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Football may be Singapore's No. 1 sport but there are other sporting love affairs around the island. In this fortnightly series, *The Straits Times* seeks out less popular games and discovers that a country's passion for sport, even in this time of Covid-19, burns brightly.



Khirmer Mohamad and Shermeen Lim are gripped by the skill levels and mental strength needed to excel at lawn bowls, as well as the camaraderie among the fraternity. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

For The Love Of The Game

Rolling for young people

Lawn bowls suitable for all, including people with disabilities, as it offers lots of benefits

Laura Chia

After the rain stopped on a Wednesday evening, 14 pairs of lawn bowlers took to the green at the Tanglin Club for the Singapore Inter-club Pairs Lawn Bowls League.

Among the silver- and black-haired players were the usual faces from the Singapore Cricket Club (SCC) and Tanglin Club, but there were also some new competitors in town.

In lane eight, a team from Parabolws Singapore were lining up alongside the likes of SEA Games gold medallist Shermeen Lim.

It was the first time that para lawn bowlers were competing with their able-bodied counterparts, said Bowls Singapore president Rodger Kimpton, who noted the inclusiveness of the sport.

"There's a path for everyone and it's a great game to play together, whether you're disabled, able-bodied, old or young.

"It doesn't matter because everyone competes on equal terms and that makes it a very social game. There are very few sports like this," Kimpton told *The Sunday Times*.

Khirmer Mohamad, who uses a prosthetic leg, was part of the Parabolws Singapore team in action that day and enjoyed being able to spar with his peers.

He started playing the sport in 2018 and had previously represented Singapore in shot put at the 2014 Asean Para Games in Myanmar.

His next goal is to compete in lawn bowls at the 2022 Asian Para Games in Hangzhou.

"I feel really passionate about this sport and I'm putting time and effort to really focus on it, so I believe I have the quality and skills to

do well for Singapore," said Khirmer, 51, whose left leg was amputated in 2006 after a wound sustained in an accident became infected.

NOT ONLY FOR OLD PEOPLE

Many may think of lawn bowls as a sport for seniors, but Khirmer added: "People think that it's only for senior citizens, you don't have to be super strong to do this sport and anyone can play it.

"It requires a lot of technique, strategy and consistency. It's also a game of endurance so you need to be mentally fit."

In lawn bowls, players roll a bowl – an almost spherical object – to a white ball, or jack. The aim is to get it as close to the jack as possible. Points are awarded according to the number of bowls a player has that are closest to the jack.

James Chia, president of Parabolws Singapore, which has between 30 and 40 active members, said most people with disabilities (PWDs) can enjoy the sport.

Bowls Singapore has 119 active players across four clubs.

One unique thing about the sport is that able-bodied and para-athletes can play together at the same time without much of a disadvantage, he added.

"Lawn bowls is a game that requires less brawn and more wits so it's not just strength that wins you the game," said Chia, 32.

"Another good thing is, against the backdrop of the pandemic, it's an outdoor sport so there's fresh air and players don't need to come into physical contact with each other. By having everyone play together, the sport can create a platform for bonding and camaraderie across different groups."

Khirmer hopes this inclusivity can attract more PWDs to try the sport and enjoy it like he does.

The customer service coordinator said: "When you deliver the perfect bowl and it stops right in front of the jack, or when I beat my opponents by cutting my bowl into theirs, it feels great so I hope more people will join us and discover how fun this sport really is."

BOWLS 'TAUGHT ME ABOUT LIFE'

The strategic elements of the sport also piqued the interest of Lim, 31, who picked it up in junior college in 2006.

"It's very exciting and there are lots of things to learn, which got me really excited," said the winner of the women's triple gold at the 2019 SEA Games in the Philippines with Lim Poh Eng and Goh Quee Kee.

The experience of competing overseas has also been eye-opening for her as it exposed her to different skill levels, personalities and cultures.

Recalling her experience at the World Singles Champion of Champions 2011 in Hong Kong where she finished in the top six, she said: "It was super exciting when you realise there are so many good play-

ers and the level of play was incredible.

"When I go overseas to play, it's not so much about being the champion but more about growing and expanding your horizons. Bowls taught me more about life than just the sport."

Lim, a regional sales and marketing manager, said her journey to winning gold on her SEA Games debut taught her a lot.

She had changed her delivery three months before the Games after consulting a coach from the Malaysian national team.

"The only reason I managed to (win the gold) was by learning from the people around me and realising I had to be humble and ask for help.

"When you're good at something, it's hard for you to unlearn it and do it all over again."

She is one of three players in the current 21-strong national squad below the age of 40 but vice-president of Bowls Singapore Edmund Lim hopes to change this by introducing grassroots programmes in schools and community clubs.

Lim, 38, said: "We need to be more ambitious and have a good flow of young talent coming in. Right now the average age of the national squad is 50 to 60 years old and that's not looking good for the future of the sport."

Building a larger base of players will increase the "overall quality and competitiveness within the squad", he added.

But the challenge lies in changing the perception of bowls as a game for old people.

He said: "We need to help people understand that this sport can help with other aspects of life like character building and networking. There are many things to learn from this sport but that's not apparent to the public."

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IF YOU WANT TO TAKE UP LAWN BOWLS IN SINGAPORE

WHO 119 active players across four clubs – Singapore Cricket Club (SCC), Tanglin Club, Evergreen Lawn Bowls Club, Singtel Recreation Club

WHERE Various venues including Kallang Lawn Bowl, SCC, Tanglin and the Singapore Sports Hub

HOW E-mail bowlssg.info@gmail.com to join a club or for more information

COST A jack costs about \$50 while bowls range from \$550 to \$800 for a set of four. For complimentary use of mat, jack and bowls at Kallang and Sports Hub, make a booking at bowlssg.info@gmail.com

Venue booking fee during peak hours at Kallang is \$9.50 per hour for Singaporeans and permanent residents, and \$12.40 per hour for others.

During non-peak hours, the rate is \$3.50 an hour and \$4.60 an hour respectively.

No charge for the Sports Hub venue.