise in this region," claimed the 43-year-old specialist sprints and hurdles coach, who has represented Georgia and the former Soviet Union (USSR) in both the junior and senior teams.

Before joining the Singapore Sports School earlier this year, Vassiliev coached the Georgian national team from 1987-1993, the Russian junior team after that from 1993 to 2000, followed by a six-year stint in Malaysia.

And he has strong reasons to expect much more from Calvin.

The schoolboy recently returned from the Arafura Games in Darwin, where he set personal bests of 10.75s in the 100m and 22.20s in the 200m – both races were electronically timed – en-route to bagging two gold medals in the Men's Under-20 category.

Calvin's 100m time makes him the second-fastest man in Singapore this year, after Mohd Shameer Ayub (10.67s).

"I dare say that if he continues improving, there is no reason why he cannot attain international standards and hit timings in the region of 10.20s in three to four years' time," said Vassiliev.

ON THE FAST TRACK: Calvin Kang could break the national 100m record in the future if he maintains steady progress, says his coach.



KOH MUI FONG

"Let's not forget that he is still young and we have not really started putting him through weight-training yet as he is still growing. Once he has built up his upper body strength, that is when you will really see his potential."

Former Victoria School student Calvin, whose talent was first spotted at a Primary 3 physical education lesson at Elias Park Primary, shot to prominence when he won the National Inter-School Championships

"C" division title with a time of 11.69s.

He was offered a place in the pioneering batch of students in the Sports School when it opened in 2004.

Since then, Calvin, who had three weekly training sessions before, has been training eight times a week. His travelling to competitions abroad, where he gets to go up against some of the best talents in the region and the world, has seen him improve dramatically.

He first went under 11s last year when he clocked 10.90s during the National Juniors.

During this year's National Juniors at the Gombak Stadium, he clocked his previous personal best of 10.84s.

And then came his 10.75s mark at the Arafura Games.

This weekend, Calvin will be representing Singapore in the South-east Asia (SEA) Junior Athletics Championships 2007 (Jun 9-10), again at Gombak.

After which he will be part of the national 4x100m men's team competing in three legs of the Asian Grand Prix Series 2007 in Bangkok (June 19), Guwahati, India (June 23), and Pune, India (June 27).

Calvin, along with Gary Yeo, Poh Seng Song, Shameer and reserve Muhd Amirudin, will get to race against Asia's elite from countries like China and Japan for the first time at one of Asia's biggest athletics meets, where only the continent's top-eight teams are invited.

As a bonus, all five sprinters will also automatically qualify to compete in the century sprint.

The Asian GP is part of the World Athletics Tour, and cash rewards are given to the top three teams in all events.

Not that Calvin is thinking about winning any money.

His focus is on helping the relay team meet the SEA Games qualifying mark of 40.60s. At the same time, he is hoping that the opportunity to compete with some of the best sprinters in Asia will lower his 100m timing further and boost his own chances of clinching one of the two slots available for the Korat Games later in December.

"I know that there are still a lot of areas where I can still improve on, like my finishing, which is a bit weak," said the bespectacled teenager, whose discomfort with contact lenses means that he wears 400-degree spectacles even when racing.

"My ambition is to represent Singapore in the SEA Games. I was hoping to be able to achieve that dream by the time I turn 19 or 20. I was certainly not expecting the chance to qualify this year so anything else that comes is a bonus."