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NATIONAL ATHLETE WHO DIED AFTER SEA GAMES SELECTION TRIAL RACE

Triathlete's heart failure death shocks fraternity

By Jeanette Wang

HEART failure caused the death of national triathlete Thaddeus Cheong - a fact that has sent shock waves through the local community of endurance athletes.

The tragedy has also spurred concern among parents of other young triathletes, who now want their children checked for potential life-threatening heart ailments that may be lurking.

Thaddeus, 17, who died right after finishing a race on Sunday, was among the top of the pack in Singapore triathlon, and this made his death even more shocking, said athletes in the burgeoning triathlon scene yesterday.

His mother, Mrs Angeline Cheong, 46, told The Straits Times yesterday: 'The autopsy result showed his heart failed, but further investigation is needed to find out the cause.' This will take about a month.

Mrs Cheong added that in light of the incident, she will send her younger son, Thomas, 13, who is an aspiring triathlete, for medical tests.

Thaddeus, a first-year student at Raffles Junior College, collapsed after finishing a 1.5km swim, 40km bike ride and 10km run in 2 hours 9 minutes in a South-east Asia Games selection trial at Changi.

His time was just 5 minutes off the pace of Mok Ying Ren, 19, the race winner.

At his wake in Jalan Girang, off Upper Serangoon Road, yesterday, parents of other young triathletes were visibly shocked and worried.

Tanney Wong, 39, whose teenage daughter is a recreational triathlete, said: 'We're looking at some specialists now to see if our child has heart problems.'

Father of three Calvin Koh, 44, also plans to send his teenage triathlete daughter for medical tests.

‘We’re definitely not going to stop her from doing the sport, but we’ll be even more cautious now.’

Others at the wake, including Parliamentary Secretary (Community Development, Youth and Sports) Teo Ser Luck, expressed sadness at the death of a talented and driven athlete.

Said Mr Teo, who is also a triathlete: ‘I feel very sad for him because he was just a young boy and he was training so hard. At least he was doing something he really loved.’

National head coach Guo Weidong, who has coached Thaddeus since 2004, said he was confident the boy would have been Singapore’s top triathlete in one to two years’ time.

‘Just when he grew a passion to train and a strong determination to win for Singapore, it all ended. It’s a waste,’ he said tearfully.

The death of an elite, young endurance athlete is rare, said doctors contacted by The Straits Times yesterday.

Dr Benedict Tan, consultant sports physician at Changi General Hospital and head of its sports medicine centre, said that unlike older people, those aged below 35 rarely suffer a heart attack due to high cholesterol, high blood pressure or diabetes.

In most cases, the sudden death of a young individual is probably caused by an underlying heart condition that may not have been detected earlier, he said.

He suggested that those who engage in intensive physical activity such as triathlons and marathons go for a thorough screening to pick up any conditions they may have.

Mrs Cheong said that to her knowledge, Thaddeus did not have any heart condition.
