Gold for Singapore

SINGAPORE'S shooters got the country's Commonwealth Games campaign off to a cracking start yesterday by winning two golds.

Aqilah Sudhir and Jasmine Ser (above) won the women's 50m rifle three-positions pairs title.

Gai Bin (right) and Nigel Lim Swee Hon (far right) had started the ball rolling by topping the men's 50m pistol pairs competition. The pair dedicated their gold to the memory of the late Mrs Lee Kuan Yew.

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Rookies overcome personal battles to deliver a pair of golds, with more likely

Singapore shooter Aqilah Sudhir had a warning from judges, Jasmine Ser found her sight getting blurry. Gal Bin started thinking of gold. Only Nigel Lim seemed unperturbed.

In shooting, in which "a blank mind is the perfect state", according to Aqilah, even the slightest distraction can be costly.

Yet, Singapore's shooters, all in their Commonwealth Games, won their personal battles in their own way to deliver the Republic's first two golds of the New Delhi Games in scintillating fashion.

Aqilah and Jasmine's win in the 50m rifle three-position was doubly impressive given it was a new event for them.

Still, not only did they beat an experienced Indian team which included Tejaswini Sawant, who only two months ago was the world champion in the 50m prone, but they also set a Commonwealth Games record with their combined score of 1,149. The Singapore pair beat the Indians by six points.

"I'm still in shock," said Ser, 20, who feels it to herself to shut out the rest of the world from her mind during competition.

Despite the gold, she was unhappy with her performance. In the standing portion of an event where each shooter also has to shoot from prone and kneeling positions, she found her eyesight blurry. She ignored the condition, thinking she could manage it. As it got worse, she resorted to eye drops.

"Then I found I could aim better. But if I had used the drops earlier, my scores could have been better. I let myself down and was counting on Aqilah," said Ser, who contributed 508 points.

"What! I was counting on you," quipped her partner.

Aqilah, who began the contest with a near-perfect 199 (each shooter gets 20 shots per position, with 10 points for bull's eye) in the opening prone position, was first cautious by an official for raising her armed rifle too high.

But she stuck to her routine as it was key in keeping her concentration. She was then given a stern warning.

"My grandmother advised me to keep reciting a short prayer, and it helped me regain my focus," said the 19-year-old.

"Jasmine and I had one aim today to break the 580 barrier. What mattered was that one of us did." Aqilah's 581 was a personal best and the day's highest individual score. The next best was Tejaswani's 575.

How sweet was that," said Chong Seng Mok, the Singapore Shooting Association president, who was at the Dr Karni Singh Shooting Range. "Taking part in this event for the first time, they still beat a far more experienced team who had the benefit of being on home soil.

Earlier in the morning, Gai, despite the experience of having coached On Shang Ming to Singapore's first Commonwealth Games shooting gold four years ago, became his own worst enemy.

He and partner Lim had gotten off to a hot start, putting up 95 points each and immediately surging into a nine-point lead. Yet in the third series, Gai began to taste victory, prematurely.

"We are only human," he said. He lost focus and shot poorly, for just 85 points. It was a wake-up call. He calmed himself by listening to his heartbeat slow down. He cleared his mind. He refocused.

Ten shots later, he had put up another impressive 95 points, and Singapore still had a three-point cushion over India's Omkar Singh and Deepak Sharma.

Lim, 31, and Gai, 42, finished with 1,094 points, relegating the Indians (1,087) to silver. Trinidad and Tobago won the bronze on 1,081.

So how did the gold feel in their hands?

"Heavy," said Aqilah, laughing, as she clutched her biggest prize to date.

"Heavy means quality," added Lim, who with his partner Gai won two golds at last year's South-east Asia Games.

Yesterday's golds earned each pair $120,000 under the Singapore National Olympic Council's Multi-million Dollar Awards Programme.

Any plans on how to spend the bonus? Said Lim: "Right now, I don't need any distractions. My focus is on shooting well in the individual events."