

SUPER MAN

Track cyclist Josiah Ng defines pain and reveals his heroes. Oh, and he's going for gold, too. By Sunitha Thayaparan. Styled by Andrea Wong. Photographed by Aaron Lee.

He's quietly sizing you up. You see it in his eyes, the first time you shake hands. A trait of natural athletes, this reflex of gauging the competition. Even when there's no race or match in sight, they are always primed for action, ready to take on an opponent at a moment's notice. Most times though, the competition is themselves.

If the name Josiah Ng is on your radar it might be because he's a career track cyclist who's represented the nation at both the Athens 2004 and Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics, or it might be that his PR savvy has brushed your cultural antennae. Raised in the United States, and now living in Melbourne with his Malaysian wife Kim Ong who helps navigate Ng's media relations, the 30-year-old is making his presence felt both on, and off, the track.

Ng's soft Southern Californian drawl does not give away the fact that at the age of 18 his parents gave him the sort of challenge that makes a man of you, or doesn't. "My father hurled me an ultimatum – give up cycling when I turned 18 or leave the house. I chose to leave. At the time, I was kind of bitter that he would just throw me to the wolves. But he created a scenario in which I had no choice but to learn to be a man all on my own, and that was the best lesson ever."

Since then, Ng has not stopped moving. He's travelled the globe to bring home medals from the UCI Track Cycling World Championships eight times, as well as taken on pros in the highly competitive Keirin track cycling sport in Japan, an event that is by-invitation only thanks, if you're not Japanese. Laughs Ng, "It's impossible for foreigners to win in the Japanese Keirin because it's an insider's game. They'll tag team you out of the race first chance they get, but it does up the ante on your game strategy."

These days he has big names backing him. Not too shabby for someone who had to bet on himself in the early stage of his career. Brands like Nike sportswear, Oakley, Giro/Easton, Bont shoes and Euro-Asia Imports have come out to play and Ng reports that the Malaysian team, based in Melbourne, Australia where they train, has recently garnered the support of yet another giant: Sime Darby has committed its support till the London Olympics 2012.

Of course, the prize Ng really has his sights set on right now is the one that every athlete aspires to. Not so much for fame, or glory, though there is always that, but because of what it means to the individual. The next Olympics. Says Ng, "Back in 2007, at the World Championships in Mallorca, Spain, I shattered my collarbone so bad that I needed two operations to put it back together. It was in the first round of my pet event, the Keirin. Italian Roberto Chiappa cut down on my front wheel and I hit the deck at 75kph. Even as

strong as our bones are made, direct impact from 75kph to 0kph in a split second is pretty destructive. I had a stainless steel plate put in and kept it there for over a year. But it protruded from my skin and irritated me so I had it removed in 2008 after the Beijing Olympics. I still have a deep scar about 15cm long as a reminder of what I'll go through to get to that top step of the podium to hear the "Negaraku" play." In 2012 he just might hear the anthem. If he does, you heard it here first.

You've said, "If I'm not in pain, I'm not doing my job." In fact, what is pain to Josiah Ng?

Pain is when I wake up in the morning, feeling like a tonne of bricks. Some days, I feel like I am double my age. Every imaginable muscle in my body aches and is stiff. Getting out of bed is the toughest part. Once I'm up and moving about, everything starts to loosen up. But real pain is when I jump into a tank full of water and ice at 12 degrees celcius or colder for periods of up to 15 minutes. I do that several times a week to help my body recover so that I can beat my body up again the very next day. You can only imagine the feeling of shock when you first try this routine. And it doesn't help to get in slowly. It's just easier to jump in the ice tank all the way up to my neck. Initially my feet and hands feel intense pain, then after about three minutes, it all goes numb. Once I challenged some big NFL football players to see who really had the best mental acuity. I won as they all surrendered after a few minutes. I stayed in 15 minutes. But I paid for it. I was still shivering hours later.

How did the journey start?

I was 16 when I started track cycling. Since then there've been ups and downs, pleasure and pain. When I was in my teens, I was a pretty talented violinist – the first movement of Sibelius Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47 is still something I enjoy playing. My parents wanted me to capitalise on that and my education. You could say that I was pretty rebellious and had other plans. When I was offered a two-year Olympic Solidarity Scholarship at the World Cycling Centre in Aigle, Switzerland I didn't hesitate for a second, I packed my bags and headed out. The biggest sacrifice I made as a result of that decision was the disintegration of the relationship with my then girlfriend of almost two years. There was just no way a long distance relationship at that time in my life would have worked. For one, I had no money to fly back for visits and two whole years without seeing someone when you are in your early twenties, well, you get the point. But it's been worth it, there have been some amazing moments. In my teenage years I always admired multiple Olympic and World Champion, Florian Rousseau from France. His focus and tenacity on the track was second to none. Off the track he was a true gentleman. I was fortunate enough to face off