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A PROMISING teenage triathlete collapsed after crossing the finish line in a South-east Asia Games selection race yesterday and died soon after.

Thaddeus Cheong, 17, a first-year student at Raffles Junior College, had just swum 1.5km, cycled 40km and run 10km at Changi. He clocked a personal best of 2hr 9min, and came in third. Then he collapsed.

The boy's parents, George and Angeline Cheong, both 46, were present and rushed to their elder son. Their younger boy, Thomas, 13, is also a triathlon enthusiast.

Mrs Cheong told The Straits Times last night: 'We did not know his heart had stopped beating. We kept calling him, but there was no answer.'

Thaddeus was unconscious and foaming at the mouth when he was taken to Changi General Hospital (CGH). Doctors were unable to resuscitate him and pronounced him dead at 10.55am.

Police have classified it as a case of unnatural death, and a coroner's inquiry will be held.

Family members, team-mates and friends were in shock as news of the teen's death spread yesterday.

By afternoon, his school and church friends had started posting messages of grief online in their blogs.

Yesterday's SEA Games trial was the first of two to decide the two men and two women triathletes to represent Singapore in the year-end regional sports meet.

Thaddeus was among eight men and three women who started the race at about 6.45am at the Tanah Merah Country Club's swimming pool.

Triathlon Association of Singapore senior executive and assistant national coach Jerry Seah said Thaddeus looked confident, happy and ready to go before the flag-off.

Participant Sikhander Singh, who finished sixth behind Thaddeus, said: 'He looked fresh throughout the race. I had never seen him look better on the run.

'It was his best year so far in his triathlon career. I am very sad to see him go.'

Describing her son as an achiever, Mrs Cheong said: 'When he wanted something, he would work hard to get it.'

He was so keen to book a SEA Games slot that he had doubled his training stints to twice daily during the school holidays.

Raffles JC's cross-country teacher-in-charge, Mr Tay Meng Kiat, said: 'He was a very good child and well-liked by his team-mates.'

College principal Winston Hodge said: 'We are shocked and deeply saddened by Thaddeus' sudden passing, and our hearts and thoughts are with his family and friends.'

Among those who paid tribute online was a boy named Yao Khuan, who said they had been friends since Primary 5.

He wrote on his blog: 'Thaddeus, if you can hear me...I'd like to tell you that you're the coolest guy, and that I've always looked up to you, and I hope that it is a better place in heaven.'

Mrs Cheong said: 'Thaddeus is a very, very good boy. He is every mother's dream. He is a no-nonsense person, will tell you what he means, short and sharp and quickly.

'But now, he has just left without saying goodbye.'

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