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Ms Grace Chua is now in her freshman year as a medical student at Nanyang Technological University. The national shuttler had put her studies on hold for about three years to focus on badminton. ST PHOTO: MATTHIAS CHONG

Back to school after 'gap' break to chase sports dreams

Trio see value in putting university studies on hold while pursuing their athletic passion

Jolene Ang

While most of her peers are already working full time, Ms Grace Chua, 22, is just months into her freshman year as a medical student at Nanyang Technological University.

Ms Chua, a national shuttler, had put her studies on hold for about three years to focus on badminton.

"Throughout the years, I have been balancing sports and studies,

but I wanted to see how far I could go if I committed full time to the sport," said Ms Chua, who in 2014 completed Anglo-Chinese School (Independent)'s International Baccalaureate programme.

Her aim was to take her bow at the Commonwealth Games in Australia earlier this year, and she did.

Ms Chua, who specialises in singles, had previously made it only to the SEA Games stage. She was part of the Singapore women's team

that won team bronze medals at the 2015 and 2017 SEA Games.

While she failed to bring home a medal from Australia, she said it was a good experience.

She said: "I got to learn things I wouldn't have if I had gone straight to university, like how to handle failure. You can train and work hard, but it doesn't mean you'll do well. I learnt to accept that, and I became a stronger person for it."

Other Singapore athletes had also put their studies on hold to dedicate themselves to sports.

For national hurdler Ang Chen Xiang, who is also studying medicine, his decision to take a gap year in be-

tween his fourth and final year at the National University of Singapore was a calculated one.

Mr Ang, 24, said track and field is a late-maturing sport, where the peak age is 26 to 28, or later for hurdlers.

So taking a year-long break in his early years would allow him to build a stable base to carry him further in the sport, he said.

During the year-long break that started in February last year, he spent three months training in Hong Kong and four in Japan.

He set a new national record of 14.19 seconds in the 110m hurdles in June last year, and qualified for the SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur. He finished fifth in his event.

He said: "Medical students tend to be very focused on their studies and career, but my gap year really opened my eyes to the rest of the world."

Unlike Mr Ang, taking a year off from school was never really in the plan for short track speed skater Cheyenne Goh, winner of three medals – two silver and one bronze – at the 2017 SEA Games.

"I always thought I'd go straight into university after high school, so

the idea was a little intimidating," said the 19-year-old, who is based in Canada.

But, like shuttler Ms Chua, she wanted to see how far she could go if she skated full time.

And she would later travel some 8,400km from Canada to Pyeongchang in South Korea, to become the first Singaporean to compete in the Winter Olympics.

There, she finished fifth in her heats in the 1,500m short track speed skating event and did not qualify for the semi-finals.

She said: "It was definitely worth it. Having to miss a year of school is a pretty small price to pay for the experience of a lifetime."

Ms Goh has returned to read engineering at the University of Calgary in Canada, and is taking a reduced course load so she can continue with her skating training.

She said: "Over the next four years, I'm hoping to improve as much as possible and become competitive enough on the world stage to qualify for the next Winter Olympics."

jolenezl@sph.com.sg



National hurdler Ang Chen Xiang is now studying medicine at the National University of Singapore. He has no regrets about his decision to take a gap year in between his fourth and final year, saying that "my gap year really opened my eyes to the rest of the world". ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

LEARNING TO HANDLE FAILURE

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MS GRACE CHUA, who put her medical studies on hold for about three years to focus on badminton.