

# GAME FOR **Li**FE

Lives Made Extraordinary Through Sport

GAME FOR LIFE chronicles the journeys of 25 Singaporeans whose lives have been made extraordinary through sport. They are a diverse group of people: academics, business leaders, public servants and professional athletes who come from very different backgrounds. At first glance, they appear to have little in common – except for their passion for sport and their emphatic belief that sport helped shape them into the resilient, self-actualised people they are today.

With 25 stories of hope and achievement, GAME FOR LIFE will inspire readers to discover their potential through sport. The book celebrates the effort and life lessons as much as it pays tribute to the victories on the field and in the arena.



**VISION2030**  
LIVE BETTER THROUGH SPORTS

Leadership/Sports/Biography

[writeeditions.com](http://writeeditions.com)

ISBN 978-981-07-6273-5



9 789810 762735

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25  
JOURNEYS

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Published by:

Singapore Sports Council  
230 Stadium Boulevard Singapore 397799  
[www.ssc.gov.sg](http://www.ssc.gov.sg)

Produced by Write Editions®

Write Editions® is a registered trademark and an imprint of  
JMatrix Consulting Private Limited, Singapore  
*A Publishing & Communications Co.*  
14 Robinson Road #13-00 Far East Finance Building Singapore 048545  
Email: [publisher@writeeditions.com](mailto:publisher@writeeditions.com)  
[writeeditions.com](http://writeeditions.com) | [jmatrix.co](http://jmatrix.co)

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Singapore Sports Council would like to express its appreciation to the following agencies for their assistance: Singapore Shooting Association and STRIKE Academy Pte Ltd for availing their equipment during the photography sessions. Photography by Asterisk Creative Solutions.

Printed in Singapore

ISBN: 978-981-07-6272-8 (hardcover)  
ISBN: 978-981-07-6273-5 (paperback)  
ISBN: 978-981-07-6274-2 (e-book)

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Game for life : 25 journeys. – Singapore : Singapore Sports Council, [2013]

pages cm  
ISBN : 978-981-07-6272-8 (hardcover)  
ISBN : 978-981-07-6273-5 (paperback)  
ISBN : 978-981-07-6274-2 (e-book)

1. Sports - Singapore - Biography. 2. Leadership.

GV697 .A1  
796.0922--dc23

OCN840562126

## PRAISE FOR GAME FOR LIFE

“Game for Life: 25 Journeys” provides inspiring, real-life stories of the power of sport for transforming lives. This alone makes it a wonderful read. However, it goes beyond these stories by posing reflective questions that make the reader think about how sport can shape his or her life.

I believe that “Game for Life: 25 Journeys” is a must-read not only for athletes but also for parents and sports coaches. Teachers will find the book to be a great starting point for young people to discuss what they are experiencing in sport and how these experiences can result in important life lessons. Young people will reap much more from this book if they reflect on its content and engage in discussions about their sport experiences and how those experiences are best interpreted to maximise psychological growth.

So, don't just read this book. Reflect on the questions posed and lessons that sport has taught others. Think about what sport is teaching you and discuss it with fellow participants and your coaches.

**Daniel Gould, Ph.D.**

Professor and Director  
Institute for the Study of Youth Sports  
Michigan State University

“Game for Life: 25 Journeys” does a masterful job of examining the impact of sports on the lives of 25 extraordinary Singaporeans. Each person credits sports with teaching lessons that were fundamental to their success in life. It is not a book about winning and losing on the athletic playing fields. It is about the lasting values learned through sports – such as respect, responsibility, self-discipline, selflessness, resilience and teamwork – that transform lives. These inspirational stories provide a valuable resource for people of all ages.

Indeed, sports have life lessons to teach, and if you are a participant rather than just a spectator, you gain even more.

I believe that sports are the best classroom for life and “Game for Life: 25 Journeys” provides proof that sports do change lives!

**Dr. Ralph L. Pim**

Professor and Director of Competitive Sports (Retired)  
United States Military Academy  
West Point, New York

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# MESSAGE

**S**port, while often seen as a physical activity, is as much about developing the spirit as the body. An athlete has to be resilient – both in body and mind.

The Olympic motto “Faster, Higher, Stronger” is well-known as a call to sporting excellence. Yet, to be faster, higher or stronger requires more than just physical strength and dexterity. It also calls for mental strength and perseverance – tenacity to keep going in spite of physical pain or mental fatigue, and self-belief not to give up even when the going gets tough. We learn to play as a team, working with others to achieve shared objectives.

Sport encourages people from all walks of life to be inspired and united through sporting heroes and role models. It is a language that everyone can understand. Through sport, we create common experiences and collective memories, as a community and as a nation. We learn how to lose with grace and to win with humility. We develop shared memories and build strong interpersonal bonds.

All these are qualities that serve us well, not just in sport, but also in our daily lives. I know a good number of the 25 people featured in this book “Game for Life”, and have seen many of them give their best in the sports arena, and in their work and personal lives. I hope readers will be inspired by their journeys and apply the same lessons to life.

**Teo Chee Hean**

Deputy Prime Minister

President, Singapore National Olympic Council

# INTRODUCTION

The Singapore Sports Council-led Vision 2030 exploration into the value of sport for the nation began with a simple question to people: How can sport help you live better? From July 2011 to May 2012, the Singapore Sports Council (SSC) Vision 2030 Team sought ideas, opinions and feedback from people from all walks of life. Through the face-to-face conversations with 500 people and suggestions posted through social media, the Vision 2030 Team produced 20 recommendations on how Singapore can use sport to better serve the national priorities in the coming years.

Among the key Vision 2030 recommendations was the creation of a curriculum to develop leadership and character through sports. Vision 2030 posited that deliberate, well-designed sports programmes would develop the characteristics needed by Singaporeans to rise to the increasingly complex challenges of our rapidly changing world. In the past year, this theme has been carried by SSC CEO Lim Teck Yin in presentations to government agencies, corporate Singapore and our educational institutions.

“Game for Life” is the foundation of the new curriculum developed by SSC’s Leadership Development Department. Designed for coaches, educators and sports trainers, the Leadership & Character Toolkit comprises the “Game for Life” book as well as an accompanying resource guide for coaches, educators and sports trainers. It was launched on 27 May 2013 at the inaugural Leadership Symposium 2013 – Inspiring Future Leaders, jointly organised by SSC and Singapore Management University (SMU) and held at SMU.

This book features 25 Singaporeans from business, academia, government and sports. Although they lead different lives, these 25 individuals share a common thread. Their life stories illustrate the transformational power of sport to inspire the Singapore spirit. Through sport, they are able to live extraordinary lives.



# FUTURE READY

In a rapidly changing world of new cultures, technologies and information, people need to be able to effectively manage market disruptions, people and products. Sport does more than teach people how to play games. Through sport, the people in this section learned a respect for fair play, teamwork and leadership, discipline in thinking and action, and a commitment to purpose. Sport helped them develop into “future ready” people.

# SAILING TO SUCCESS

Known for his trademark consistency on the waters, ex-national sailor **DR. BENEDICT TAN** raised the profile of competitive sailing in Singapore. He shares lessons learned from the sport, and how they have helped him navigate through life's uncharted paths.

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In his office at the Changi Sports Medicine Centre, Dr. Benedict Tan is animatedly sketching out a diagram. Sailing, running, and medicine have formed three core circles. He draws a line resolutely through, connecting them. "Sport is a stepping stone to something else, like character development," he muses, dotting each circle with his pen. "Through the years, sailing has taught me many lessons, many of which are transferable to academic pursuits, work and life."

Well, Dr. Tan would know. After all, the 45-year-old has achieved success on both sporting and medical fronts. He is an Asian Games and four-time Southeast Asian (SEA) Games gold medallist in



sailing, as well as a three-time Sportsman of the Year. The Olympian is also a prominent sports physician. He is the head and senior consultant of the Changi Sports Medicine Centre and Singapore Sports Medicine Centre. He also serves on the Medical Commission of the International Sailing Federation and is the sports patron of the Singapore Disability Sports Council as well as the president of the Singapore Sailing Federation.

Since retiring from competitive sailing in 1996, he has turned his focus to recreational long-distance running, emerging as the third-fastest Singaporean in the 2008 Singapore Marathon. In a seven-year effort, he recently completed the World Marathon Majors, a championship-style competition that comprises five races in the cities of Berlin, Boston, Chicago, London and New York. "I planned for my first Major to be the one in Boston as it is the toughest to qualify for," says Dr. Tan, who accomplished the feat in October 2012.

Juggling his various spheres of interests now comes as second nature. But he was not born with natural abilities to excel in all. Instead, performing to his best in sailing, running, academia and work is something that he has trained himself to do. And it all started with sailing.

### A DAILY DOSE OF DISCIPLINE

It was Dr. Tan's father, Tan Yew Kier, who introduced him to sports such as swimming, badminton, soccer and squash. A recreational sailor, he also brought young Dr. Tan to Changi Sailing Club. Dr. Tan says: "Initially, I played on the beach while he sailed. But he signed me up for a sailing course as soon as one came up."

Sailing struck the 11-year-old as being unique. Dr. Tan shares: "A comprehensive sport, it requires physical strength, technical abilities and tactical skills." Since there was a need to be competent in every area, sailing was extra stimulating. But even in his youth, he did not shy away from tough tasks. "It was a challenge to master the sport's multiple dimensions. But I didn't mind having to work hard for years before seeing results."

In those days, formal coaching was hard to come by. Whatever he knew was picked up from his father and the sailors around him. To improve his skills, he read sailing books daily, even borrowing and photocopying each book from cover to cover. "I'm not a natural reader," he professes. "I especially struggled with the sailing rule book, which was written in legalese. I read each line three times and still could not understand." Tiny "eureka" moments only came when he was on the water and managed to apply what he had read. "It was a laborious process, but I believed that persistence would overcome

all difficulties.” This even transformed Dr. Tan’s initial less-than-interested attitude towards his studies.

With little pressure from his parents, he nearly flunked his Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE). At Ghim Moh Secondary School, he was an average student. It was sailing that showed him the path to academic excellence. “I reasoned with myself that if I had the discipline to plough through thick sailing books daily and grasp difficult concepts like hydrodynamics, meteorology and racing tactics, then my secondary school textbooks should be a cinch,” he says.

So, he forged on in his studies, emerging top of the standard by the time he completed Secondary Three. He then went to Hwa Chong Junior College before doing medicine at the National University of Singapore. Dr. Tan’s postgraduate studies brought him to the University of Canberra and the Australian Institute of Sport, where he obtained his Master of Sports Medicine.

Through his academic life, he learned that he must carry his own weight. In university, the professors made it clear that he could not use sailing as an excuse if he failed his examinations. As a houseman and medical officer, he knew he had to do the same amount of work even if he had taken time off to race overseas. “I knew that my colleagues would have to shoulder an additional person’s load if I didn’t perform my share of the work. So, I would work longer hours, do more calls, and sleep less to make up for any time spent away racing.”

### RELYING ON TEAM EFFORT

Dr. Tan is quick to acknowledge that he got as far as he did because of teamwork. Although he specialised in the Laser, a single-handed boat, it was never an individualistic pursuit in his eyes. This perspective can be attributed to his father’s gentle orchestration of his early sailing career.

When he was older, Dr. Tan took the initiative to organise training sessions for his close-knit sparring group throughout the week. “Sailing, even if it is on a one-man boat, requires cohesive teamwork with your sparring partners. If they fail to turn up for training, how can you improve?” He says: “It’s about forming an alliance to share and learn from one another during training, but compete during races.”

Over the years, he has sparred with many local sailors like Yuri Siegel, Milk Bjorkenstam, Wee Toon Liang, Vincent Cheng, and Tracey Tan, each with a different forte to contribute to the alliance. Beyond our shores, Ben's overseas sparring partners included then-United Kingdom's National Champion Gareth Kelly, the top-ranked American sailor Nick Adamson, and New Zealand's No. 3, Rod Dawson.

"Think about it," he urges. "In a fleet of a hundred boats, the chance of winning is statistically 1 in 100. But let's say I forge an effective alliance with another sailor to spar and train as a team, then our standard would rise above the other 98 isolated sailors. In the next regatta, my only threat would be my own sparring partner, so my chance of winning would now shoot up to 1 in 2! The ability to form alliances and work as a team should not be neglected as an essential life skill." With such formidable alliances, it is no wonder that Dr. Tan achieved international success.

When Dr. Tan was in his mid-teens, his father also steered him towards two-man boats. He says: "On two-man boats, many teams end up fighting within themselves because it can be highly pressurising to have to make fast, accurate decisions during a race. So, he felt that it would be a good place for me to learn about partnership." By virtue of the terms "skipper" and "crew", there is a presumed hierarchy on the two-man boat. But through competing on these boats, Dr. Tan learned that an equal partnership founded on mutual respect is the key to winning races. He often switched roles with the crew during training sessions. He says: "Only then could we have understood each other's roles and challenges."

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The theme of teamwork runs through most of Dr. Tan's life. When long-distance running became his recreational sport of choice in 2002, he applied the same winning formula and sought out training partners like current national record holder Murugiah Rameshon, 2008 Singapore Marathon champion Daniel Ling, and Sundown Marathon champion Benny Goh. "I picked up distance running from scratch, but they generously shared their knowledge and pushed me during training, allowing me to fast-track my progress," he says. "Without them, I would never have achieved my marathon personal best of 2 hours 56 minutes." To underscore the potency of the sparring group, Rameshon, Daniel, and Dr. Tan hogged all three local podium places at the 2008 Singapore Marathon.

While he was at medical school, he had to sail at East Coast Sailing Centre and train in the gym at West Coast Recreation Centre every day till 10 p.m., leaving little time for his studies. He relied heavily on his clinical group to motivate him. "By the time I reached the university library, it would be after 10 p.m. We would then study together outside the library, on the benches along the corridor, until 2 a.m. We worked together so well that we were one of only two clinical groups that year that achieved a 100% pass rate."

Likewise, this has been applied to his work at the two centres that he runs concurrently, the Changi Sports Medicine Centre and the Singapore Sports Medicine Centre. "As the head of sports medicine, I play the role of a team leader," he says. "We have achieved many milestones, but I don't hog the credit because it's always a combined effort from everyone – the doctor, the physiotherapist, the trainer, the sports massage therapist, the dietitian, the podiatrist, the sport psychologist, the nurse and the receptionist. I'm useless without the team, as I only diagnose. It is the physiotherapists, podiatrists and others who actually deliver the treatment."

## SHOWING HUMILITY IN TRIUMPHS

The first race that left a profound impression on Dr. Tan was the Asian Fireball Championships, held in Thailand in 1984. It is memorable as it was his first-ever international race. "The Fireball scene was dominated by the Thais and Thai-based British expatriates. Nobody knew me, and I was an underdog," he recalls.

But the 17-year-old was not deterred. He says: "If a challenge seems immense, just break it up into bite-sized steps and tackle them one by one." First, he tweaked his training schedule to address weaker areas. Then, he kept a low profile. "That way, the top sailors would not even bother to cover me. Instead, they would spend their energy trying to outdo one another." That did the trick, and his points crept up the scoreboard. "By the time they realised I was leading on the scoreboard, it was too late." He became its youngest champion.

From 1989 to 1995, Dr. Tan won the Laser gold in every single SEA Games. At the 1994 Asian Games in Hiroshima, Japan, he comfortably scored a gold medal without having to sail the last race. It was Singapore's first Asian Games gold in 12 years, and the Republic's first-ever in sailing. In 1995, he even broke into the ranks of the top 40 sailors in the world. A year later, he finished 36th out of 56 competitors at the Olympic Games in Savannah, USA. For his sporting achievements, he was declared Sportsman of the Year in

1991, 1994 and 1995.

But Dr. Tan never let success go to his head. After every race, he performed the same ritual. After crossing the finishing line, he would duck under the sail to thank the race committee because the volunteer race officials had sacrificed their weekends for the sailors. When the runners-up sailed closer, he would congratulate them. Good sportsmanship in victory is the mark of a true sportsman.

### LEARNING FROM THE BEST

Looking back at his illustrious sporting career, Dr. Tan acknowledges the importance of constant learning from the crème de la crème of the sailing fraternity. In his youth, he partnered with top local sailors like Tan Kok Hwa, Simon Loh and Loey Ah Chee on two-man boats.

“My father believed that my progress would be accelerated by learning from seniors, so he convinced experienced sailors to crew for me. So, my crew in the two-man boat could easily be twice my age,” says Dr. Tan. From these sessions, he picked up not only

“ I COMPETE TO  
MAKE MYSELF A BETTER  
PERSON, NOT TO PUT  
DOWN OTHERS.”

sailing skills, tactics and strategy, but also maturity. “As a child, I interacted a lot with adults and was put in my place so many times that you could say I was well and intensively mentored,” he laughs.

His sailing style gradually evolved into an amalgamation of three top sailing masters: the balanced style of United Kingdom’s Gareth Kelly, the aggressive boat-handling of United States’ Nick Adamson, and the physical techniques of New Zealand’s Rod Dawson. “We spent countless hours training on and off the waters together, and their skills rubbed off on me,” says Dr. Tan.

As usual, he applies what he learned in sailing to his work in medicine. “The way I treated my sparring partners – as peers, with respect and empathy – is how I treat my colleagues now, for instance,” he says. “Also, I never stop learning. In medicine, we subscribe to continuing education, just like how I kept learning from different sailing masters then.”

Dr. Tan adds: “Before I retired from competitive sailing, I gave the sport everything I had, so I was ready to move on to the next chapter in my life – my medical career – and give it my all.” Pouring his soul into medicine is certainly what Dr. Tan has done. At the age of 45, not only has he succeeded in the mammoth task of developing the field of sports medicine into a fully



recognised subspecialty in Singapore, he is also arguably Singapore's best-known name in sports medicine.

Today, Dr. Tan is still as industrious as any houseman. He reiterates: "The engine that has gotten us to where we are today needs to be tuned continually in order to ensure that it delivers results further down the road."

To hone his mental discipline, he wakes up at 5 a.m. to run and logs between 80km to 120km a week. On Sundays, there is no sleeping in – he gets up at 4 a.m. to run 36km before it gets too hot. Dr. Tan has even influenced his wife of 18 years, Alison Lim, a managing director at an international bank, to run. "She has come a long way from not being able to complete 2.4km runs in school to finishing her first marathon at the 2012 Chicago Marathon." Apart from travelling around the globe to participate in marathons, the couple also ski and scuba dive every year. This man and sports are truly inseparable.

## VALUES

Teamwork • Persistence • Diligence • Discipline • Humility

## REFLECTION

1. Are you willing to forgo the comforts of life to focus and persevere to achieve your life goals, as demonstrated by Dr. Tan's single-mindedness to become an excellent sailor?
2. When faced with conflicting but equally important demands in life, how do you determine your course of action? Do you give up on some goals? Or do you sacrifice some things to achieve others? How do you determine your priorities?



2

# THE WINNING EDGE

In 2008, **RICHARD TAN's** Arina group of companies shone the spotlight on the world's first Formula One (F1) night race in Singapore. An avid badminton player and go-kart racer, the savvy entrepreneur talks about how his passion for sports has paid off in his business and life.

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In the air-conditioned comfort of Singapore Badminton Hall, Richard Tan recalls how he helmed the installation of lighting structures at the inaugural Singapore Grand Prix in September 2008. "It was a technically challenging project," says the chief executive officer (CEO) of Arina.

"We had to set up a temporary light system at the Marina Bay Street Circuit in the quickest possible time to minimise disruption. That meant working round the clock in shifts to get it done." But for the dynamic 51-year-old, illuminating the Singapore Grand Prix was a worthy challenge. In fact, his company's involvement in the world-class event would give the sporting industry here a strong,



sharp boost.

It was, after all, motorsport's first night race in Formula One (F1) history – a race that would put Singapore on the world map. Held in the cool of the evening, the race featured a live broadcast to European television audiences. Lighting the Marina Bay Street Circuit was among the most critical aspects of the high-profile event. At least 1,500 projectors, 108,423 metres of power and optic cables, and 247 steel pylons were needed – all of which had to be installed over a period of three months. “At that time, there had never been an F1 night race in the world, so no one had any experience in putting together such a massive project.”

Not that it deterred Richard. Logistical challenges were aplenty. The entire track, even the run-off areas, had to be lit consistently. Rain had to be taken into consideration, so the lighting system had to minimise glare and reflection from wet surfaces and spray from cars. There had to be a alternate source of uninterrupted power supply in case one of the 12 brand new twin-powered

“THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A GOOD BUSINESSMAN AND A MEDIOCRE ONE IS THAT THE FORMER WILL PERSIST UNTIL HE SUCCEEDS.”

synchronised generators suddenly failed. The hard work of Richard and his team brought the F1 to stunning life, framing the high-octane action for more than 300,000 spectators and over 100 million television viewers around the globe.

Those involved with the race were duly impressed. McLaren F1 team principal Martin Whitmarsh was noted as saying that “the setting and atmosphere make it one of the jewels of the calendar.” Richard is justifiably proud of the key role he played, and the subsequent success of the F1 night race eventually propelled the company onto the world stage.

Richard, who has been in the business for 23 years, is never complacent. “Even if we have scored a 90%, I will ask myself where we have gone wrong in that 10%,” he says. “That’s because in the construction for any sports event, problems will always crop up.” Yet Richard is constantly spurred on by his “pure passion” for sports and a desire to do a great job for the country.

Over the years, Richard has continued to add to the sporting résumé of Singapore. He was the driving force behind the construction of the HSBC Golf Championships in both Singapore and China, as well as the Singapore 2010 Youth Olympic Games. As an avid badminton player, he also led a bunch of badminton enthusiasts to build the S\$1.5 million Singapore Badminton Hall in Geylang – without government funding.

More recently, Richard has even taken go-karting – another of his sporting passions – to the F1 race circuit. “I have plans to create a strong brand name in the Karting Formula One (KF1) Corporate Challenge and, in time, take it regional,” says Richard, who has had the idea ever since he put up the lights at the 2008 Singapore Grand Prix. “For me, it’s always about combining my love for sports with my interest in sports-related events or businesses.”

### **PERSISTENCE TO PLAY**

After all, sports have always played an integral role in Richard’s life. As a student, he played tennis and sprinted for the school’s track and field team (coached by none other than track legend C. Kunalan). “I was once the formation champion in the army,” he reminisces. “I enjoyed the feeling of winning as a boy.”

Although Richard had a natural competitive streak – one that would serve him well in the world of business – he never joined the national athletics team. “I didn’t start doing sports because of peer pressure or parental influence anyway,” he explains. He also picked up squash during his days as an army regular and started playing badminton soon after. It was the combative aspects of racquet games that he most relished. “Every time I played, I played to win,” he affirms. “But at the same time, I recognised that losing can be a form of winning, too.”

Later, his love and involvement with sports would nudge him into starting Arina as an enterprising 28-year-old. At the time, Richard was dating his then-girlfriend (now wife) Pauline Kwek, who is the marketing director at a leading gym equipment company. Pauline’s mother influenced Richard to merge his sporting interests with a career in sports events construction.

He had taken a good look at sports events held in Singapore and felt that he would be able to build and provide the temporary structures resembling permanent installations to replace large tentages and marquees. He elaborates: “I was attracted to the complexity of designing and constructing such structures so that they would not only be functional but also match the overall vision of the sports events.”

The initial years were tough, but Richard stayed the course. “I worked hard to ensure every project was done to customer satisfaction and treated every project as a learning opportunity.” Gradually, he picked up the know-how to bring a sports event to life in the most efficient and cost-effective ways. “To build structures according to standard requirements is not difficult, but to develop innovative designs and new methods of construction require out-

#### 14 GAME FOR LIFE: 25 JOURNEYS

of-the-box thinking.”

Richard draws parallels between his work at Arina and badminton, a game he thoroughly enjoys. “The difference between a good businessman and a mediocre one is that the former will persist until he succeeds. It was badminton that trained me to have the stamina to push on, even after the first years of the business. Without this endurance, I’d have given up during tough moments a long time ago.”

Word of mouth spread, and Richard finally hit his first big break when he was awarded the contract for the National Day Parade (NDP) in 1993. For the next 20 years, he and his team at Arina would construct the NDP stages, lighting towers and support, and seating galleries. “With each major project, it was all about having that persistence to keep going until it was finished to the customer’s satisfaction.”

### **COURAGE TO COMPETE**

Richard attributes his courage to compete in business to the life lessons learnt from go-karting, a sport he was regularly active in by then. “In go-karting, you have to get used to taking well-calculated risks, like whether or not to overtake the go-kart in front. There could be a 50-50 chance of crashing, but only then can you have a shot at winning. Like a racer, a businessman needs to learn to have the courage to make such split-second decisions.”

Looking back, Richard feels that his achievements were well worth the stress and sleepless nights. Today, Arina is a multinational company with over 200 staff and factories in Singapore, Johor, Beijing and Shanghai. Riding on his business successes, Richard decided to give back to the sports he loved, starting with go-karting.

In 2011, he threw himself into organising the KF1 Corporate Challenge, an annual go-kart race that would kick-start the F1 season. He imported 28 Italian-made electrical-ignition go-karts – each costing about S\$14,000 – for the inaugural race.

“We even put together a Team Singapore, where national athletes like sprinter Gary Yeo, paddler Feng Tianwei and shuttler Fu Mingtian came together to race for Singapore against 14 other teams,” says Richard. There was also a corporate team race, which saw the participation of industry leaders like Yeo See Kiat, CEO of ARA Trust Management (Suntec) Limited, and Francis Koh, CEO of Koh Brothers.

Watching the racers whizz past 0.9 kilometres of the Singapore GP track, under the F1 street circuit lighting that he had helped put up, moved Richard

beyond words. “We were the first to organise such a race. To me, creating this event was a significant milestone.” Richard kept the momentum for the event going. In 2012, three more races were held, also before the start of the F1 season. He says: “We were happy to see more communities joining in the fun, like Bishan Motorsports, Kampong Chai Chee and Ayer Rajah.”

## SERVING THE SPORT

As with the KF1 Corporate Challenge, Richard did what he could for the badminton scene in Singapore. When the historic Singapore Badminton Hall on Guillemard Road closed down in 2008, he and his fellow badminton enthusiasts were understandably upset.

“We still wanted the sport to be relevant in Singapore,” explains Richard. “To achieve that, there had to be a badminton hall with proper facilities to inspire people to take up the sport – and hopefully lift Singapore badminton back to its old glories.”

After three years, Richard fulfilled his dream of building a state-of-the-art badminton hall in the country. “We even named it Singapore Badminton Hall out of nostalgia,” he says. Situated on Geylang Lorong 23, the brand new S\$1.5 million facility houses a 300-seat gallery, a gymnasium, a 30-bed hostel and 14 courts, 6 of which are air-conditioned.

“LIKE A RACER, A  
BUSINESSMAN NEEDS  
TO LEARN TO HAVE THE  
COURAGE TO MAKE SPLIT-  
SECOND DECISIONS.”

The year it was built, national-team shuttlers bound for the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games in Jakarta, Indonesia, were housed there for a six-day centralised training camp to prepare for the Games. Singapore Badminton Association (SBA) managed to win Singapore’s first individual gold after 28 years. Since then, the Singapore Badminton Hall has played host to several national tournaments such as the Singapore Badminton Association National Age Group Doubles Championships.

This year, Richard and Arina even inked a one-year deal with SBA to “adopt” national shuttlers Derek Wong and Terry Yeo. “We are providing each of them with S\$10,000 in financial support,” says Richard. “This is our way of motivating them and bringing up the level of sports here.”

As Richard continues to do his part for the local sporting scene, he does not neglect his own sporting regimen. He plays recreational badminton thrice weekly “at the Singapore Badminton Hall, of course,” he proudly states. “On

Thursdays. I play with my staff at Arina. I arrange for them to be coached by ex-national shuttlers, and organise regular tournaments.”

Richard adds: “While many see sports as a means of keeping fit, it’s the other way round for me – I keep myself fit so I can keep playing sports well.” He also sees sport as “capital” for his business and life. “What I’ve learned in sports, like perseverance and courage to compete, gives me the firepower to clinch more deals and achieve

**“WHAT I’VE LEARNED IN SPORTS, LIKE PERSEVERANCE AND COURAGE TO COMPETE, GIVES ME THE FIREPOWER TO CLINCH MORE DEALS AND ACHIEVE MORE IN LIFE.”**

more in life.”

But to Richard, success is not measured by how much he earns.

“It is about how much I can make people around me happy, and contribute to society.” That’s why he never fails to spend time with family. Sunday dinners are

especially important to him, as it is the only time of the week he gets to really connect with Pauline and their five sons – Lawrence, 21; Lewis, 20; Larry, 18; Lyndon, 16; and Lervin, 15.

Sport has even given him a boost in his family life although none of his sons play badminton. They see that their father keeps an active lifestyle, and are inspired by it. Richard says: “In fact, most of my conversations with my sons revolve around the sports I do, especially karting, which they find exciting.” For the man, it certainly seems like a passion for sport has paid off, not just in business but also in life.



## VALUES

Perseverance • Competitiveness • Courage • Leadership

## REFLECTION

1. Richard has a history as an innovator in business, creating new models for success. His contribution to the development of the Singapore Grand Prix is among the highlights of his long career. He notes: "There had never been an F1 night race in the world, so no one had any experience in putting together such a massive project." A life in business is often unpredictable. When was the last time you faced a seemingly insurmountable challenge? How did you motivate and guide your team to solve the problem? What has sport taught you about dealing with crisis or disruption?
2. Even after 23 years in business, Richard is never complacent about success. "Even if we have scored a 90%, I will ask myself where we have gone wrong in that 10%," he says. How would you describe your leadership style? Do you show the same care and concern for your employees as you do for the bottom line? How do you exemplify your corporate values? What steps have you taken to prevent a slide into complacency from both a corporate and personal perspective? How do you encourage your employees to develop their leadership capabilities?





3

# HIS UTMOST

Singapore's best-known criminal lawyer **SUBHAS ANANDAN** has a secret weapon for fighting complex cases in court — snooker. He shares his penchant for it and reveals how the sport has guided him in law and life.

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**T**he court broke for lunch. Subhas Anandan stepped out of the Supreme Court, but his mind was still preoccupied with the murder trial of Nadasan Chandra Secharan, a mechanic accused of brutally killing his ex-mistress. The man was a prime suspect but insisted on innocence.

Subhas says: "Everyone deserves a fair trial, and I wanted to give him that." For him to have a chance of acquittal, the criminal lawyer knew he had to discount the laboratory reports of the prosecutor's DNA experts before the judge. The all-important cross-examination was scheduled that afternoon in 1995. As he crossed the road to the Singapore Cricket Club, Subhas carefully considered his strategy.

It had become Subhas' habit to play a game of snooker whenever the court broke for lunch. "Whenever I'm handling a big case, I will mull over it over a game of snooker," the 64-year-old says. "It helps me to relax and rethink what has happened in court that morning. As I play, it clears my mind and allows me to focus on what I'm going to do next in the trial."

Back in court, Subhas cross-examined both the prosecutor's forensic expert from Scotland Yard and the tyre expert from New Zealand. He got the forensic expert's admission that her laboratory had failed to follow established protocol. The tyre expert also admitted that his preliminary opinion was mere speculation. *The Straits Times* called Subhas' expertly executed cross-examination of forensic experts the best they had ever seen.

"The judge still convicted Nadasan and sentenced him to death," remembers Subhas. "But we had grounds for appeal because the judgment was weak and did not accurately reflect what had gone on in the trial. Later, the Court of Appeal unanimously allowed the appeal. That made headlines because such an outcome was rare." Nadasan finally escaped death.

**“YOU CANNOT BECOME A CHAMPION OVERNIGHT. EVERY SPORT REQUIRES DEDICATION AND DISCIPLINE.”**

"So, yes, playing snooker helps," Subhas quips, his eyes twinkling. Comfortably seated in the boardroom at RHTLaw Taylor Wessing, where he is a senior partner, Subhas looks every bit like the bearded and fearsome criminal lawyer that the media has portrayed him to be. But as it turns out, his signature scowl is reserved for the courtroom. On a one-on-one basis, he smiles often, answering every interview question the best he can.

### TAKING UP THE CUE

Years ago, friends introduced Subhas to snooker. "Call it peer pressure, but I gradually grew to enjoy the game," he says. "If you take snooker seriously, it is just like fighting a case. With snooker, you've got to think fast and anticipate your opponent's moves. In the courtroom, you have to analyse quickly why the prosecutor is asking a certain question – is he laying the foundation to prove a point?"

Over time, he even participated in inter-club tournaments. "But it was never about winning. I merely relish the fun and comradeship that snooker brings." Later, at his friends' insistence, he ran for presidency at Cuesports Singapore, the national sports association for billiards, snooker and pool.

When Subhas took over in 2006, Cuesports was \$700,000 in the red. Within four years, its account was back in the black. Under his five-year tenure, Singapore's snooker, pool and billiard players went on to win two gold, three silver and four bronze medals at the 2007 and 2008 Southeast Asian (SEA) Games.

At Cuesports, Subhas was tough with the national players. He had no patience for prima donnas. "We would rather concentrate on raising the standards of our local-born players," states Subhas. And that was precisely what he did. "Snooker – or pool and billiards – is a game where not only the tall and strong have an edge. The smaller-built Taiwanese and Filipinos excel in the sport because they are very disciplined and train hard. If they can reach world standards, so can we."

Subhas worked hard to raise the profile of the sport. He held exhibition tournaments, organised inter-pub competitions, and even brought the billiard championships into Singapore. He spurred the players on, telling them, "You cannot become a champion overnight. Every sport – be it snooker, cricket, hockey or football – requires dedication and discipline."

Subhas didn't neglect the crucial step of ensuring continuity in the sport. He focused on working with secondary schools to get youths curious about cue sports, planning free demonstrations and organising inter-school games. He was gratified to see teenagers who played with passion.

"But the fact that cue sports are often played in pubs and associated with betting worked against us," says Subhas. "I spoke to parents who didn't want their kids to play snooker because of its unsavoury reputation, and tried to convince them otherwise." Though mindsets couldn't be changed overnight, the foundation for the future was well-laid.

## STAYING LOYAL TO THE TEAM

Subhas' father was a recorder for the British Royal Navy ("a glorified term for a clerk", he says), and the family of seven lived in a two-bedroom unit on the British Naval Base. As a child growing up in the base, Subhas remembers running along sloping fields and winding roads. "With my friends, we played in parks, cycled on trails and watched people swim in the Straits of Johor."

Later, at Naval Base School, he would discover a natural aptitude for sports, especially athletics, hockey and football. "I participated in all these sports at Combined Schools events. I wore school colours for all three," Subhas says, remembering his youth with a proud smile.

He remembers how he was the only one from school selected to play

cricket for Bukit Timah District. It was the first time a Naval Base School student had been selected. “The rest of the cricket team comprised players from Anglo-Chinese School,” he writes in his part autobiography, part criminal log, *The Best I Could*. He was the wicketkeeper. Although he felt out of place among his richer teammates, his Eurasian cricket master, Mr. Van Schoenbeck, pushed him to play in every game. “I was reluctant to continue playing as I didn’t enjoy watching my teammates driving up or being driven up in fancy cars. But I persevered as I didn’t want to disappoint Mr. Van Schoenbeck.”

And persevered he did. Once, an inter-district cricket game was being held at Monk’s Hill Secondary School. It was an hour-long bus ride away from Naval Base. With the dollar that Mr. Van Schoenbeck gave him, Subhas spent 60 cents on the bus rides and used 20 cents to buy a drink. He kept the remaining 20-cent change safely to return to his kind-hearted teacher.

**“IN SPORTS, YOU LEARN TO BE PART OF A TEAM. IN LAW, YOU DON’T FIGHT A CASE ALONE... THAT’S WHY I ALWAYS MAKE IT A POINT TO ACKNOWLEDGE MY ASSISTANTS’ HARD WORK TO REPORTERS.”**

You should stand by him against the world.”

The notion of teamwork comes across strongly in Subhas’ work ethic. “In sports, you learn to be part of a team. In law, you never fight a case alone,” he says. “It may be my photo that is splashed across the newspapers whenever I am handling a major case. But my assistants do the extensive research – and they deserve credit too. I always make it a point to acknowledge their hard work to reporters.”

### **GIVING HIS ALL**

If Subhas’ mother had had her way, he would have been a doctor – not a lawyer. “It was my mother’s dream and I wanted so much to please her,” he says. “So, I enrolled in a pre-university medicine course at Loyola College in Madras (now Chennai), India.”

But he quickly realised that he was not cut out for medicine. “As I did



sports regularly. I knew my own limits – and how hard I could push myself. To have to write to my mother to say I wanted to return to Singapore was immensely difficult.” His father, however, was on his side. So, Subhas returned and started attending Raffles Institution (RI) before going on to the University of Singapore.

Sports remained a major part of his life. At RI, he played football and ran cross-country for the Hullett House. In 1965, his second year at RI, the football team was due to play against the Johor English College in an annual friendly match. RI was always “slaughtered by the Johor English College,” but that year, the football standard was higher and there was a good chance of winning. There was just one glitch. Being a competent athlete, Subhas was also selected to run cross-country in an inter-district race the same day.

It was demanding on his physique, but Subhas wanted to give his best shot – for both. The teachers quickly made arrangements so he could run the race at MacRitchie Reservoir at 3 p.m. before rushing to the RI field for the football match at 4 p.m. He won the race for City District – but did not stay to receive the trophy. Instead, he threw on his RI jersey and dashed off for the match, which ended in a draw.

**“IN MY YOUTH, I QUICKLY  
REALISED THAT I CANNOT  
ALWAYS WIN IN LIFE.”**

“Johor English College did not find us easy meat like they usually did. We played a very good game.”

For Subhas, it was never about the result anyway: “In sports, there is always someone with a better physique, better skills. In my youth, I quickly realised that I cannot always win in life. This taught me how to accept defeat very gracefully. Even now, when I lose a case in court, I will not be sore about it. Instead of letting defeat pull me down, I do my best to bounce back.”

In any case, doing his best is all that matters to Subhas. He adds: “What you learn in sport can always be translated to law. If you lose in sport, you try to improve so you can beat your opponent at the next game. In law, it’s the same thing.” Perhaps that’s why the mere mention of his name strikes fear in the court.

Known for his sharp, stinging courtroom attacks, Subhas has been called “The Basher”. He has handled over 1,000 criminal cases, representing clients from the late opposition leader J. B. Jeyaretnam to underworld figures like “Bookie Pal” Rajendran and notorious murderers like Anthony Ler.

Just like how he has always pushed himself in sports, Subhas believes in doing everything within his power for his client. “In capital cases, you are burdened with a very heavy responsibility because the life of the accused



is at stake. You simply cannot afford to make mistakes. If you do, there is a possibility that your client will hang,” Subhas writes in the preface to his book. “You have to do the best you can to keep your client away from the gallows.”

With his deteriorating health, Subhas is no longer active in sports. He has had three heart attacks – the first happened on his 31st birthday – and has also gone through a heart bypass and an angioplasty. He has lost one kidney to cancer and is also diabetic. “At last count, I am taking 21 different kinds of medication daily,” says Subhas with a laugh, adding that his wife, Yimala Kesavan – or “Vimi”, as he affectionately calls her – dispenses them to him. “I told her that it’s a good number.”

Even so, the years Subhas spent in sports continue to influence and inspire him. Looking back at his former sporting achievements, he says wistfully: “Winning the Junior Championship Cup for athletics in the first year the award was put forward in 1962, leading RI into the inter-school finals for football... these are all the sporting moments I am proud of and deeply cherish.”

## VALUES

Teamwork • Loyalty • Discipline • Dedication

## REFLECTION

1. Playing snooker taught Subhas to think ahead to stay ahead of his opponent. This strategy of improvement through planning ahead has been useful in court as well. When you are faced with obstacles in life, do you see opportunities or challenges? Describe some goals that you have achieved through problem-solving and strategy.
2. Subhas emphasises teamwork in both his sports and professional life. He ensures that the team members work in synergy and he shares credit for the team’s success. As a leader, how do you develop all the members of your team? How do you resolve conflict within your team?

4

# BOWLING QUEEN

In the 1980s and 1990s, **GRACE YOUNG-DIAO** ruled the nation's bowling alleys with her trademark poise and power. The mother-of-one, who attributes her remarkable rise to the top of her game to hard work, grit and tenacity, shares on giving back to the community through sport.

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**“H**alf a century sounds like a long time,” says Grace Young-Diao, who celebrated her 50th birthday last December. “If you are a teenager or young adult, it’s plain ‘old’. Thank goodness I have enough spirit in me to feel far from old.”

Turning 50 marked a major milestone in the life of the former national bowler. She notes: “I was immersed in bowling for 15 years. Now, I have been out of the bowling scene for as long as I was competitive.” Back in the 1980s and 1990s, Grace was widely hailed as Singapore’s bowling queen for being a seven-time Southeast Asian (SEA) Games gold medalist and three-time Sportswoman of the Year. In fact, her determined, committed and thorough approach to the game – underscored by many defining victories – was well-known.



She was also a familiar face on the small screen, presenting the sports segment on prime-time news and *World of Sports*, a weekly sports update and leisure entertainment programme. Now, she is as much the go-getter as she was in her heyday. Married to Roy Diao, a Chinese-American who runs an asset management firm here, Grace is a full-time mother to her eight-year-old son, Kenneth. Family duties aside, she devotes a large chunk of her time and energy to charitable causes.

Last November, she cycled through the Thai countryside in the Tour of Hope event to raise funds to build and outfit libraries for hill tribe schools. To raise extra funds, she even organised a tennis event the same month, raising a total of \$18,600 for the orphanage she was supporting. Grace says: "We donated bicycles that brought out huge grins in the children. With the money, we were also able to support a programme by Johns Hopkins Hospital to train midwives to conduct Pap smear tests in villages."

**“NOW, I SEE SPORT AS A TOOL TO MAKE A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF THE LESS FORTUNATE.”**

It was her fourth time participating in the international event featuring cyclists from all over the world. "There were rolling hills and some steep hills which you would never be able to find in Singapore. The journey was painful but I managed to stay on the bicycle saddle throughout. My mental strength kept me going, and it proved to me that I can still psych myself up to overcome obstacles – even though I left bowling in 1998," she observes.

"The values and skills inculcated in me through my sporting career have, indeed, taught me well. Now, I see sport as a tool to make a positive difference in the lives of the less fortunate." And her ability to do so can ultimately be attributed to the years she spent bowling.

### **DETAILED DILIGENCE**

Growing up, Grace enjoyed sports in many forms, such as softball, badminton, roller skating and ice skating. From a young age, she took every game she played seriously, even getting into the Combined Schools team for softball. "No matter which sport I was playing, I would work hard at learning the correct technique."

Yet, Grace was only introduced to bowling at the relatively late age of 21. She had visited Kallang Bowl with friends. As fate would have it – the late national bowling coach, Victor Tham, was coaching the national youth team

six lanes away. Although it was the first time she tried bowling, her potential shone. Victor wasted no time in inviting the budding bowler to join them for training and watched with pride as she readily put the tips he taught her into practice.

That was in 1984. Barely six months later, she broke into the national scene by becoming a Graded Champion in the Singapore Nationals. "It was a totally insane decision to pursue a career in sports then," she quips. Winning a national-level tournament was enough encouragement for Grace to channel all her energies into the sport. But little did she know that the path to glory would not be smooth sailing. For one, she was often up against more experienced players. In the then-nascent local sporting scene, support and grants were very different from what the athletes of today enjoy.

Over the next five years, she met with more disappointment than success. "During those barren years, I often wondered if I had made the right decision to pursue my dream of being an athlete," says Grace. "Although I was athletic, I was not a natural at ten-pin bowling." She had potential but knew that training hard and smart was the real key to sporting success.

“WHILE I OFTEN FELT EXHAUSTED, DISCOURAGED AND FRUSTRATED, I ALSO KNEW THAT SUCCESS LAY IN MY OWN HANDS.”

Putting together a holistic approach, which included the physical, mental, technical and emotional elements of the game plan, was a monumental task – especially as proper guidance was lacking. First up, physical training. "Merely rolling a bowling ball down the lanes all day was not going to do it."

A perfectionist by nature, Grace focused on the tiniest of details in every aspect of her training and competitive approaches. Being an ardent fan of international sports stars, she read everything she could get her hands on about their training processes – and incorporated elements into her own training regime. She realised that having a timeline with an endgame, including all the various elements, could consistently steer the 15-pound ball in the right direction. So, Grace began hitting the gym to build both strength and stamina.

Before any competition, Grace would even check the venue to assess the environment she would be competing in. She explains that bowling is a technical sport, and even the specifics like distribution of weight in the bowling ball and lane conditions can affect a bowler's performance. "As time

went by. I added more and more details like these, and it was soon apparent that these extra elements helped to rescue me from mediocrity.”

### **PASSION THROUGH PERSEVERANCE**

As Grace trained, she felt more passion for bowling. But her commitment to the sport – and the struggle to make sense of her life – was interspersed with reluctant multitasking. As support was scarce, she had to play multiple roles in her chosen profession. “I wasn’t just a bowler,” she smiles. “I was also the coach and the manager.”

At the time, the only two coaches she could turn to were Victor Tham and Henry Tan, a former national bowler and co-coach of the national team. But while they were both willing to guide Grace, they held day jobs. She recalls: “My formal coaching in the sport came in the form of recording myself bowling before rushing to review them with Victor or Henry, if they had time to spare.”

“SPORTS HAVE CERTAINLY GIVEN ME STAMINA IN THE ROLES AND PROJECTS I HAVE UNDERTAKEN.”

In fact, Grace was so eager for guidance that she would discuss bowling with anyone and everyone – as long as they had the time for her. “I would be pleased as pudding when people at the bowling alley – including my indispensable ball driller, Walter Tan – would show their support for me by dispensing honest views on my

techniques,” she says. “I am grateful for all the guidance I have received, especially from my mentors, Victor and Henry, who gave their personal time to train me.”

While working to improve her bowling techniques, Grace also had to meet and negotiate deals with sponsors and learn the finer points of sports presentation so she could raise the sport’s profile. Fortunately, her dogged determination to fulfil these roles well was noticed by many. Soon, she was offered sponsorship contracts with a café, computer firm and sporting goods manufacturer, among others. “These earnings funded my training, travelling and tournament expenses, but they were all jobs in themselves,” says Grace.

“While I often felt exhausted, discouraged and frustrated, I also knew that success lay in my own hands – and values like determination, resilience and a huge dose of courage would bring me closer to my goals.” In 1987, Grace’s determination and diligence were duly rewarded. From the SEA Games in



Jakarta, Indonesia, she brought home a gold in the Five Ladies team event and a bronze in the Trios.

### **GLIMMER OF GLORY**

Real victory would come in 1989 when she scored a hat-trick by winning the Singles, All-Events and Grand Masters Champion at the Singapore Open. She was also ranked 11th in the World Cup in Dublin, Ireland. "I even won five medals at the SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and was awarded my first Sportswoman of the Year title. It was truly a watershed year for me," says Grace.

It was remarkable that the then 28-year-old could reach such sporting heights. After all, her coach and mentor, Victor, had passed on early that year. She found out during a competition, and had to fight back her sadness to finish the game. Subconsciously, Grace pushed on as a mark of respect for the friend who had guided her through her most challenging years. But she was devastated over his death – and it marked a change in her attitude and direction towards bowling.

"In that emotional phase, I quietly contemplated my future in bowling," she says, adding that she knew she had no one else but herself to carry on the journey. "Until then, I had been training without any breakthrough. An analogy would be going to work every day until it becomes routine, but yet never asking why." So she made some specific training goals to break out of her rut.

Besides continuing with physical training, Grace acknowledged the importance of mental toughness by employing sport psychology. She says:

"Only when the mind and the body come together, can an athlete then reach the pinnacle." She was one of the first in the local sporting scene to realise its significance. Keeping an open mind, Grace started working with guest sport psychologists at the Singapore Sports Council (SSC) to improve her training methods. "I was like a sponge when I met my first sport psychologist," she shares. "I knew I was on the right track by including visualisation to help me focus better."

She would go as far as to form a mental checklist the night before every competition, from the time she would wake up to the music she would play in her car as she drove to the venue. "I did not want to be distracted by any 'surprises' that could crop up. Doing this meant I could give my full attention to the game at hand." And the more prepared she was, the less pressure she felt during competitions.



Whenever everything went smoothly during a game, Grace would be elated. "Bowling can be like a symphony when all the elements of the game work for you. Before I committed to the sport, I would never have guessed that it could be such a stimulating game with so many strategies involved."

### **SHEER GRIT**

While she suffered a back injury that threatened to undermine her preparation for the Manila SEA Games in 1991, she persevered against the odds and competed. In the stepladder finals, she trailed behind the top two players – both Filipinas – but eventually beat them on their home ground to win two gold medals for Singapore. That was, to Grace, one of the best games of her career.

The next year, she not only put in sterling performances at local, Asian and international championships, but was also placed fifth at the prestigious AMF Bowling World Cup in Le Mans, France. For her achievements in bowling, Grace won the Sportswoman of the Year award for three consecutive years: 1989, 1991 and 1992. In 1993, Grace was the torchbearer at the opening ceremony of the Singapore SEA Games. She also clinched gold medals in both the Doubles and Team events. A year later, she took third place in the World Cup, and won a bronze medal in the Asian Games in 1994.

In 1996, Grace struggled with tendonitis as she was preparing for the Singapore Nationals. While she had suffered different injuries as she pushed herself physically, a bout of tendonitis meant that her bowling career could be coming to an end. It was the worst time for such a thing to happen. "I was the defending champion for the second time running. If I won for the third time, I would have gotten to take home the trophy," explains Grace.

At the game, Grace had to endure the excruciating pain in her fingers. It got so bad that she was given time off before the stepladder finals to get injections from the orthopaedic surgeon to numb the pain. When she returned to the bowling alley, she devised a fresh method to deliver her shots without using her fingers. Instead, she used her palm to bear the weight of the ball. It worked, and she emerged triumphant. After that, she rushed back to the surgeon, who gave her three more shots. Grace looked on as her fingers ballooned from the strain, but felt that all the pain was worth it – she got her trophy.

Each time Grace stepped onto the winner's podium, with Singapore's national anthem playing in the background, she would feel overwhelmed with emotions. "That rush of adrenaline followed by the sudden choking in

one's throat that usually result in tears of joy . . . How does one sum up the immersion in one word?" asks Grace. "To this day, those winning moments are precious to me. Somewhere in my heart, there is a memory chip that stores these treasured moments to be savoured by me alone."

### **FUTURE READY**

Over the years, her fame as a star athlete grew – and caught the eye of the studio producers at the then-Television Corporation of Singapore (now MediaCorp). In 1990, she became a sports news presenter – alongside fellow ex-national bowler Adeline Wee.

Being articulate and telegenic, she performed her role well, even though she was jittery during the first few recordings. "At the time, I felt that it was harder than competing in a bowling tournament!" Besides these two main roles, Grace even found time to work with organisations like the National

**“AS I PROUDLY SERVED MY COUNTRY THROUGH BOWLING ALL THOSE YEARS, I LIVED AND BREATHED THESE VALUES UNTIL THEY HAVE BECOME A PART OF ME.”**

Council of Social Service (NCSS) and the Singapore Red Cross Society.

After the 1998 Asian Games, Grace quietly retired from competitive bowling. "I never really announced it because I wanted to keep my options open in case bowling ever became an Olympic

sport," she laughs brightly. "It still isn't, but I'm glad to have participated in the 1996 Atlanta Games where ten-pin bowling was featured as a demonstration sport. A treasured experience indeed!"

With her departure from competitive sports – and later, leaving television in 2000 following her marriage – she went on to serve in different committees and boards until four years ago. As the Head of the Athletes' Welfare Department of the Singapore Bowling Federation, she provided support for the new generation of bowlers that she once so sorely lacked.

No matter which roles Grace has chosen to take on – television presenter, wife and mother, social do-gooder – she has embraced them all. "I'm glad that turning 50 has not dampened my enthusiasm for my interests and projects," she says, adding that each role will teach her something. "The learning curve does not stop on the fast lane." For Grace, indeed, the living and learning continues.

Throughout her sporting career, Grace endured plenty of hard knocks.

But she sorely misses the competitive arena. “I don’t miss bowling, but I miss how a tournament can drive my adrenaline up and bring me into a different zone.” She still believes in keeping a daily exercise regime. “Cycling, swimming, tennis and Pilates keep that skip in my step upbeat,” says Grace. “In fact, sports have certainly given me stamina in the roles and projects I have undertaken.”

Today, sports still rank high in Grace’s family. With Roy, she enjoys tennis and golf. As Grace has benefited so much from sport, she also believes in exposing and encouraging Kenneth to different kinds of sports, like swimming, tennis, horse riding, football and basketball. “He did away with the training wheels of his bicycle at just three years old,” she says with a tinge of pride. “Skiing is one of our favourite family sports.”

Looking back, Grace is proud of what she has accomplished – so far. She contemplates: “I approached my sport with exuberance, diligence and perseverance. As I proudly served my country through bowling all those years, I lived and breathed these values until they have become a part of me.” For now, it seems like Grace is certainly well-prepared for the next phase of her life.

## VALUES

Diligence • Perseverance • Passion • Tenacity

## REFLECTION

1. Success does not come easily for most athletes. During her competitive life, Grace experienced many moments of doubt. She often felt she had made the wrong decision to pursue a career in sport – as she was experiencing more disappointment than success. However, she did not give up and continued to work hard towards her goal. Have you been in situations where you felt like giving up? How did you overcome those challenges? How have you managed transition in your life?
2. The values that Grace learned through sport became part of her life, and she believes that sport will have the same impact on her son. How has sport shaped your values? Is there someone you would like to see benefit from the power of sport to improve lives? How can you engage them in sport?



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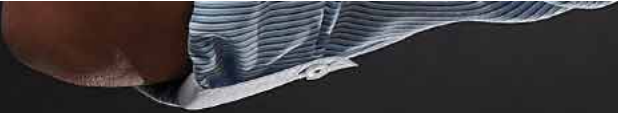
# ENDURANCE KING

Ultra-marathoner and Ironman triathlete **ADRIAN MOK** is not just an avid sportsman. He is also the man behind Singapore's first night running race, the Sundown Marathon. Whether it is running the distance or organising sports events, he believes in making it to the finish line – no matter how tough it gets.

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**O**utside the Chinese Heritage Centre at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Adrian Mok was getting ready to start the Run Round Singapore Challenge 2005. The 168km route would take him, and seven other key runners, over a distance equivalent to four consecutive marathons.

By that evening, Adrian was leading the race. With his impressive timing, the event organisers estimated that he would take no longer than 24 hours to complete the challenge. He plodded on. The 37-year-old recalls: "There were definitely moments when I felt like I couldn't go on anymore. But I recognised that in any endurance event, energy will ebb and flow. As long as I could read the vital body signs and manage the pain, it was possible to go on."



But luck was not on his side. The next dawn, Adrian injured his leg. He was only at the halfway point, and quickly fell behind. But, even when he could not run anymore, he limped on. “I remembered why I was doing the run in the first place – to raise funds for the student bursaries that would help future generations of NTU students. So, I couldn’t let tough moments like that get me down.” He eventually walked the rest of the way, and finished in 27 hours 54 minutes. For Adrian, it is one of his most memorable races. “It was a true test of my resolve, tenacity and depth of character.”

The experience even sparked off a business idea. Adrian recounts how he used to run through the night when he was training for the Run Round Singapore Challenge. “There was a kind of magic in night running,” he shares. “On a quiet street, you could see lights flickering, hear your own footsteps and heartbeat, and feel the evening breeze. Besides feeling a sense of solitude that I would never otherwise feel during the day, I was able to clear my mind to focus on the act of running.”

As managing director of sports event management company HiVelocity Events, Adrian felt that he could bring this night running experience to the masses. “It inspired me to conceptualise a marathon that went beyond the usual.” In 2008, the Sundown Marathon was born. Adrian grew it from just 6,000 participants to 30,000 in four years.

It is still Asia’s only night marathon, and a landmark in the local sporting calendar. “I hope that we have created a uniquely Singaporean experience with the Sundown Marathon. It truly evokes the emotions on why we love running,” says Adrian. “We have global dreams for the event, but there is still a long road ahead.” A worthwhile dream, made more remarkable by the fact that Adrian was not a born athlete.

## TOUGH TRAINING

Growing up, Adrian was like many kids his age – more sedentary than sporty. It was not until his secondary school years at The Chinese High School that he got more acquainted with sports, and he discovered the joys of basketball.

That led to him joining the basketball team at National Junior College (NJC). “I used to practise shooting baskets for long hours, and that kind of training honed my endurance and competitive spirit,” reveals Adrian. “This is why I see basketball as an important precursor to my later pursuits in endurance sports.”

At NJC, Adrian also ran cross-country and did track and field. One of his fondest memories is running from his home in Bukit Batok to NJC on Hillcrest

Road. "After completing the eight kilometre route, I would be wolfing down the egg sandwich breakfast that my then-girlfriend – now my wife – had prepared!"

His first competitive experience in sports came when he represented NJC in a cross-country race at 18. "It was considered a late age to start competitive running. But I expected a lot from myself as I did not want to let the school down." He pushed himself hard, balancing his "A" Level with intensive cross-country training. "Even now, I never minded the hard work that came with endurance training. Instead, I think it further strengthened that resolve to complete whatever I set out to do."

When Adrian started his business undergraduate course at NTU, he became more serious about running and sports. He had to study and work part-time as a fitness instructor, but he continued training hard. Soon, he started chalking up a series of sporting achievements – he came in seventh in his first marathon, and even made the national triathlon squad.

Some of his best sporting accomplishments include running a marathon in 3 hours 9 minutes, and completing an Ironman race in 10 hours 23 minutes. At one point, he was Singapore's fastest Ironman triathlete. In 2002, he even attempted the Eco-Challenge in Fiji, known as the "world's toughest endurance race" because it involved harsh challenges like canyoning, ocean paddling and river kayaking.

"One value that sports have taught me is the importance of hard work. Talent can only account for a small part of any triumph. Success is far sweeter if you have to work hard to achieve it." He remembers how he scaled 73 storeys of the Westin Vertical Marathon in 6 minutes 56 seconds (the world record is 6:45) in 1999. "That was a short race, but powerful enough to make me see that all the hard work in training was worth it."

### FOCUSING ON THE FINISH LINE

Adrian was such a regular at marathons, biathlons and triathlons that it eventually led to the formation of HIVELOCITY Events in 2007. "I did not intend to set up a business," says Adrian. "But from sports, I met like-minded people, learned certain values and embraced opportunities that had presented themselves."

Over the years, Adrian has organised other major running events like the

“SUCCESS IS FAR SWEETER  
IF YOU HAVE TO WORK  
HARD TO ACHIEVE IT.”

J.P. Morgan Corporate Challenge, Shape Run, and Great Eastern Women's Run. He is also known for playing a major role in bringing the Aviva Ironman 70.3 franchise to Singapore. "After crossing the finish line at the 2004 Ironman World Championship in Kona, Hawaii, something crystallised in my mind – I wanted to bring this experience to Singapore," reveals Adrian. "Being a part of this classic race felt incredible, and it really strengthened my resolve to do my best to bring the Ironman franchise here."

Being an athlete, Adrian is extremely particular about the experiential aspects of any sports event he organises. "This can be a tough job as participants sometimes have high and unforgiving expectations. But with so many variables in an event, things can go wrong easily," says Adrian, referring to many issues that could crop up, like messy registration and poor crowd control.

Instead of throwing in the towel at every obstacle, he looked to his experience in sports training to overcome obstacles. "When I train, I set goals and achieve them. This has aided me in the delicate task of managing people and expectations in every project, be it the Aviva Ironman 70.3, Sundown Marathon or other sports events."

**“WHEN I TRAIN,  
I SET GOALS AND  
ACHIEVE THEM.”**

Besides helming HiVelocity Events, Adrian somehow also found the energy to play key roles in other sports-related businesses. He helped to start the subsidiary business for advanced sports training equipment manufacturer Polar Electro in Singapore, only leaving the company after 12 years in May 2012.

Adrian has also started Fitness and Health International (FHI) with like-minded friends who are passionate about fitness. Together, they work with companies to carry out workplace health promotion programmes. "I have gained so much from sports that I always think about how I can give back," says Adrian. "So, I love to get involved in projects that spread the message about staying fit and healthy."

Whenever the going gets tough, Adrian always reminds himself to concentrate on the end-goal – pulling off a successful, unforgettable event. He says: "The mental framework of running is no different from organising sports events or running a business – it's about not letting difficult moments get you down."



## NEVER GIVING UP

Even as he throws himself into work, Adrian makes sure that he gets his daily dose of exercise. The tough triathlon-style training plan includes swimming one and a half hours of interval laps on Monday, cycling 72km in over two hours on Tuesdays and running 10-minute max-intensity tempos, gruelling circuits and half-marathons throughout the rest of the week.

“Whenever possible, I also do yoga and hit the gym,” shares Adrian. He adds that he does not drink coffee. “Exercising does a better job of keeping me motivated.” Perseverance in both sports and work comes naturally to him. Every time he feels like he can’t go on anymore, “I then remind myself that I am training because I truly enjoy it – warped but true.”

At home, Adrian also tries to instil the values in his seven-year-old son through sports. He shares: “I taught him to cycle when he was four, so family weekends usually involve cycling in parks and gardens. If not, we swim together. At the same time, I tell him stories of great Olympians like Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt, drawing on how he persevered till the end to achieve his medals.”

Adrian contemplates: “Running has changed my outlook on life. You learn not to let tough moments bring you down. Instead, you learn to appreciate and work with what you have. That said, I aim to push further in sports and business. I hope my story can inspire more people to embrace sports.”

### VALUES

Resilience • Discipline • Tenacity

### REFLECTION

1. Through sport, Adrian gained valuable experience in resilience and perseverance. Have you been in situations where you felt like giving up but you managed to overcome those challenges? How did you overcome those challenges? What issues did you consider? What choices did you have?
2. Drawing on your own life experience, what values would you share with others through sport as a parent, coach, friend or mentor?



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# LEADING TO SERVE

As a former school tennis player, **ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AYMERIC LIM** learned focus, developed discipline and honed his ability to perform under high pressure. The hand surgeon and chairman of the National University Hospital (NUH) Medical Board reveals how these skills have since aided him in work and life.

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“I see sport as a mirror to our lives,” says Associate Professor Aymeric Lim contemplatively, leaning back slightly in his chair. “Through sport, we experience fears and struggles, exhilaration and depression. As we go through these emotions, we gain mental strength and learn about discipline, focus and perseverance – all useful qualities that we can apply to life itself.”

We are in a small meeting room at the National University Hospital (NUH) premises on Kent Ridge Road, where he is not only an Associate Professor at the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery but also the Chairman of the Medical Board. “These roles take up about 90% of my time,” says the 47-year-old. “My duties as the Dean of the Health Leadership College take up

the remaining 10%.” The Health Leadership College is a division of MOH Holdings, and aims to develop competent and compassionate leaders in the public healthcare sector.

Indeed, as Assoc Prof Lim goes about his daily responsibilities at the hospital, he leans on the life lessons he has learned through the ups and downs of sport. A skilled tennis player, he played at inter-school levels until the end of his university days. He shares: “I love the feeling of hitting the ball with my racquet. I get a sense of satisfaction from hitting a nice topspin forehand or a nice slice backhand.”

“ I SEE SPORT AS A MIRROR TO OUR LIVES ... WE GAIN MENTAL STRENGTH AND LEARN ABOUT DISCIPLINE, FOCUS AND PERSEVERANCE. ”

In fact, he sees the tennis court as a classroom where he spent his formative years.

That’s why Assoc Prof Lim is a strong believer in the narrative of sport today and also played a significant role as a member of the steering committee for Vision 2030:

Live Better Through Sports, an initiative by the then-Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) now under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), and the Singapore Sports Council (SSC).

## THE POWER OF DISCIPLINE

As an athletic boy at Tanglin Trust School (Junior School), Assoc Prof Lim discovered that he loved running. He would join the school’s annual Sports Day, representing his class in as many track and field events as he could. He reminisces: “I participated in the 100m, 200m and 400m, and loved everything about it – from the time the starter gun went off, to the exhilaration of running on the track, to finally crossing the finish line.”

From running, Assoc Prof Lim soon progressed to football. Although he displayed less potential in it, he persisted in playing recreationally with friends. “When I first tried playing, I had to be taught step-by-step how to kick the ball,” he laughs. “But I wanted to be better at it, so I kept on playing.” His foray into football gave him a glimpse into the importance of teamwork. He explains: “I relished the shared joy of winning together in football. It’s more fun to win together than to win alone. And if we lose, well, it’s easier to lose as a team than to lose alone.”

But it was tennis that would eventually become his main sport. His father – an amateur tennis player himself – introduced him to the sport when he

was nine. While he was not drawn to it at first, he grew to embrace it over time. “My father wanted to see me excel in the sport he loved, so he got me a proper coach and sent me for regular training,” says Assoc Prof Lim. The young player showed plenty of promise on the courts, and continued training throughout his teenage years at the United World College, Lycée Français de Singapour and Raffles Institution (RI).

“When I played for RI, I usually won,” says Assoc Prof Lim, who also participated in various inter-school tournaments. Winning on the court always gave his youthful self a confidence boost. He remembers a particular match he played in Secondary Three. “It was the inter-school finals, and my opponent was the national under-16 champion. But I ended up beating him in the game. I was thrilled.”

Doing well in tennis only spurred him on in training. This meant revolving his life around tennis practice and tournaments. Social engagements took a backseat to forehands and backhands. As he practised his skills, he understood the value of discipline – something that has stuck with him and is now driving his daily work at the hospital. He often puts in 12-hour workdays, reaching NUH’s Kent Ridge premises at 7 a.m. every morning. Assoc Prof Lim says: “Tennis training instilled in me a sense of discipline that now comes naturally and serves me well at work. For instance, the night before a surgery, I make it a point to do my homework thoroughly, like checking the patient’s medical status and going through the operation many times in my head.”

## **PERSEVERANCE UNDER PRESSURE**

When Assoc Prof Lim went on to the National University of Singapore (NUS) to pursue a medical degree, he continued his love affair with tennis. Besides playing in school tournaments, where he was the NUS school champion in both 1985 and 1986, he also represented the university in inter-varsity games.

One of the most important lessons Assoc Prof Lim learned as he competed on the tennis court was the ability to persevere under pressure. He recalls: “During my second year, I played opposite an American college player in the semi-finals of the NUS Open. I lost the first set easily, and was down 5-2 in the second set.” It would have been easy to give up but years of tennis training didn’t count for nothing. Assoc Prof Lim was, by then, used to the highs and lows on the court. He took a deep breath, turned his focus on the ball, and broke down the stress by playing point by point. He eventually won the match.

In 1990, Assoc Prof Lim completed his medical training and joined NUH. Five years later, he obtained his Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons (Glasgow) in General Surgery, awarded by the fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons. The year 2000 saw his advanced Fellowship training in hand surgery in Bordeaux and Nancy, France. Of his decision to focus on hand and microsurgery, he reveals: "I chose this specialty because at the time when I was to choose my specialty, I saw a woman in church with completely deformed hands. I understood this to be a sign from God, and it has indeed turned out to be the right decision for me."

Throughout the years, the physical, mental and emotional stress he faced in tennis increased Assoc Prof Lim's capacity for managing stress in work and life. He explains: "When I was playing tennis matches in school, there was great pressure to get that first serve in, score points and win. Now, there is also pressure in running a hospital with over 700 doctors and a million patient visits annually, as well as to deliver results in the surgeries I perform, like operating on a broken finger at 3 a.m."

**“SPORTS GIVE YOU A CAPITAL OF KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE THAT YOU CAN DRAW ON AND APPLY IN ANY LIFE SITUATION.”**

Indeed, the gravity of his role as a microsurgeon can be particularly daunting. "Microsurgery can be very intricate. Sometimes, there can only be that one shot to get the suture in," says Assoc Prof Lim. "So if a surgery isn't going too well – because of the level of intricacy involved – it can be nerve-racking. In fact, it's the same kind of feeling as being 30-40 down during a tennis match, and needing to get that serve in."

It was tennis that taught Assoc Prof Lim how to handle this mental pressure. He says: "In the running of the hospital, I tackle things issue by issue. In microsurgery, I do the same by focusing on the intricate task at hand, and persevering till the end."

A veteran of humanitarian projects, Assoc Prof Lim has also led medical personnel to places like Taiwan, Afghanistan and Cambodia. To him, it is important to give back to the community and help the poor in the region. But like his roles at work, the pressures of such medical trips are tremendous. "The conditions are often challenging," says Assoc Prof Lim matter-of-factly. Once, Assoc Prof Lim had to perform a hand surgery for a tribal chief in Afghanistan. The anaesthesia wasn't working, and the patient was facing partial paralysis of his arm. Even the lights went off.

Again, he drew on the mental strength he gained from tennis – and did



the best he could. The chief eventually recovered from his operation. He adds: "Sports give you a capital of knowledge and experience that you can draw on and apply in any life situation."

### LEADING THE WAY

Besides his day-to-day duties at NUH, Assoc Prof Lim also faces work challenges at the Healthcare Leadership College. He observes: "Our healthcare system is overloaded in terms of infrastructure and manpower. It is also a time where our system of care is transitioning from one that is hospital-centric to a community-centric one. We are also experiencing significant attrition of nurses, administrators and doctors to the private sector, where there is also a lack of clinical regulation."

Assoc Prof Lim's role as the Dean of the Healthcare Leadership College precisely seeks to address all that. "Our purpose is to reaffirm the public service ethos in the public healthcare workers in Singapore." Starting the college was tough in the beginning, as there was no structure to rely on, but

“SPORTS HAVE HELPED ME TO EXPRESS AND REMEMBER A BELIEF IN FINAL VICTORY.”

Assoc Prof Lim and his team developed a competency framework that emphasised values to determine decision-making at different levels of leadership.

"The competency framework includes values like 'Self' (an element of sacrifice), 'Enabling' (leading by example), 'Execution' (carrying out the plan) and 'Direction' (guiding the next generation of doctors and keeping them in public service)," says Assoc Prof Lim. "This helps us to contextualise healthcare leadership in Singapore, and work towards improving the overall situation. Even if there are challenges, sports have helped me to express and remember a belief in final victory."

Today, Assoc Prof Lim is still a passionate sportsman. He can often be found at MacRitchie Reservoir in the wee hours of the morning. If his work schedule permits, he will run up to 12 times a month. "There is a jogging route that starts from the north of the reservoir that I love to take," he shares. "It goes through the primary jungle, where I get surrounded by the sounds and smells of the lush greenery. As I emerge from it, the reservoir comes into full view – and it always looks so beautiful." From there, he runs around the reservoir and through a mangrove swamp before heading back to his starting point. He enthuses: "Isn't it amazing that you can get to see different sides of nature in one morning?"



Sports have also become a family activity for Assoc Prof Lim. With his three sons – Felix, 15; Thomas, 13; and Martin, 7 – he runs, swims, and plays table tennis and football. Through sport, he tries to inculcate values and qualities in his children. “I always tell them to give their all in sports,” he says. “Even if they’re losing, there should be no crying or cheating. Instead, they should persevere. Gradually, you can see how they have transformed in the way they play, and the way they handle situations – in both the game and in life.”

## VALUES

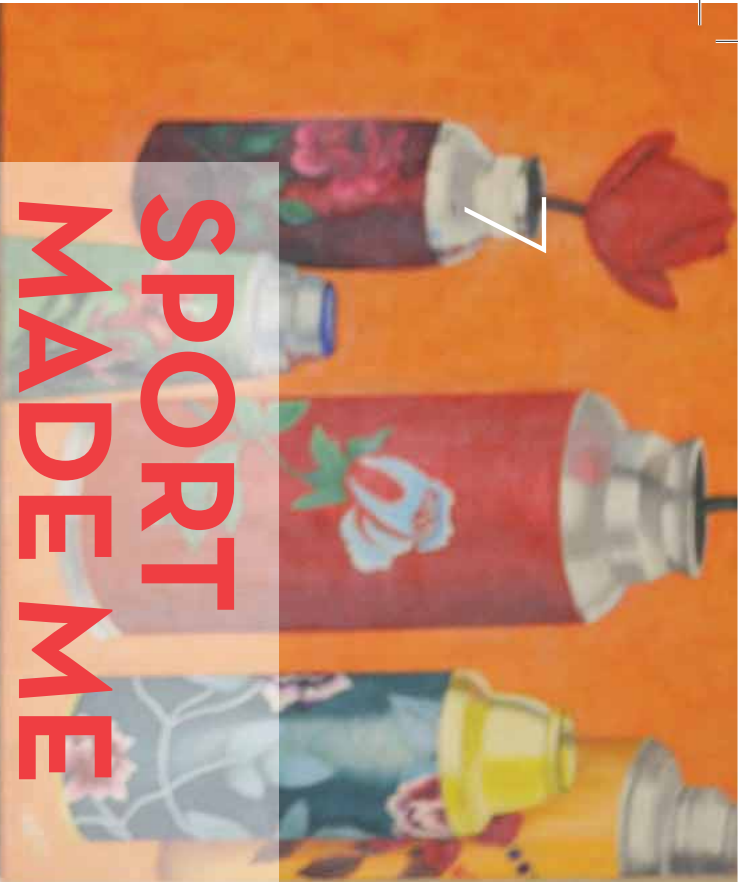
Perseverance • Discipline • Teamwork • Leadership

## REFLECTION

1. Through sport, we experience the major emotions of life such as fear, exhilaration and depression, learning about discipline, focus and perseverance in the process. What are the values that you have learned through sport? How have these values helped you at work or school?
2. As the Dean of the Healthcare Leadership College, Assoc Prof Lim and his team developed a competency framework that emphasised values to determine decision-making at different levels of leadership. What are some core values of your organisation/educational institution and how do they align with your personal values? Which values do you apply daily?



Photo courtesy of South West Community Development Council, BRIDGE



# SPORT MADE ME

As a teen, Deputy Prime Minister **THARMAN SHANMUGARATNAM**'s life revolved around sports. Now, as a national leader, the 56-year-old discusses how sports develop skills for life and make life more enjoyable and fulfilling.

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**W**hen Singapore's only Olympic-size ice rink opened in August 2012 in JCube shopping centre, Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Tharman Shanmugaratnam spoke passionately about sports and how more sporting facilities created in our neighbourhoods would make it easy for everyone to take part in them.

To prove the point, he took to the ice a few minutes later as the goalie. DPM's willingness to step into the rink was not surprising, given his background as a hockey player in his school days. As a youth, DPM Tharman and his sports were inseparable. Today, he believes strongly in the role of sports in building character and a resilient society.

At a lunchtime interview at The Treasury on High Street, DPM Tharman

shares candidly about his love for sports, as well as how it can shape community life. He observes: “We live better through sports, even in the busy lives we lead. They help us keep up friendships, bring families together through something enjoyable and, of course, keep us fit.”

DPM Tharman adds: “Sports are also a huge deal for character. Children learn the value of teams. They learn the discipline of repeated practice, and how there is no other way to develop expertise. Plus, the ability to fall or lose in competition and pick oneself up, and to win with humility.”

Citing developments in Jurong, he says: “The Jurong Lake Run is now an annual fixture in the West. And in the next 10 years, Jurong Lake Park will see the creation of more trails and spaces for the public to get closer to nature. And that will be part of the Round Island Route, a seamless green corridor for cyclists, inline skaters, brisk walkers, joggers and serious runners.”

### TEAM CAMARADERIE

In his youth, DPM Tharman was involved in “anything that had to do with running and a ball.” He says: “I was more of an all-rounder, rather than

“I LOOKED FORWARD TO GOING TO SCHOOL EVERY DAY, BECAUSE OF WHAT WE DID AFTER SCHOOL.”

an exceptional talent in any particular sport.” Still, he was good enough to represent his school, Anglo-Chinese School (ACS), in athletics, football, cricket and hockey, and to play for Combined Schools in hockey.

He also played rugby, volleyball and sepak takraw in inter-house games in school. “If you want to go further back, I was actually a serious exponent of hantam bola in my primary school years, with some reputation for accuracy!” he laughs.

He relates how sports made school “just so enjoyable”. “I looked forward to going to school every day, because of what we did after school.”

Hockey turned out to be the core amongst DPM Tharman’s sports. Even when there were exams, his hockey stick would be lined up at the front of the exam hall with his schoolbag. He laughs: “Sport was the only discipline for my friends and me. We would train as long as we could, until nightfall, when we couldn’t see the ball anymore.” Although these training sessions were tough, DPM Tharman loved the social aspects of the sport.

“When you win and lose together as a team, year in and year out, it’s

only natural that you build a special rapport with each other,” says DPM Tharman.

For him, the strengths of a team made all the difference on the field. “In football and hockey, some are good on the wings, others make extremely good strikers. There are some who don’t have that killer instinct but are good at strategising, while others are solid in defence,” he says. “That’s the interesting thing about sports – every team has people with distinct strengths, and no one is without weaknesses. You don’t have to be outstanding by yourself, but you can be outstanding as a team. So we learned to rely on one another to improve. And without realising it at the time, it helps you appreciate the strengths in everyone – at work and in life.”

At the end of his Secondary Four year, he looked through a small diary, where he had conscientiously recorded all his sports activities, from athletics trials to football friendlies to hockey training and competitive matches. “I found that, except for three days, I had managed to do some form of sport every day for that year,” he says.

“There is something exhilarating about sports, both on the field and as a spectator

... it’s complex, it’s uncertain and you never know what will happen next. And above all, there is beauty in sports, whether it’s dribbling well, scoring from an unlikely angle or diving to save a goal.”

“YOU DON’T HAVE  
TO BE OUTSTANDING  
BY YOURSELF, BUT YOU  
CAN BE OUTSTANDING  
AS A TEAM.”

## LEARNING SPORTSMANSHIP

“Hockey is an interesting sport,” says DPM Tharman. “As the players are armed with a stick and contact is close, it is not difficult to play dirty without the umpire noticing.” But as school captain of the ACS team, DPM Tharman simply could not understand why players would want to do that.

He explains: “The best players never resorted to dirty tricks to win the ball.” Once, when he was playing for Combined Schools, DPM Tharman had the opportunity to play against the Singapore Prisons team. Knowing little about their opponents, the youth players were understandably apprehensive. “I remember that game very well. The match was so enjoyable, and even the weather was beautiful. Everyone played seriously but fairly. The Singapore Prisons team turned out to be the most sportsmanlike team we played against that year.”

DPM Tharman recognises that in sports, losing is as common as winning.

“You could spend the entire season training really hard, yet lose to a better opponent, or sometimes because of plain bad luck.” That developed in him the ability to take setbacks. “Setbacks happen all the time, sometimes big setbacks. I can get despondent, or I can pick myself up and prepare for the next season. It’s never about one game.”

Sport also brought DPM Tharman into contact with many people. “It attracts people from all backgrounds. The field sports were also multiracial, probably more so in those days than they are now,” he observes. “Growing up with sports meant that we all got to interact with others from schools around the island, and from very different backgrounds. It doesn’t mean that if kids grow up without sports, they can’t acquire these values and perspectives. But sports give them an advantage.”

### BECOMING A LEADER

In the days when DPM Tharman was in school, a lot of the coaching was done by the students themselves. “We would go through our own drills and coach

**“IT IS WONDERFUL TO SEE HOW SPORT BRINGS FORWARD NEW LEADERS AND MENTORS, LIKE THIS GROUP OF EX-INMATES MADE GOOD.”**

one another, passing on the skills and techniques we had learned from the previous batch of players. The captain and vice-captain would plan the training schedule and make everyone do the toughest exercises – like doing a duck walk up a hill,” he says.

It meant that the boys had to lead at a young age. He says: “Again, we didn’t realise it at the time, but it was how we picked up leadership skills. As a boy, I looked up to my hockey captain, Norman Wong. He was a strong leader in our practices and at matches. I learned a fair bit under him, which came in handy when I later became captain.”

After ACS, DPM Tharman went to the London School of Economics where he earned a Bachelor’s degree in economics while representing the university in squash. Later, he obtained a Master of Economics from the University of Cambridge and a Master in Public Administration from Harvard University. At the latter, he also received the Lucius N. Littauer Fellow Citation for outstanding performance and leadership potential.

Before his entry into politics in 2001, DPM Tharman was the Managing Director of the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), Singapore’s central bank and integrated financial regulator. Today, besides his duties as the

DPM and the MP for Taman Jurong, he is also the Minister for Finance, a responsibility that he has performed since December 2007. In March 2011, he was appointed Chairman of the International Monetary and Financial Committee (IMFC), the ministerial policy steering committee of the IMF. He was admitted to the Group of Thirty, also known as “The Consultative Group on International Economic and Monetary Affairs”, in June 2008.

In his role as an MP, DPM Tharman sees sport as an opportunity for volunteers to take leadership. He explains: “Last night, I had a meeting with a group of volunteers who are ex-inmates who call themselves Beacon of Life. They are now running a football and mentorship programme for youth-at-risk, especially those still in school, so as to help them devote their energies to something that is not only enjoyable but builds character. So, that’s now called Beacon of Life (Football) Academy, or ‘BOLA’. Singapore Sports Council, through its SportCares arm, has helped them by providing skilled coaches for the boys and tickets to matches. It is wonderful to see how sport brings forward new leaders and mentors, like this group of ex-inmates made good.”

He sees plenty of potential for sport in Jurong Lake Park. “The volunteer-led Jurong Lake Run is now a major event.

There were about 5,000 runners at the beginning, but the number has grown to 15,000. We also plan to do many other things with the lake, like starting water activities for families with paddle-wheel boats.”

### SPORT STAYS FOR LIFE

Now, with a busy schedule at work and in the community, DPM Tharman takes an evening brisk walk whenever possible with his wife, Jane Itogi, who is also actively involved in community work and the non-profit arts sector.

“I’m much taller and walk faster, so I tend to walk around her while she walks straight,” says DPM Tharman. “That way, we can talk while we walk.” The couple has three sons and a daughter, in their mid-teens to early 20s. As a father, he takes a keen interest in their lives. He says: “When they were in school, we would usually chat about their sports, but everything about their lives is so interesting.”

When his children were younger, DPM Tharman used to take the family for regular sprint relays at a running track late at night, in the dark. “Eventually, I

found it impossible to keep up with them, including my daughter!” he laughs. “We would play street soccer late at night too, until two years ago.”

DPM Tharman is an avid follower of local sports. He says: “There is still a lot more potential in our young, in the field sports and athletics, besides traditional strengths like swimming and table tennis. Standards are rising again”. He is also an avid follower of the Olympic Games and World Cup. “With my children, we will replay the videos over and over, because it’s amazing how men and women are capable of such speed or power, or sheer artistry.”

For DPM Tharman, sport made him what he is today. “I didn’t play sports because I thought it was a way to imbibe values. I did it because it was challenging, we pushed each other and we enjoyed being together, practising, playing matches and talking about it after. But although I didn’t know it at the time, there was a quiet way in which sports actually made me,” he says. “It was the only serious thing I did when I was young and, hand on heart, I know it made me.”

## VALUES

Leadership • Teamwork • Sportsmanship • Mental Toughness

## REFLECTION

1. DPM Tharman grew up in a world where sport was an integral part of life, and it shaped his sense of community and principles. What values have you carried from your youth into your adult life? How do you deploy these values in your profession, family or community life?
2. Even as he matured into a family man and government leader, DPM Tharman made a point of staying active in sport. How successful have you been at blending sport into your personal life? Is sport something you do with absolute regularity as part of quality time with the family? Or are you hard-pressed to find the time to play sports with family or friends?



# LEAVING A LEGACY

Legacy is not on an athlete's mind when he or she first muscles up the courage and commitment to begin the long journey towards a podium. Legacy is built race by race and game by game. It is found in an athlete's tears of disappointment – and in the gritty determination to carry on. The 11 individuals in this segment once carried the sporting dreams of our nation. Now they encourage, equip and inspire our next generation of athletes to reach for greatness.



# SPRINT ICON

**CANAGASABAI KUNALAN** overcame his small build and a late start to become a sprint legend. Off the track, the Olympian continues to inspire with sporting values of tenacity, diligence and a strong dose of humility – in teaching, love and life.

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**O**ctober 1, 2012. The Children's Day celebrations were in full swing at Sembawang Primary School. Canagasabai Kunalan, with his silvery strands of hair and wiry 1.63m frame, stood out from the sea of youthful faces. The man had just given a talk about his athletics accomplishments during the morning assembly. Now, he was getting ready to confront a more physical task.

The school's principal, Kiran Kumar Gosian, had challenged his students to do a minute's worth of sit-ups with Kunalan. So, everyone had his or her knees bent, with feet flat on the ground. A teacher started the timer. By the time the whistle sounded, Kunalan had finished 77 sit-ups, a figure most people two-thirds his age can barely hit. "The teacher announced that I had equalled

my record set in 1994, when I was 52!" the soft-spoken man grins. He turned 70 last October.

Age never seems to slow Kunalan down. Even now, the man sprints around his semi-detached house off Orchard Boulevard every morning. Then, it is on to sit-ups and push-ups – 80 each. It would be unseemly for him to be out of shape, as he is a senior manager of Sports Alumni at Singapore Sports Council (SSC). "Do people have to train less as they grow old? No!" he exclaims affably. "It is the same in work and life – you don't have to slow down. You go all the way."

It is precisely this unrelenting attitude that made Kunalan one of Singapore's greatest sprinters. In a career that spanned over a decade from 1963, he won five medals in the Asian Games and 15 in the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games (later known as the Southeast Asian Games). He was the only 100m and 200m gold medalist for Singapore in over 50 years of SEA Games – and he still is.

He is also a two-time Olympian, clocking in at 10.38s for the 100m event at the 1968 Mexico Olympics. That stood as the national record for 33 years, until U. K. Shyam bettered it by 0.01s in 2001.

Over the years, Kunalan's achievements on the track have translated to success in life. As he pushed himself physically, the sporting values he acquired along the way guided him through teaching, love and life.

## **BAREFOOTED ADVENTURES**

Growing up, Kunalan lived with his parents and two elder sisters in the staff quarters of the Malayan Breweries (now known as Asia Pacific Breweries) on Alexandra Road. His father, N. Canagasabai, was a "dresser" – much like our modern-day general practitioner – and attended to the basic medical needs of the brewery's employees. His mother, Janagi, was a housewife who later joined her husband at the clinic as an assistant.

At Pasir Panjang English School, neither studies nor sport were top priorities. "I failed in most subjects, and broke my parents' hearts." Kunalan's diminutive size also meant that he did not shine on Sports Day – competitors in those days were categorised by height. There were other things that mattered more, anyway – like flying kites and plucking mangos.

His favourite, though, was "drain running". Just opposite his home, there was a large drain with steep sloping sides. It was cemented and banked like a cycling velodrome. Kunalan used to run along the sides. When he could not hold the pace and began to fall, he would leap to the other side and continue

to sprint, repeating the process until he reached the bottom. That, perhaps, laid the foundation for the agility that would eventually make Kunalan a champion sprinter.

But it was at Pasir Panjang Secondary School that Kunalan would have his first taste of competitive running. While he failed to qualify for the sprints during annual sports meets, he came in third for the One-Mile Open Race. He participated in other inter-school and inter-district races but did not impress. Kunalan always ran barefoot, just as he had as a kampung boy. He did not have proper running shoes and did not care for them – not that it stopped him from running on to bigger things.

## PERSEVERING IN SPORTS - AND LOVE

Kunalan's talent for sprinting was only discovered when he was a trainee at the then-Teachers' Training College (TTC). There, as Kunalan was playing soccer, the late Tan Eng Yoon – a TTC lecturer and honorary national coach – noticed his rapid-fire gait. Despite Kunalan's short strides, Eng Yoon was convinced that the 20-year-old had the potential to develop his speed. So, he tried persuading him to join his athletics trainings at the Farrer Park track.

“GOOD GENES CAN ONLY LET YOU LEAD THE FIRST 20 METRES.”

Kunalan was initially resistant to the idea. “I wanted to focus on my work as a teacher at Tiong Bahru Primary School and play soccer, my obsession at that time,” says Kunalan, who managed to keep himself out of Eng Yoon's way. Eventually, a brief encounter with Eng Yoon along a corridor in TTC changed Kunalan's mind. “He asked me why I hadn't turned up for training, and that he didn't like to see talent wasted. He also offered to coach me on an individual basis when most of the athletes had gone for an overseas competition.”

Finally, in 1963, he joined Eng Yoon's national squad. As a show of his commitment, he gave up soccer completely. With his potential, he represented Singapore at the first Merdeka Games in Kuala Lumpur – just five months after he started. He came home with a gold, silver and bronze, smashing two national relay records along the way. Kunalan was greatly encouraged by his wins. He recounts: “I was competing with the top sprinters in Malaysia, and it felt really good!”

The future was bright for Kunalan. Even in love. Around this time, Kunalan started dating a fellow sprinter on the TTC Athletics team, Elizabeth Chong Yoong Yin. The two were complete opposites – Kunalan was a country boy,

and she was a city girl – but sparks flew during a Physical Education Camp in 1964. “Everyone in the Swifts Athletes Club team called one another ‘Koyok’, a brand of Japanese medicated plaster. It symbolised friends sticking together in good and bad times,” he shares. “Soon, we were the only two calling each other that.”

Mixed-race relationships were not common in those days, and the tender courtship saw furious opposition from both their families. Kunalan was told by his father to “leave the Chinese girl or never return home.” He left with only the clothes on his back. Yoong Yin was given a similar ultimatum. The tide of heated disapproval – even from outsiders – affected them greatly. When a distraught Yoong Yin suggested a break-up, Kunalan insisted on staying together.

Kunalan is fond of saying that running gave him a good wife, because it was the sport that gave him the final push to persevere in the relationship. He saw how people from diverse cultures and backgrounds could work together harmoniously for a common goal in sports; he was certain that they could do the same for love. His determination rubbed off on Yoong Yin – and they married in 1966. While Kunalan’s family accepted Yoong Yin once she converted to Hinduism, Yoong Yin’s father only relented when their first child was born.

The couple now have three daughters – Soma, Mona and Gina – and are happy grandparents.

### STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE

Kunalan’s competitive career truly kicked off at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, where he participated in the 4 × 100m relay – and clocked 41.4s with the team. By the end of 1966, Kunalan held five national records, three for individual events – 100m, 200m and 400m – and two for relays, the 4 × 100m and 4 × 400m.

These records were not just the result of Kunalan’s natural talent – he worked hard for his achievements. “Good genes can only let you lead the first 20 metres,” says Kunalan. “It is with tough training that you can continue to lead the remaining 80 metres and win the race.”

Throughout that year, he trained six days a week. The toughest training to Kunalan was the seemingly endless repetitions of 150m sprints. After each 150m, the athletes had to return to the starting line with numb, aching legs

– to do it all over again. When he felt that he had not reached the point of exhaustion, he strove to do other workouts just to improve. He explains: “You reap what you sow. When you push yourself in sports, you stress your physiological system bit by bit. As you bear the ‘discomfort’, your body adapts to it. Only then will you get the rewards.”

This unyielding determination is made more admirable by how Kunalan had to juggle full-time teaching work while training with limited resources. He recalls how he always turned up for training on the dot – the only other athlete who was equally serious about training was his friend and rival, Mani Jegathesan. Kunalan had the same attitude towards his responsibilities in teaching. “My life just changed when I became a teacher,” he says in a 2010 *The Straits Times* report.

When he started teaching at Tiong Bahru Primary School in 1961 and, later, at Dunearn Secondary Technical School (DSTS) in 1967, he embraced the role wholeheartedly. Though never academically inclined, he felt a deep sense of accountability towards his students. So much so that he was willing to put in extra effort to brush up on his knowledge of each subject, especially mathematics – his weakest subject – late into the night. He would try every problem sum in the chapter till he got the right answer. When he could not solve a sum, he would turn to his colleagues, like A. C. Abdeen, for help. “It is just like sports – I started late in sprinting and didn’t have the build for the sport. But with hard work, I could still achieve the same results.”

## HUMILITY IN SUCCESS

Kunalan’s tough training paid off during the 1966 Asian Games in Bangkok. He made it to the 100m finals but lost the coveted gold to Jegathesan by a hairline – a result based on a photo finish. Instead of sulking over his loss, Kunalan put it aside immediately to anchor the 4 × 400m relay team to a bronze medal.

Later, in a year-end review of Singapore’s sporting achievements, *The Straits Times* journalist Norman Siebel awarded a medal of another sort to Kunalan. He wrote: “Kunalan bore this disappointment with a quiet dignity and sportsmanship which qualifies him for the Singapore medal for chivalry.”

Kunalan’s trademark humility would be observed through the highs and lows of competitive running. In 1968, he became the first Singaporean to qualify for the second round of the Mexico Olympics. For that – and the fact that he was ranked fourth among the sprinters from the Commonwealth nations – he won the Sportsman of the Year Award. The next year, he won

gold medals in the 100m and 200m races before anchoring the 4 x 400m relay to another gold medal at the SEAP Games in Rangoon – and another Sportsman of the Year Award for him.

Despite the mounting accolades, success never went to his head. Unless Kunalan is asked, he never mentions past sporting glories. At his office in NIE, there were no sporting plaques or medals on display. At home, all the medals are packed away. “I donated the important ones, like the 1966 Asian Games silver medal and the Sportsman of the Year awards, to the Sports Museum. For me, that’s more meaningful because there will be other pairs of eyes looking at them, and not just mine.”

The lowest point in Kunalan’s sprinting career came in 1970. “It was the saddest year,” recalls the man. He had woken up one day with a sharp pain in his left foot. “It turned out that I had a Calcaneal spur, an abnormal growth in the heel bone resulting from calcium leaching. No treatment helped.”

He had to rely on hydrocortisone shots to soothe the pain but kept on training. “A sense of duty to do something well, especially if the task affects

**“IT MAY SOUND  
CLICHÉD, BUT IT’S THE  
JOURNEY THAT MATTERS -  
NOT THE WINNING.”**

other people, keeps me going.”  
Perhaps this has something to do  
with Eng Yoon, too. “I tried very hard  
not to let him down. He was my first  
mentor.”

Still, he continued to be plagued by  
the pain at the Commonwealth Games  
in Scotland. To aggravate matters, he had to run with a swollen Achilles  
tendon in the cold. His result of 10.7s – though understandable – was deeply  
disappointing. Later that year, he was third in both the 100m and 200m events  
at the Asian Games. Kunalan was not in top form. “I went home so, so, so  
sad – and it was the major reason for hanging up my spikes.”

And he did. After that year, he retired from the competitive scene. While  
some athletes would flaunt past victories to score lucrative careers, Kunalan  
refrained from doing so. He has never nominated himself for any position. He  
says: “It may sound clichéd, but it’s the journey that matters – not the winning.  
For me, it has always been about the training, feeling the tension build up,  
finishing the race and going home. After that, a new chapter begins.”

## LASTING STRIDES

Kunalan’s decision to retire from sprinting was an emotional one. He says: “At  
first, I felt ‘justified’ in giving up. But in the recesses of my mind, I felt that I had



let people down. It was hard to live with that.”

He began to feel better about himself as he focused on teaching with renewed vigour. At that time, Tan Choong Yan, the principal at DSTS, called on Kunalan to start coaching athletics. “He told me that half of the school’s students were not academically inclined and that we could instil confidence and a sense of achievement in them through sports.” By 1973, the DSTS track and field team had won the “A” Division Boys’ title at the Bukit Timah Championships and, later, the National School Championships. That became a great morale booster for the boys, who affectionately called Kunalan “Mr. K”.

During his time at DSTS, Kunalan talent-spotted and transformed many boys into national athletes, like a 15-year-old Alan Koh, Kok Peng Mun, and Serjit Singh. For Kunalan, competitive sports work as a “crucible” for students to learn important life lessons like perseverance, sportsmanship, hard work and humility. “Every time you prepare and take part in a competition, you have the opportunity to grow. You will learn to appreciate the Olympic values, be it excellence, friendship or respect.”

The same year, Kunalan was invited to be the last torchbearer for the 1973 SEA Games, hosted by Singapore at the brand new National Stadium. With his heel spur becoming less severe, he also made a brief comeback. That year, he anchored the team to a silver medal in the 4 x 400m relay. Then 1975 came. It was “the best year”, Kunalan says. At 33 years old, he qualified for six events at the SEA Games in Thailand, eventually anchoring the Singapore team to a gold medal in the 4 x 400m event. After that, sprinting finally took a backseat. Kunalan went back to school.

He applied for a two-year part-time course, Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE), in 1976 but was rejected without explanation. Kunalan felt let down, especially since the course potentially carried two increments on his salary. “Each time I was passed over for promotions or scholarships, I had that hollow feeling inside. But when you have sprinted for your country, nothing in the world fazes you.” So, he just continued doing his best.

Fortunately, his principal Tan Choong Yan stepped in. “He made a personal appeal to the Institute of Education (IE).” His hard work eventually paid off. In 1980, he left for a nine-month Colombo Plan Scholarship for a Certificate Course in Physical Education, Health, Dance and Recreation in Perth. When he returned a year later, he was accepted as a seconded officer to lecture at IE, where he was highly respected because of his diligence and experience.

In the 1980s, he went to West Germany for a 14-month course. When he

“YOU READ WHAT  
YOU SOW.”

returned, he joined the newly formed College of Physical Education (CPE) to continue training PE teachers. His boss, Professor Paul Robinson, once said that Kunalan had the “ability to inspire and motivate students he taught.” With that, he was given a two-year scholarship to study a Master’s degree in Sports Science at the Loughborough University of Technology. Even though he did not have a science background, he graduated among the top three.

Eventually, he became a lecturer at the National Institute of Education (NIE). Even after Kunalan reached the retirement age at 55, NIE kept him on for another 13 years until he left in 2010. When he left, he was an assistant professor in the Physical Education and Sports Science department. “Being a good teacher is my proudest achievement. It’s very satisfying. I feel that it’s my duty.”

**“ I ALWAYS TELL STUDENTS THAT GOALS CAN BE ACHIEVED AS LONG AS YOU HAVE THE INTEREST. ”**

These days, he is still not taking it slow. Besides his SSC appointment, he is the honorary secretary of Singapore Olympians Association and the vice-president of Training and Selection at the Singapore Athletic Association (SAA). But what he is most passionate about is spreading Olympic values to youths: “Since 2011, the Sports Alumni has come under the Sports Museum, which houses the Singapore 2010 Youth Olympic Games (YOG) Gallery. There, I regularly conduct gallery tours and talks,” shares Kunalan.

“I also take on invitations to speak at schools.” Kunalan gives these talks for free. “I always tell students that goals can be achieved as long as you have the interest. If I can do it, they can do it even better.” With his busy schedule, he continues to take comfort in his fitness regime – rising as early as 5 a.m. to start working out. In the end, it is sports that continue to push him further. “At my age, I don’t think I have any further to go actually,” he laughs. “But I’ll stay on for as long as people need me.”

## VALUES

Perseverance • Diligence • Accountability • Humility

## REFLECTION

1. Kunalan defied many odds to become a sprint legend. He did not allow circumstances to stop him from pursuing his destiny as a runner. What obstacles are you facing in the pursuit of your dreams and ambitions? What can you learn from Kunalan's story?
2. Kunalan has run a long journey – from a sprint champion in 1963 to a highly respected educator today. He has demonstrated a tireless commitment to empowering people to achieve their potential. What are some of Kunalan's key attributes you can apply to your life's journey?



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# GOING FOR GLORY

Former national sprinter **GLORY BARNABAS** is best known for her stunning 200m victory at the 1973 Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games. Today, the 71-year-old still keeps the Singapore flag flying at masters meets worldwide. She shares how discipline and determination have served her well through the years.

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It was 1973. On the brick-red tarmac in the former National Stadium at Kallang, Glory Barnabas was getting ready for the race of her life – the 200m event at the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games. Then 31, she was making her comeback after a two-year break from athletics. Her greatest competitor was the much-feared runner from Myanmar, Than Than. “She was the hot favourite,” recalls Glory. “In fact, her reputation preceded her because all the newspapers were raving about her speed. Just seeing her doing warm-ups was intimidating – she was solid muscle.” But Glory was determined to win, especially since the race was held on home ground. The 6000-strong Singapore crowd was all hyped up. “They were screaming their lungs out and yelling my name, which gave me an extra push to do my best.”

But just having the desire to win was not enough – Than Than was a formidable foe. She was in Lane 1, while Glory was in Lane 3. “During the race, I couldn’t see her because of the staggered start. Instead, I had to use Than Than’s fellow runner in Lane 7 as a benchmark.” As Glory came out from the curve, she saw that Than Than was just one metre ahead. “I told myself that I can’t let that happen, and that I must catch up with her.” Step by step, she pushed herself on, until she was running neck and neck with her rival. Right before the last stride, Glory made the bold decision to lunge forward.

From the stands, it seemed like both Glory and Than Than had crossed the finish line at the same time. She says: “It took them half an hour to decide the winner. During that time, I was taken to meet the media.” It turned out to be radio DJ Brian Richmond. “He asked if I wanted to watch myself run, and showed me the whole clip. I saw that it was a really close finish.” In the end, Glory’s final lunge towards the line won her the race.

That year, Glory’s gold medal – and those won by other national track and field legends like Eng Chew Guay, Canagasabai Kunalan, Heather Marican and Nor Azhar Hamid – gave Singapore athletics a great boost. Glory would go on to help Singapore win more medals, from international competitions to masters meets. “I hope to keep on running till I’m 80,” smiles Glory, who does not look a day beyond 50. Her frame is lean, her spirits sprightly. And her eyes light up in joy when she recounts her track and field days.

Sprinting has been a long-running passion for Glory. But she would be the first to point out that her successes – both on the track and in her teaching profession – would not have been possible without discipline, determination, and a strong desire to win.

### A DESIRE TO COMPETE

It was at Paya Lebar Methodist Girls’ School (PLMGS) that Glory spent some of her most formative years in sports. Besides the usual games that schoolgirls play, she discovered netball, her first love. “I represented the school in netball at a district level,” she says. “I always played the Centre role, because the coach recognised that I could run. My inherent speed meant that I could cover the whole netball court. For that, I was nicknamed ‘Mercury,’” laughs Glory.

Later, Glory’s teachers, Claudette Poulier and the late Anna Thomas, started sending her for invitation relays and other track and field events at inter-school meets. “We didn’t have physical education (PE) teachers then, so Mrs. Thomas and Mrs. Poulier were the school’s sports secretaries and took charge of sports-related responsibilities,” she explains. “They even got

a classmate's brother, Kanagasabapathy, to coach three other students and me for the relay."

At that time, PLMGS was not a sporting school and lacked training facilities. "All we had was a very small field with no track," says Glory. "We trained at the police station opposite the school, as they had a proper track for us to do relays." The school team made do with what they had. "We may not have been one of the top schools then, like Raffles Girls' School (RGS), which had a lot of support and good facilities, but we were determined to do our best." And they did, with Glory anchoring the team to a gold medal at one of the schools' sports meets.

Glory says: "It was then that I realised running was so thrilling." She went on to participate in 100m and 200m events at various inter-school meets as well. But her persistence to train and compete went against the wishes of her strict mother. "She told me to stay home like a 'good Indian girl', and tried to stop Mrs. Thomas and Mrs. Poulier from sending me to races by telling them that I was anaemic, which wasn't true." But the two good-hearted teachers were so keen to nurture Glory's talent that they went as far as to buy her eggs, milk and cheese, just to ensure that she was getting enough nutrition. Sensing her teachers' devotion to her sporting career, Glory was even more determined to continue running.

## LESSONS IN DISCIPLINE

With Glory's natural talent, it was only a matter of time that she would join the national team and represent Singapore at an international level. But when she first entered the Teachers' Training College (TTC) in 1961, she had no such dreams. Instead, she was inspired by Mrs. Thomas and Mrs. Poulier to become a teacher.

Her eventual foray into competitive athletics was an accident. Right before a major university meet, the 4 x 100m relay team was one person short. "One of the members had fallen sick, and they needed a replacement fast. Somehow, word got around that I was a good runner, and I was asked to join the relay." She was astonished to find herself being placed in the last leg. That turned out to be a wise move by the track and field coach. "We were not originally in the lead, but when I took the baton, I made up for the shortfall enough to win our team a gold medal."

It was then that Mr. Tan Eng Yoon, a TTC lecturer and honorary coach, talent-spotted her and pulled her into the national team. By then, Glory was no longer playing netball – she had decided to give her all to sprinting

instead. Training under Tan was tough. “We would train five to six days a week,” says Glory. Training was less intensive in the beginning as they ran fewer intervals.

“But as we got fitter, we were required to hit certain targets at a certain period in training. So, we would keep running intervals, with only one minute of rest during the walk diagonally across the field back to the starting line.” It took a strong dose of determination – as well as daily discipline – to endure the gruelling training.

“In team sports like netball, if you slacken a little but your teammates are good, your team can still do reasonably well. But in athletics, it is solely an individual’s effort. You have to train every day to maintain your standard,” says Glory. “It is your effort, 100%, if you want to win.” And good effort, according to Glory, is having the discipline to turn up for training, and pushing herself to improve.

Glory did this all throughout college. While young women her age would be out having fun with friends, she stayed committed to athletics. “I never had time for movies because I was training all the time,” she says. “I also had to sleep early before competitions, so I was never out late.” The personal sacrifice was Glory’s choice, and she never complained about it. “I was completely focused on the sport, so I felt too driven to be bothered by it.”

“IT IS YOUR EFFORT, 100%, IF YOU WANT TO WIN.”

Even as a full-fledged teacher, Glory did not give up her love for athletics. When she joined Charlton Primary School in 1961, Glory continued to train, juggling intense training with her teaching responsibilities. “The school allowed me to teach in the morning session, so I could attend training with the national team in the afternoons.”

### PURSuing SPORTING EXCELLENCE

Glory represented Singapore in the 1965, 1967 and 1969 SEAP Games, bringing home bronze and silver medals until her most glorious sporting moment in 1973. During that memorable 200m event at the SEAP Games, everyone in her family turned up to cheer her on. Glory will never forget that it was her mother’s first show of support. “I was also married by then, and my husband, Edwin, and parents-in-law all came.”

Winning that race on home soil was the start of even greater things for Glory. Only two days later, she led the 4 × 100m relay team to a gold too.



Her then-coach Patrick Zehnder, was so pleased with her results that he persuaded her to continue running for the following year's Asian Games. In 1974, at the Asian Games in Tehran, Iran, she did her part to help Singapore score a bronze in the 4 x 100m relay and silver in the 4 x 400m relay. In the latter relay, the team – consisting of Glory, Maimoon Azian, Lee Tai Jong and Chee Swee Lee – missed out on the gold by half a stride. But together, they set the national women's 4 x 400m record of 3 minutes 43.85 seconds, a national record that remains unbroken today.

Over the years, Glory won some, and lost some. But whenever she lost, she did not despair. "Of course I've lost many times. But I always consoled myself that my turn would come another time. Then, instead of beating myself up, I would go straight back into training."

In 1977, Glory decided to hang up her spikes for good to concentrate on teaching PE at Willow Avenue Secondary School. Before that, she had already taught at both primary and secondary levels. And when it comes to education, nothing helps the young build character like sports. She explains: "Through sports, be it in athletics or team games, students can learn many essential life skills like leadership abilities, as well as worthy qualities like discipline, determination and teamwork."

“THROUGH SPORTS,  
STUDENTS CAN LEARN MANY  
ESSENTIAL LIFE SKILLS.”

In 1983, Glory was posted to Temasek Junior College. Three years later, she went on to help set up the PE Department in Tampines Junior College, where she would serve as Head of Department (HOD) until her retirement in 2003. Often, she would share life lessons with her students during PE lessons, and with the track and field teams she coached. "For instance, when coaching relay teams, I would remind them to take their victories and losses as a team. There shouldn't be any blame game at all."

Instead, she focused on instilling discipline, getting her students to turn up for training on time. She led by example – it was not unusual to see her training on the school track every morning before flag-raising. She adds: "If the training schedule shows that they have to do 10 sets of intervals, they just have to grit their teeth and do it."

When the students were discouraged, Glory would tell them stories of sporting greats like the American track star Wilma Rudolph. "She was born with infantile paralysis, but managed to overcome all odds to become lightning fast on the track. At one time, she was the world's fastest woman. I've always looked upon her as my role model, not because of her medals,

but because I admire her grit and determination.”

Glory, who has a daughter, Jennifer, still holds an adjunct teaching role at Springfield Secondary School. And she continues to inspire young athletes with her life story and gung-ho attitude towards sport. “I often tell my students that if there are two identical candidates at a job interview, the employer will hire the candidate who does sports,” says Glory. “That’s because an athlete is almost certainly a more well-rounded individual.”

## SPRINTING FORWARD

After four years out of the sporting limelight, Glory was itching to get back onto the track. The opportunity came when M. Harichandra, the brother of “Flying Doctor” Mani Jegathesan, returned from his first World Masters Athletics in 1975 with a silver medal in the 400m and told his fellow runners all about his wonderful experience.

In the Masters athletics category, also referred to as veterans meets, only veteran athletes who are 35 years old or above can participate. Glory remembered the thrill of sprinting, and decided to wet her feet by participating in the World Masters Athletics Championships in January 1981 at Christchurch, New Zealand.

“I’VE SEEN RUNNERS WHO ARE OVER 90 YEARS OLD, AND THAT REALLY INSPIRES ME.”

Then aged 40, she relished the experience so much that she returned to the 1983 World Masters Championships in Puerto Rico, scoring a silver in the 200m and a bronze in the 100m.

Glory went on to win a gold in the 400m event at the inaugural 1985 World Masters Games in Toronto, and another 200m gold at the 1987 World Masters Athletics Championships. “I beat the 1985 champion on her home ground in Melbourne, Australia. It felt great to be a world medallist.”

In 2003, she was appointed President of Singapore Masters Athletics, a veterans track and field association. She went on competing up till 2010, winning many medals in the sprinting events, as well as scoring gold in the triple jump events in the Asian Masters Athletics Championships in 2004 at Bangkok, Thailand and in 2006 at Bangalore, India.

For Glory, though, it’s never just about the medals. She explains her motivation for participating: “I’ve seen runners who are over 90 years old, and that really inspires me. Sport should be a means of keeping fit and staying healthy, and that’s why I hope to run for as long as I can.”

## VALUES

Discipline • Commitment • Excellence • Passion

## REFLECTION

1. Glory had to face many challenges, such as the much-feared runner Than Than. But she did not give in to fear. How do you respond to challenges? Do you stand strong and rely on the discipline of your training to see you through adversity?
2. Over the years, Glory won some and lost some. But whenever she lost, she did not despair. How do you handle failure or defeat? How do your values help carry you through disappointment?

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# TRACK RECORD

As a talented track and field student athlete, **ALAN KOH SWEE WAN** could have gone on to bigger things. But a hamstring injury and financial hardship killed his dream in athletics. Still, he remains committed to sports. Over the years, he has played a pivotal role in transforming the campus sports scene at Singapore Management University (SMU).

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**A**lan Koh feels most at home in a sports stadium. The oval running track, the green grass field, the spectator stands. After all, this is where the former student athlete spent years training for his specialty events in track and field – the 100-metre dash and the long jump.

“There were so many things I loved about track and field – the smell of the track, the warming up, and the applying of wintergreen oil to soothe bruised muscles,” says the 57-year-old wistfully. “I relished the personal challenge of doing my best during each race, too.”

Alan’s memories of athletics are deeply intertwined with recollections of his childhood. As a 10-year-old child, he used to race his twin brother, Koh Swee Hua, on the running track after school. They would toss their schoolbags



on the ground, laughing as they got into the starting position. There were no starting blocks, no firing of the starter's pistol. But boys being boys, it was just fun to dash from point A to point B. "Somehow, our race to the finishing line was never about winning – we just really enjoyed running," he says. "There are so many sporting memories that I cherish, but this remains my fondest."

When the teachers at St. Michael's School discovered that the twins had talent, they encouraged them to participate in the school's sports events. The senior associate director of sports and adventure at Singapore Management University (SMU) laughingly recalls: "Swee Hua and I were the bane of other athletes as we would win trophies for most of the events."

### TAKING THE LEAP INTO TEAMWORK

When Alan was 13, he had the opportunity to participate in his first-ever overseas competition. Together with other young athletes like Cheah Kim Teck, the current deputy chairman of Singapore Sports Council (SSC), he

left for Ipoh, Malaysia, to represent the Combined Schools in Singapore for the long jump event.

It was the first time Alan belonged to a team. "Even though I was the youngest, I bonded well with my teammates. There was a strong sense

“A LEADER IS ONE WHO INFLUENCES THE TEAM MEMBERS TO PERFORM TO THEIR BEST ABILITIES.”

of congeniality within the team," he says. "That left a deep impression on my mind." Everything went well until the day of the competition. Upon landing in the pit, Alan broke his arm. He still won third place though. "I was careless in the way I executed the jump. But I remember how my teammate, Maurice Alphonso, stayed by my side and bent my arm back into position so there was less pain. I will never forget that act of kindness."

That feeling of teamwork stayed with Alan through the years, relevant even during Alan's working life at SMU. "Doing sports is like running a department. You choose whom you want in the team, making sure that the strengths and weaknesses of your team – fellow players or colleagues – complement instead of contradict. Then, you work together to achieve a common goal."

In fact, teamwork is the first quality he looks for in new hires at SMU. "No matter how good a candidate's résumé is, what truly matters is whether or not he or she is a team player. If everyone in the team operates selfishly and independently, the department will not function." Even the heads of departments must play a part, Alan says. He explains: "Sometimes, you can

plan a sports event down to the last detail, but a mistake still crops up during the awards ceremony. I have to take the heat and accept responsibility for any mistakes.”

Alan adds contemplatively: “A leader is not defined as the one who shouts orders. A leader is one who influences the team members to perform to their best abilities, and to guide them within a certain parameter and allow for mistakes – and learn from them.”

## PERSEVERING ON THE TRACK

In the early 1970s, St. Joseph’s Institution – now a secondary school – still offered pre-university classes. It was there that Alan continued his track and field career. As a dedicated athlete, he used to push himself so hard that he would keel over, vomiting into the grass.

For Alan, this was part and parcel of preparing for a race. He says: “Through the drawing up of a training schedule and sticking to it, athletics training has taught me that if I want to achieve anything, I have to be focused and committed. Of course, it is also important to trust your coach.”

“SPORTS PROVIDED ME WITH  
THE KNOW-HOW TO PUSH,  
PERSUADE AND PERSEVERE TO  
REACH MY GOALS AT WORK.”

At one time, Alan was training under Patrick Zehnder. He was then coaching middle-distance champion Chee Swee Lee, who became the first woman in Singapore to win the 400m gold in the 1974 Asian Games in Tehran, Iran. “That was such a defining moment in Singapore’s athletics history that I looked up to her. During my training, I found her to be incredibly focused, committed and disciplined.”

Alan became the first schoolboy to break the 11-second barrier in 1973 by achieving a 10.9-second timing during the 100-metre race at Farrer Park Stadium. It was a record that was held for more than a decade. He was also one of the few national athletes with such a good timing. With a score of 6.94 metres, he also held the Schools’ record for long jump for about a decade.

As how he trained in athletics, Alan perseveres in pushing his goals at work. He fervently believes that, at a university level, sport should be a co-curricular activity. “It should not be something ‘extra’, but the general consensus was that a business university like SMU had no need for sport,” he explains. “But sport and business can – and should – come together.”

To achieve that, Alan had to start from scratch. During his first four years

at SMU, he worked relentlessly to generate interest in sports on campus. “There were zero sports and adventure clubs at SMU then,” he recalls. Today, there are 40 sports clubs and seven adventure clubs, from Ultimate Frisbee to fencing to archery to diving to horse riding. Among them, sailing is one of the most successful.

“Our SMU sailing club has participated in national and international competitions,” says Alan. The club has also organised the biggest regatta in Singapore – the annual SMU-RM Western Circuit Sailing Regatta – known for its challenging courses and fun-filled post-race parties. Over the years, Alan made sure that SMU organised other signature sports events too, like the SMU Night Adventure Race, Gravigal (Bouldering), Diva la Futbol, Asia Pacific Student Cup Regatta and the new wakeboarding event, Wakefest Singapore 2012.

Alan also worked on convincing the SMU management on the importance of sports and started positioning the university in the sports industry. Thanks to his background in athletics, his approach worked. Most recently, SMU signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with SSC to take sports to the next level. A slew of sports-related initiatives – like the launch of new sports electives “Principles of Coaching in Sports” in August 2012 and the Sports Marketing Elective in 2013 – will prepare SMU undergraduates with the knowledge and skills to work in the sports industry. He shares: “Sports provided me with the know-how to push, persuade and persevere to reach my goals at work.”

## STRIDING FORWARD

With Alan’s potential, he could have easily gone on to the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games in 1973. But fortune was not on his side. He had to give that up because of a double whammy – a hamstring injury and financial difficulties.

“The hamstring injury happened as I was running down the slope during a training session,” he says. “Then, my family faced financial challenges as my father retired at the age of 55. Between making ends meet and a professional career in athletics, I chose the former,” says Alan, who started working full-time immediately after National Service (NS).

Not being able to turn professional was a tough reality check for the promising young athlete. But Alan feels no bitterness. “My father happened to get married later than his peers, and had to retire earlier,” he shrugs matter-of-factly. “Life is not a bed of roses. You can’t run away from ups and downs.



The sooner you accept that, the easier it will be.”

What Alan realised, though, was that he could fulfil his love for sports in other ways. “Sport has always been in my blood,” he says passionately. In the army, he played football with his platoon. With his sporting experience, he also represented the Singapore Armed Forces Sports Association (SAFSA) in track and field, and rugby. “Nothing could compensate for the loss of track and field, but rugby was one of the joys I had in the army,” reveals Alan.

Until then, he had only played rugby recreationally. But in the army, he trained aggressively for it to compete at an inter-formation level. “One of the biggest achievements of my life was beating SAFTI Military Institute and Engineers teams – filled with national rugby players – with my team, 2 SIB, in the 7-Aside Inter-Formation competition. With my brother, Swee Hua – the two competitive runners in the team – we were real fast on the wings,” he says, with a hint of pride.

After army, he joined the SSC in 1978. He spent two decades at the Sports for All and Sports Excellence departments. It was there that Alan could once again focus on his deep-seated passion for sports, albeit on the “other side of the fence”. He shares: “I travelled to major competitions like the Asian Games, Southeast Asian (SEA) Games and the Commonwealth Games around the world as an official. Since I was an athlete, I could understand what national athletes needed during the games.”

Working life at the SSC was so fulfilling that Alan’s final decision to leave in 2001 was a tough one. “After so long, I desired a new personal challenge,” reveals Alan. “The offer from SMU came at the right time. As a new campus, they wanted me to come in and create sports vibrancy on campus.”

### REALISING THE VALUE OF SPORTS

When asked if he might consider retirement soon, Alan shakes his head. He gleefully rattles off a seemingly never-ending to-do list. One of the bullet points: Keeping students interested in sports so that they can commit to the clubs. They have to come to understand the value of sports, he believes. “Sports come as a package deal. Those who do sports not only enjoy the activities, they tend to have better focus, time management skills, and are committed to their goals. These life skills naturally become a part of their lives.”

One way to keep the students engaged is to nurture them in sports and expose them to competitions. In 2005, Alan started the Sport Excellence Programme (SEP) at SMU to raise the standards and profiles of SMU student athletes. "When young athletes enrol in SMU, we help them to grow," he shares. This is done through additional funding for training and, in certain cases, sports scholarship programmes. Athletes who are committed will also be selected to compete on an international level, such as the ASEAN University Games and the World University Games.

Adding value to the students is always at the top of Alan's mind. He shares: "I often ask myself: What do we want to give students after they have graduated? It has to be life skills." This is where sports come in, as "a strategy to better a person, to inculcate values and build character".

This is why he always challenges the students to think about how sport can contribute to their lives. "For instance, sport can hone leadership skills. I've had employers like Barclays and DBS Bank share how SMU graduates are filled with initiative to kick-start new programmes in their companies."

For Alan, it is a regret that he didn't get to go further than he could have in athletics. "I often wonder how far I could have gone if I hadn't traded my sporting dream for a dose of reality," he says softly. "Admittedly, it's a part of my life that is not really fulfilled. But I have had such great times on the track, and now, off the track, I can still continue my passion in sports. So, I am truly satisfied. "

## VALUES

Perseverance • Teamwork • Diligence • Leadership

## REFLECTION

1. Alan strongly believes in the importance of teamwork and focusing on the strength of each team member to achieve a common goal. Have you been part of a strong team that has been able to overcome a challenge? How did good teamwork contribute to the success of the project?
2. Sport helps to develop important life skills such as self-confidence, self-management and responsible decision-making. What life skills have you developed or learned through sports?

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# THE SINGLE- MINDED SHOOTER

**KHATIJAH SURATTEE** fought parental resistance and overcame coaching challenges to become the first female shooter to represent Singapore in the international arena. She shares how shooting has honed her grit.

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**T**he first time Khatijah Surattee held a submachine gun in the shooting range, she was in awe. The year was 1968, and she was just 18. At the time, she had just joined the pioneer batch of 12 female Dental Orderlies at the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and was exploring what military life had to offer. Thanks to her open-minded superior at the time, Dental Officer Captain (Dr) Benny Chan, she was soon introduced to the world of firearms.

“As women, we didn’t have to go through basic military training. But Captain Chan felt we should know how the army worked and brought us around,” recalls the feisty 63-year-old in her Pasir Ris flat. The trip to the shooting range turned out to be a life-changing



experience for Khatijah. "Everything about shooting appealed to me."

In the 1960s, shooting was still a predominantly male sport. But the fact that it was a testosterone-driven game did not deter Khatijah. "As an only child, I was headstrong: What I wanted to get, I got," says Khatijah firmly. "I did not believe that being a woman meant I couldn't achieve certain things."

As she practised, Khatijah was thrilled to find out that she had a natural talent for shooting. Suddenly, she had a target to aim for, not only at the shooting range, but also in life. "I wanted to excel in shooting so much that I turned a blind eye to whatever obstacles were in my way," she shares pensively. And there were obstacles – lots of them.

## A DETERMINATION TO SHOOT

Khatijah's father called the shots for most of her early life. But if he had had his way, she would never have joined the army or picked up shooting. "My father was a traditional man," she shares. "He tried to steer my life according

**“ I HAVE AN ENERGETIC PERSONALITY. BUT WHENEVER I WAS IN THE RANGE, I COULD BE STILL AND FOCUS ON THE ACT OF SHOOTING. ”**

to society's expectations of a woman – a good marriage was far more important than education or career."

She wasn't allowed to go on to junior college, even though she did well enough to do so after her O-level. Then, he objected to her

joining the army and, later, her newfound passion in shooting. But although she was young, Khatijah had a mind of her own. She knew she wanted to stay in the army and shoot. And that was precisely what she did. In retrospect, Khatijah attributes this fierce determination to stay on course to her mother's early death. "When she passed away, I was only 12. But I had to grow up and learn to take care of myself. That made me not only emotionally strong but also very independent."

Shooting, as it gradually turned out, became part and parcel of Khatijah's growing years. Always headstrong, she learned to curb herself through the very act of shooting. "I have an energetic personality. But whenever I was in the range, I could be still and focus on the act of shooting. Over time, I have been able to control my emotions better."

Armed with a life goal, Khatijah was soon shooting competitively. She honed her shooting skills by representing the People's Defence Force at the competitions that SAF regularly held for its staff. "I started competing in M16

events in 1973, when I was at the Beach Road Camp. But I wasn't improving my shooting skills as I did not have proper tutoring." Still, she pushed on to perfect her shooting techniques – on her own.

### AIMING HIGH

It was not until her posting to the SAF TI Military Institute in 1974 that she finally started to make breakthroughs in her shooting. "There were many sharpshooters at the Pasir Laba Camp," she says. "As it was a training institute, there were coaches, too." The first thing she did when she arrived at SAF TI MI was to head straight for the shooting range. "I took an M16 and fired away," says the naturally instinctive shooter. "If I felt I wasn't doing something right, I would ask for advice from the shooters there."

She never stopped asking. Her dedication to the sport caught the attention of Abbas Abdullah, a shooting coach at SAF TI MI. "I was also always the first to report at the range. When Abbas saw that I was so interested, he became willing to teach me what he knew," says Khatijah. "Once he corrected my stance, I started shooting very well. Under Abbas' tutelage, I became a top M16 shooter in the SAF."

“EVERY NIGHT, I WOULD  
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MYSELF SHOOTING AT IT.”

Khatijah went on to win the SAF Small Arms Meet in 1977, 1978 and 1979. She cites this as one of the triumphs of her shooting life. "Although it was an internal competition, it was a major personal achievement to win the trophy. The award was only given out if you won for three consecutive years." The following year, she stopped competing in the M16 events.

### THE ABILITY TO ADAPT

Eventually, Khatijah turned her attention to the air pistol as Singapore wanted to field a women's shooting team for the 1983 Southeast Asian (SEA) Games. It was a move that would bring her international recognition. She says: "After I got through the trials, I was really fired up to do my best."

Though she was representing the country, Khatijah was still left to her own devices to train. She says: "In those days, there was no real emphasis on sports." But there were many challenges, such as learning how to shoot in a confined space after years with an M16. She also did not know how to draw

up a training programme. "Nor did I know how to peak. I would just go into the shooting range, pick up the air pistol and shoot. If I didn't shoot well on a certain day, I felt discouraged."

But shooting not only brought out Khatijah's stubborn streak to succeed, it also revealed an ability to adapt. "I just had to continue shooting," she says. "In fact, I told myself that I had to achieve, no matter what." So, she devised ways to improve. "I learned through trial and error. After observing how others shot, and asking them for advice, I had to adjust accordingly." Still, that presented problems. "Ultimately, the techniques that worked for them did not always work for me. I still had to improvise on my own."

Sheer determination won the day, as Khatijah picked up her first medal – a bronze in the 10-metre air pistol event at the 1983 SEA Games in Singapore. "Winning was exhilarating, of course," she says, clearly remembering the highs of her shooting days. That win soon set her on a steady trail of shooting achievements. In 1987, Khatijah won a silver medal in the SEA Games in Jakarta. By 1988, she was the only female representative from Singapore to compete in Seoul, Korea, for the 24th Olympics.

## HARD WORK REWARDS

Even then, Khatijah did not get a proper coach. "There was a visiting coach from Australia but he arrived only a month before the competition. By then, it was too late. There was simply not enough time for us to work together. He merely corrected my stance before returning to his home country."

The day she left for Seoul, she broke down in tears because she felt so unprepared. Even though she continued to train every day, her scores were dipping. Still, she relied on sheer hard work. She trained every day, even though she knew that she could have skipped the training – and no one would have realised.

Her rationale? There is no shortcut to success. She adds: "Every night, I would focus my gaze on a target on the wall and imagine myself shooting at it. I would do so at least 10 times before I allowed myself to fall asleep. This reminded me of the values of persistence and hard work that were crucial for success – in sports or life."

In the 10 days leading up to the competition, she suffered from insomnia. "My state of mind was bad, and I lost five kilograms due to stress during that time." She eventually shot a 361/400, finishing in the bottom two. For Khatijah, it was still an experience to remember. "The standard was obviously very high, but it was an honour to be able to compete."





Back home, Khatijah became the 1987 Sportswoman of the Year. She even shot a score of 380/400 at the Mount Vernon range in June 1986 during the SAF 125th Anniversary Meet, a record that remains unbroken to this day. Gold came her way too in the SEA Games Championships. "1988 was a good year for me," Khatijah laughs. "If only such years came around more often!" She went on to compete in the 1990 Asian Games in Beijing and the 1991 SEA Games in Manila where she won a silver.

### GETTING OFF THE TRIGGER

For her contributions to the shooting scene, the Singapore Armed Forces Sports Association (SAFSA) awarded Khatijah with a 30th Anniversary Special Commendation in 1998. But not everyone took pride in her achievements.

Over the years, her colleagues at the dental clinic grew unhappy with the time she took off for competitions. Finally, in 2002, her boss issued an ultimatum to Khatijah to stop shooting. "I had to comply," she says. That decision took a lot out of Khatijah, who describes competitive shooting as "being in my blood". She adds: "When I stopped shooting competitively, there was a big void in my life."

In the end, the routine work at the dental clinic got to her, and she started taking up courses to improve herself. She eventually left the army in 2009, and is now a tour guide with the Singapore Tourism Board.

Now a grandmother of two, Khatijah understands that all good things come to an end. Looking back at her glory days, she says: "Competitive shooting helped me to keep fit, stay focused and achieve my goals through the years. It would be an understatement to say that the sport shaped my life."

## VALUES

Perseverance • Discipline • Passion • Tenacity

## REFLECTION

1. Khatijah wanted to excel in shooting so much that she “turned a blind eye” to the obstacles. Do you have such a passion – one that you’re prepared to sacrifice for and stay true to, despite all challenges?
2. There is no shortcut to success, as Khatijah’s story has shown. What do you do when your efforts do not produce the outcomes you desired? Does your resilience motivate you to try again? Do you reconsider your priorities and shift your direction? How do you evaluate your options?

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# THE STEADFAST DEFENDER

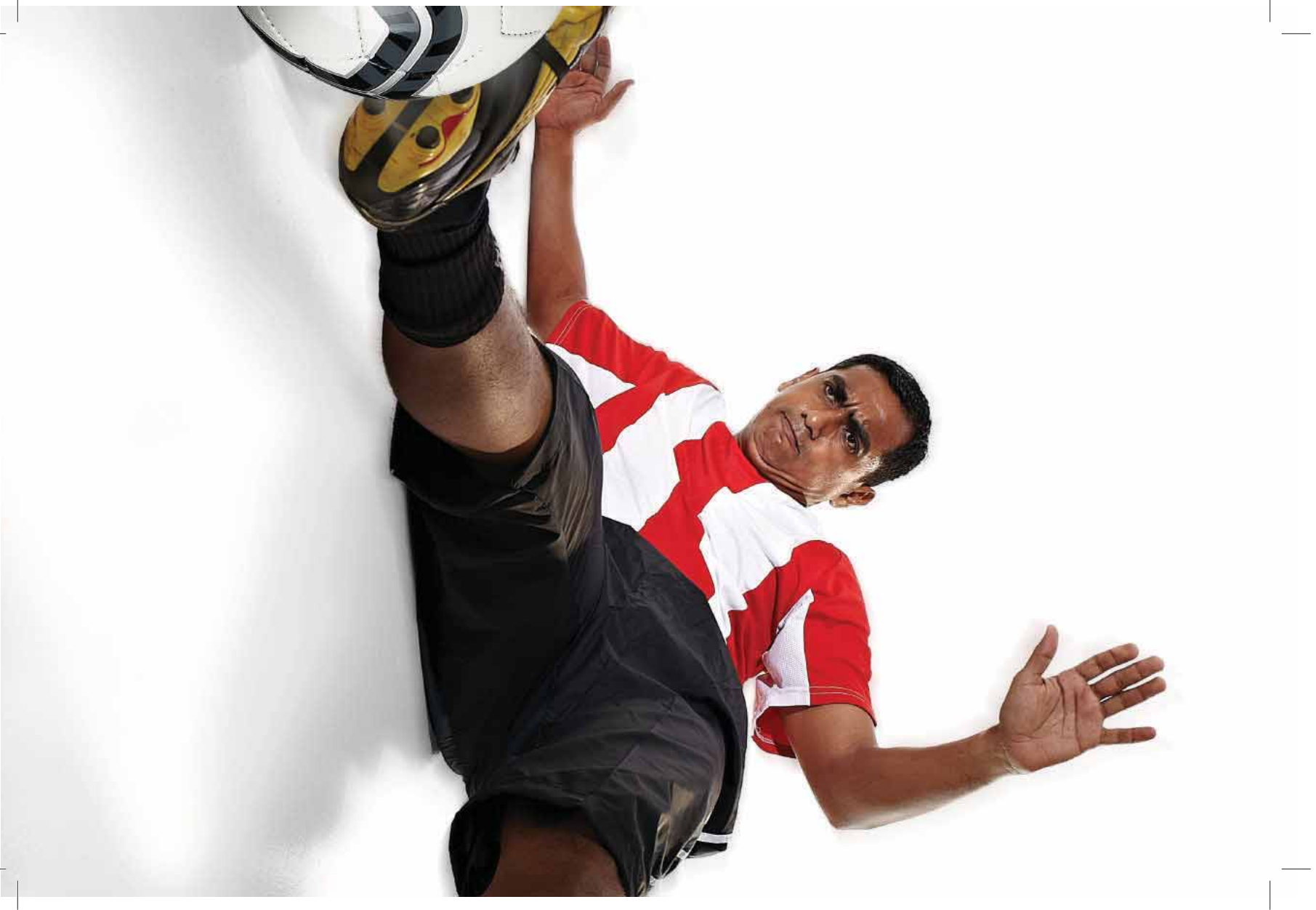
As part of the Lions' "Dream Team" in the 1990s, former national footballer **KADIR YAHAYA** tackled his way to fame and glory on the pitch. Today, he is a coach dedicated to using the sport as a platform to instil the right values in young players.

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If you have the chance to meet Kadir Yahaya in person, you will understand why he excelled as the tough-as-nails defender of the Singapore Lions in his heyday. In his role, he was never flashy, preferring to do his job quietly out of the limelight.

"A defender is an unglamorous role," says Kadir in his characteristically soft-spoken way. "He can make 10 tackles with no mention of it in the newspaper report after the match. But when he fails in one tackle, and the opposing striker scores, he gets the blame." Not that it has ever put off the man from trying to become





the best defender in town.

As a professional footballer, Kadir's teammates knew him as a remarkably disciplined player who would never allow himself to slacken. Whenever he ran – be it during training or the Cooper Test (a physical fitness test that requires an athlete to run as far as possible in 12 minutes) – he always pushed himself to be first. For an eight o'clock training in the morning, 44-year-old Kadir would turn up at seven. And he had Manchester United manager, Alex Ferguson, to thank for that.

"I read his book, 'The 90-Minute Manager'," says Kadir, who is now a school football coach. "I was so amazed by his passion and dedication to football. He wrote about waking up at 5.30 a.m. every morning and reaching the training grounds by 7 a.m. There, he would walk around to greet each and every staff, from the laundry lady to the team members."

At that time, Kadir told himself that he would replicate what Ferguson had done. "These little practices were what made him extraordinary, and the only difference between him and me was that he was in Europe while I was in Singapore." He believed that he could do the same. And with the right qualities and attitude, he would become a good defender. For Kadir, a good defender goes beyond a good tackle. He adds: "He has to be disciplined, diligent and determined."

## DISCIPLINED TRAINING

As a boy, Kadir was naturally drawn to sports. Whenever his school's annual Sports Day rolled by, he would enthusiastically participate in as many events as he could. "I ran in middle-distance and cross-country races," he recalls. "I was also in the school's sepak takraw and football team."

Of all the sports, football was his chosen love. And it was not just because he relished kicking a ball around with his friends at void decks. In a way, football was a way for young Kadir to remember his father, who passed away when he was in Primary One. "I had a photograph of him posing with his team after a friendly match, and it remained etched in my mind. Later, I found out from my mother that he was a recreational goalkeeper and enjoyed the sport."

Like his father, Kadir played recreationally until the age of 15, when a friend persuaded him to go for the trials at Geylang International (now Geylang United). He was then selected to join the under-16 division. He considers himself fortunate, especially since that period is what many consider to be the golden age of local football.

“Geylang United had amazing players like Fandi Ahmad and Malek Awab, and they really inspired me,” says Kadir. “I used to watch them play football on television, and joining the club meant I had the chance to get up close and personal with them. If they even so much as spoke a word to me, I would be so encouraged.”

Beyond these “fanboy” moments, the football pitch became an outdoor classroom for Kadir. He picked up many worthy life lessons just by observing his seniors. Once, he happened to arrive early for his training at the football club. As he was changing into his gear, he noticed a lone player conducting his own shooting practice. “After a while, I realised it was none other than Fandi. At that time, he was already a well-known player, but still he set a good example by showing up early and training on his own. That left a deep impression on me, and it was the first time I understood what discipline was all about.”

That lesson came in useful. By then, he was training daily and playing matches on weekends. Whether it was a training session or a match, he was always on time – if not early. But juggling schoolwork on the side was physically exhausting and mentally taxing. Fortunately, he knew discipline – and embraced it.

“I made sure that I didn’t neglect my schoolwork even as I played football.” As he persevered, his passion for the sport kept him going. “In those days, euphoria for Singapore football was at an all-time high, so I knew I was living every boy’s dream.” He felt strongly that he had a future in football – and was ready to go all out.

“IT WAS MY  
RESPONSIBILITY TO  
STICK TO THE STRIKER  
LIKE A LEECH.”

## MORAL GUIDANCE

At Geylang United, Kadir found a mentor that he could rely on. Throughout his years at the Vocational and Industrial Training Board (VITB), now the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) Bedok, the then-chairman of the club, Patrick Ang, ensured that the talented teen turned out right.

He would call Kadir at home after training to make sure that he wasn’t hanging out in clubs, smoking or doing anything that would be detrimental to his budding football career. Kadir adds: “He even stepped in to help when I couldn’t pay my school fees as my mother was struggling to raise three children and care for my bedridden grandmother.” Football, it seemed, had given Kadir the father figure he needed.

Through facing such challenges, Kadir grew up imbued with the right values – and progressed gradually in football, moving up to the feeder squad before reaching the first team. When he was 24, an offer came in from the Football Association of Selangor, one of Singapore’s traditional rivals during the Malaysia Cup days. The young professional was tempted to take it up. “I felt that I could earn more money and win more fame,” says Kadir. “But Patrick gently pulled me back to the ground, and told me that I would be able to achieve more in football if I stayed with Gaylang United.”

That turned out to be a wise decision. Over time, Kadir matured not just as a person, but also as a footballer. As a right-back, he was known for his flawless man-marking skills that would nullify opposing strikers. “I was taught by my coach never to let a striker go,” says Kadir. “His exact words were: ‘Even if he runs off the pitch to the toilet, you follow him there.’”

For Kadir, his role was straightforward: To outwit and outplay the opposing strikers. He explains: “It was my responsibility to stick to the striker like a leech. If he didn’t score during those 90 minutes, I’d have done my job.”

“SPORT IS NOT ALWAYS ABOUT THE WINNING. IT IS AN EFFECTIVE PLATFORM TO INSTILL THE RIGHT VALUES IN YOUTHS.”

And that was all that mattered. In his playing days, he was often dubbed “The Shadow”, silently working on the field to impact the outcome of the game.

By the early 1990s, Kadir was in his element. With him, there was a solid line-up in the national team consisting of seasoned players like Fandi Ahmad, V. Sundramoorthy and Malek Awab. Dubbed “The Dream Team”, they would go on to mount a serious challenge for the 1993 Malaysia Cup. “We made it to the Malaysia Cup finals, and played against Kedah,” remembers Kadir. “I even told my mother before the match that I would reward myself with a new second-hand car if I won.”

But victory was not meant to be. The “Dream Team” lost 2-0 to Kedah in the final. It was a crushing defeat, made worse by how fans and the Singapore public were hyped up for success. “Our dream crumbled in 90 minutes. After the loss, I went on my knees and cried. The first thought I had was how confident I had appeared in front of my mother,” says Kadir, his voice noticeably lowered. It was the lowest point of Kadir’s career, one from which he was not sure he would be able to bounce back.



## STAGING A COMEBACK

The following year, the Singapore Lions returned to the training ground. For Kadir, it was after months of cooping himself up at home and avoiding the media glare. In the meantime, he had come to the realisation that in football – and indeed, life itself – things couldn't be taken for granted. "Even if you are confident, there may be other factors that will influence the result."

That said, he was determined not to lose again. The team and the country came together, and training resumed with a strong dose of indomitable spirit. "The coach got senior players like Fandi and Malek to give us pep talks. They told us to forget about the defeat, and focus on doing better the next time." Kadir adds: "The way they carried themselves professionally, and that attitude of refusing to be second best, spurred me to train harder." The "Dream Team" went on to win the 1994 Malaysia Cup final against Pahang.

In 2001, Kadir sustained an anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injury in the knee. The condition, commonly seen in athletes, meant that he would not be able to play for a year. At the height of his football career, Kadir now had to consider retiring. "It was crushing news. I hadn't prepared for life after football." He eventually decided to switch roles and become a coach.

The transition was not easy. Kadir had to take a pay cut, half of what he used to earn as a professional player. Thirty-three years old and newly married, Kadir drove a second-hand Datsun and lived in a five-room Housing & Development Board (HDB) flat. "I had many bills to pay, and had to drastically readjust my life," says the man. "My wife even had to return to work." The fortunate thing was that Kadir had been frugal all his life.

"I had a small Malay wedding at the void deck and never bought flashy cars," says Kadir. Even today, he only buys training software and books when they are on sale. He attributes these penny-wise habits as something he picked up indirectly from football. Growing up, he would train very hard – just to be able to receive a brand new kit from Geylang United. "I would not have been able to afford football boots otherwise." That was a life lesson learned early, and it ended up serving him well when he decided on a career change.

Over the years, Kadir has coached at the Singapore Sports School, St. Joseph's Institution (SJI) and helmed the Singapore Youth Olympic Games (YOG) football team to a bronze medal in 2010. He was also the assistant coach of LionsXII until December 2012, working with former teammate, V. Sundramoorthy.

## INSTILLING VALUES

He not only sees coaching as a job but also grew to truly appreciate the role.

“Coaching children and youth gives me greater joy and satisfaction, without the pressure and limelight,” says Kadir, who adds that he has a different approach from most coaches.

Instead of pushing the schoolboys towards a desired match result, he believes in cultivating character while drilling them in football skills. “Sport is not always about the winning. It is an effective platform to instill the right values in youths,” he says earnestly. As a coach, Kadir first ensures that the boys learn how to balance their studies with sports – just like how he used to as a student.

Discipline aside, he takes great care to teach his boys about respect on and off the field. “A football team can be made up of boys of different races and religions, so I make sure they speak a common language – English,” he says. Kadir goes a step further by organising field trips to places of worship

**“ I THINK IT’S MORE IMPORTANT TO HAVE PLAYERS WHO ARE UPRIGHT AND RESPECTFUL INDIVIDUALS, THAN IT IS TO WIN.”**

like a Christian church, a Buddhist monastery, a Hindu temple and a Muslim mosque. “When they understand one another’s race and religion, they learn about mutual respect, and teamwork quickly follows.”

Building character in these boys is not always so straightforward. Kadir says: “Boys tend to play rough, and there will be times when they will shout at a referee or pick fights with the opposing team.” But under Kadir, the boys have learned how to control their tempers, or hold back an angry teammate if a scuffle happens on the field. “It is the coach’s responsibility to impart the right values.” For Kadir, these are the values that the boys will apply in their personal relationships and future careers.

In time, Kadir hopes that the life skills that football brings to the schoolboys will change their lives for the better. He says: “If a coach only focuses on the results, he may be able to churn out winners on the pitch. But off it, he may get players who will scold the referee or pick fights. I think it’s more important to have players who are upright and respectful individuals, than it is to win. So, for me, it’s a personal challenge to see how I can guide these youths well with football.” And with his holistic approach, disciplined manner and can-do spirit, this certainly looks like an achievable feat.

## VALUES

Discipline • Diligence • Respect • Loyalty

## REFLECTION

1. Kadir Yahaya was a defender for the national football team. Defence lacks the glamour of leadership, but Kadir knew he could have a crucial impact on the success of his team – if he played his role to the best of his ability. How do you handle supporting roles? Do you resent being a subordinate? Or do you see the importance of doing your job well for the good of the team?
2. What are the values that have helped you in your studies or career? How do you apply these values in your professional life? Have you coached others on the importance of commitment to purpose or discipline in action?

# LEARNING FIELD

As a former national hockey player, **MELANIE ANN MARTENS** learned powerful lessons that have served her well in work and life. The principal of St. Anthony's Canossian Secondary School now uses sport as a tool to get her students ready for life's challenges.

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It was 1994 at the Asian Games in Hiroshima, Japan. The night before the hockey game against South Korea, Melanie Ann Martens could not sleep. She tossed and turned in bed, knowing that the game would be a tough one. She recalls: "They were world champions, while our team was ranked a lowly 144th. Everyone said we were going to lose."

Melanie's fear continued to haunt her in the hours leading up to the game, and she found it difficult to face up to the challenge. But when the time came, she calmed her nerves and stepped onto the field. "I kept telling myself to just put one foot in front of the other and get out there to play," says the 53-year-old, adding that all that her team wanted was to put a single goal past their opponents. "Even if we were going to lose, we were going to put up a



good fight until the final whistle was blown.”

Ultimately, Melanie scored that goal, even though South Korea won the match by 7-1. “It was a wonderful reverse flick that I remember to this day.” For her, that was one of the defining moments of her sporting career – never mind that her team lost that game. She says resolutely: “I realised that it didn’t matter that we lost. What mattered more was that we conquered our fear of competing against the best, stepped onto the field and did our best.”

For Melanie, losing has turned out to be an important life lesson. “Sport teaches you how to manage failure because this failure is never final. It’s the same thing with work, relationships and life. If you fail at work or in love, you don’t jump off a building. You see how you can do better the next time.” It is precisely this attitude that Melanie, now the principal of St. Anthony’s Canossian Secondary School, strives to instil in her students.

Work-wise, this is one of Melanie’s biggest challenges. “Singaporean parents often link sports with earning power. If their children can’t make a living doing sports, they don’t go out of their way to encourage them to do it,” observes Melanie, who feels that this mindset must be changed. She adds: “Australian parents, on the other hand, cheer their children on in sports, but do not need them to become the next Ian Thorpe. Instead, they use sports to develop skills and build character in their children – because they recognise that sports can prepare their children for life.”

## BUILDING CHARACTER

An active and lively girl, Melanie was exposed to sports from a young age. “My father was a hockey coach at St. Joseph’s Institution (SJI), while my mother was the teacher-in-charge of hockey at CHIJ St. Theresa’s Convent. They brought me to all their school games like the SJI clashes with Raffles Institution,” reminisces Melanie. “I felt the school rivalry and the passion that the players had for their sport. I wanted to be a part of it.”

When Melanie’s father cut an adult-sized hockey stick to a suitable length for her, she spent hours hitting a ball in the front yard of her home. “I broke a few flower pots in the process,” she laughs. She soon got hooked on hockey, and made the school team when she started at CHIJ St. Theresa’s Convent. That hockey was a team game enthralled her. “I’m a people person, I feel

energised by people.” As she practised, she also discovered that she enjoyed the technical skills and strategic aspects of the sport. Melanie says: “I had to think a few steps ahead and run through the game in my mind so that I could be quick enough to make the right passes on the field.”

Clearly a talented player, Melanie says she owes everything to her former school coach, V. K. Chekvan. “He trained me in football, balancing and dribbling. He taught me how to play the game beautifully,” she says wistfully. “Because of him, I could hold my own against top players.”

But Melanie admits that she was not always the most gracious of losers in her youth. “I was highly competitive and always wanted to win. If we lost, I would be sulking,” she says. Fortunately, her mother – who often umpired hockey matches at CHIJ St. Theresa’s Convent – was there to keep her in check. “If she thought I showed my temper too much, she had no qualms about sending me off the field. I used to get so mad about that, but now, I know that when we lose gracefully, we maintain a sense of self-respect as an athlete.”

**“SPORT TEACHES YOU HOW TO MANAGE FAILURE BECAUSE THIS FAILURE IS NEVER FINAL.”**

She cites former Raffles Institution goalkeeper Graham Ng as her role model. “He always gave as good as he got but would never deliberately take out an opposing player. He never failed to carry himself with dignity during the game.” So, Melanie emulated his gentlemanly behaviour, and gradually curbed her feisty nature on the field. “I realised that I had a duty to everyone who was watching me play. I had to carry myself well out of respect for them.”

When Melanie went on to Raffles Institution and National University of Singapore (NUS), she continued her involvement with sports. “Besides hockey, I ran relays and hurdles in track meets, threw javelin and played tennis. I felt very lonely training for these events though, and realised quickly that team games suited me more.” At NUS, she even learned swimming at the relatively late age of 24. She had broken her elbow during a hockey game and was advised by her doctor to swim as a form of therapy. “A friend patiently taught me how to swim, helping me overcome my initial fear of water. I still don’t swim very well, but at least I can swim now.”

## PAYOFFS IN HARD WORK

As a 23-year-old, Melanie represented Singapore in the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games in 1983. She then went on to play in the 1989 SEA Games in Kuala

Lumpur, Malaysia, where the New Straits Times reported that she “gave the Malaysians several uncomfortable moments before the more experienced defending champions asserted their superiority” and won the match.

Besides Melanie’s skilful play and gung-ho determination on the field, her “take-charge” temperament meant that she was often mistaken for the captain of the team. In her time, the women’s national hockey team was widely considered as one of the best Singapore had ever had. But the team had never beaten long-time rival, Malaysia, at a tournament level. “Sure, we’d won in friendly matches, but we kept losing to them in the SEA Games,” says Melanie.

When the 1993 SEA Games drew near, the team threw themselves into intense training. For Melanie, working hard was the only way that she and her team members could have a chance against Malaysia. As the months wore on, Melanie would push herself to train according to schedule every day. “I asked myself: ‘Do I really want to train this hard?’ And the answer was a resounding yes. So, if I had planned to run seven kilometres under 35 minutes, I would not allow myself to get away without doing it.”

Yet, it was inevitable for the team to feel discouraged at times, and that was when sport psychologist Peter Usher entered the picture. “He came to our training and said: ‘I’m looking for the best team in Southeast Asia.’” The team scoffed at his question. Melanie recalls: “Someone sheepishly said: ‘I think you need to look across the Causeway then!’”

But Peter was convinced that Singapore had a good chance, and he gradually turned the situation around. They continued training hard, but added sport psychology exercises to the mix. “We learned to take the focus off the results and concentrated more on the journey of training,” says Melanie. “It became less about winning or losing, and more about improving our skills.”

Team coach Margaret Pierce also showed them how they could play to one another’s strengths. Melanie explains: “For instance, I always attract opposing defenders during the game. So, we decided that I wouldn’t try to score. Instead, whenever they tried to tackle me, I would slip the ball off to my teammates and let them go for the goal instead.”

With that collaborative strategy, Melanie would not have had the glory of scoring. But she didn’t mind. “We had the same vision of winning, and everyone had a different role to play.” The team eventually beat Malaysia to achieve Singapore’s first and only SEA Games gold medal that year. “Victory was sweet,” reminisces Melanie. “Just sweet.”

From that experience, Melanie realised that as long as she was willing to





work hard without obsessing over the end-goal, she could achieve whatever she set out to do. And that's what she often tells her students at school. "I've taught them to focus more on the learning process instead of the number of As on the report card. I may be competitive, but it's more important to equip my students with skills that will last them a lifetime."

### LEADERSHIP IN SPORTS

Besides diligence, Melanie also gained fresh perspectives on teamwork and leadership. "Margaret taught me to value the strengths of others," she says. "This is something that I've since tried to do on a daily basis as I work with the teachers and staff at St. Anthony's. For instance, I think conceptually, but appreciate how some of my staff are better with processes."

Beyond the confines of the staff office, Melanie has worked methodically to change the school's vibe for the better. When she first arrived in 2007, she wanted her students and staff to enjoy coming to school. "I knew then that

**“IT'S MORE IMPORTANT TO EQUIP MY STUDENTS WITH SKILLS THAT WILL LAST THEM A LIFETIME.”**

I wanted to make the school a happy place that students would enjoy coming to in the morning. " With that, she decided to focus on the students' emotional well-being instead of pushing them to achieve stellar results for the school's benefit

—just like how she trained for that 1993 SEA Games match in her youth. She started treating her students as individuals, listening to them and sharing sporting anecdotes to motivate and inspire.

Under her charge, the school's physical education (PE) programme has also seen the addition of fun sports like windsurfing, floorball, lacrosse and gymnastics. During weekdays, it is not uncommon to see Melanie dropping in on students' PE lessons. "The sports field is right behind my office, so sometimes, I join in the fun," laughs Melanie.

"I want the students to be participants, not spectators. And it's been great. We've seen the teens doing gymnastic routines from the Olympics based on YouTube videos, even though they have never trained in the sport before! We should never underestimate teenagers and what they can do." She believes in letting her students know how good they are, as well as encouraging them to learn and grow. Melanie, who no longer plays hockey because of a knee injury, says: "Six years on, I'm proud to say that St. Anthony's is a happier place. Now, even if there is graffiti, the doodles are of smiley faces!"

In parting, Melanie reveals what her greatest wish as an educator is. “Like what I’ve learned from hockey, I’ve taken my mind off the goal of being a successful principal. What matters more to me is that my students realise just how good they can be if they work really hard.”

### VALUES

Respect • Diligence • Mental Toughness • Teamwork • Leadership

### REFLECTION

1. Melanie faced one of her greatest challenges during the game between Singapore and Malaysia at the 1993 SEA Games. For Melanie, several factors came together to help Singapore win Singapore’s first gold medal in hockey that year. She worked hard personally, relied on the strength of the team and leveraged off the coach and sport psychologist. How have you, as a leader, expressed your faith and confidence in your team members? What kind of impact did you leave when you reinforced the capabilities of your team members to contribute to the success of the team?
2. Melanie pays tribute to her parents for encouraging their children to be active in sport. Her parents were early adopters of sport as a means of developing character and life skills in children. What kind of role model have you been for your child? Have you been active in sport to stimulate your child’s participation? What values do you demonstrate to your child through your daily behaviour?

# THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE SAILOR

Former Olympic sailor **TAN WEARN HAW** became the Chief Executive Officer at the Singapore Sailing Federation in 2011. At 32, he was the youngest person to lead a national sports association here. The forward-looking man shares how sailing has shaped his character and shown him the world.

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**W**hen you first meet Tan Wearn Haw, what immediately strikes you is his swarthy, sunburnt skin. We are at a café at Craig Road in the heart of town, but the former national sailor looks as if he has just returned from sea. However that isn't the case. Instead, Wearn Haw has actually come from a meeting. Since he took up the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) position at the Singapore Sailing Federation (SSF), he has been focusing on his role within the organisation instead of sailing at sea.

"Sailing is just like running an organisation," the 34-year-old explains. "An organisation doesn't operate in a vacuum, so there is an external environment that a CEO cannot change. Likewise, in





sailing, there are conditions beyond a sailor's control, like the wind." He adds: "Then, there are the people within the organisation, like the crew. Put two and two together, and essentially, a CEO – like a skipper – has to learn how to harness the crew's ability on board to deal with external conditions in order to move ahead."

An accomplished sailor, he was not only the winner of the inaugural Optimist Asian Championship in 1990, but also a multiple Southeast Asian (SEA) and Asian Games medallist. In 2000, a 22-year-old Wearn Haw stepped onto the world stage to compete in the Sydney Olympic Games. He eventually progressed to the America's Cup – sailing's most prestigious event – in Valencia, Spain, in 2007.

Despite his long list of sailing accolades, Wearn Haw is reluctant to share at length about his sporting accomplishments. The soft-spoken father-of-one merely states: "Once in the water, I can be very competitive." Perhaps preferring to focus on his present role instead of past glories, he is more interested in discussing his future plans for the SSF, one of the highest-profile of the 64 national sports associations in Singapore. While he has held sports administrative positions in the then-Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) and the Singapore Sports School, his current role is his most challenging yet.

“SAILING IS TRULY  
MORE THAN JUST A SPORT  
- IT IS A LIFE SKILL.”

Since sailing was first introduced here over 40 years ago, it has gained much prominence and popularity. Medals have been won. Young talents have been selected and rigorously trained. "Today, Singapore is one of the top sailing nations in Asia," Wearn Haw notes. But having come so far, the SSF is striving towards the next challenge – an Olympic medal for the country.

As the CEO of SSF, Wearn Haw plays an active role in developing the sport in Singapore. He is responsible for building pathways for our next generation of sailors – and the one after them. To achieve this, Wearn Haw is returning to the basics. "Just like how sailing is about getting the fundamentals right, it is important that the right systems are first put in place – from sharing the sport with young children to establishing fair, open and robust selection processes to identify the best athletes." He acknowledges that his background in competitive sailing has served him well. "Sailing is truly more than just a sport – it is a life skill."

## SOLIDARITY IN SAILING

Wearn Haw credits his late father, Tan Yeok Keong, for putting the wind in his sails. A former national sailor and SEA Games gold medallist, the senior Tan used to sail at the Changi Sailing Club. As he navigated through the waters, a young Wearn Haw watched him while building sandcastles on the beach.

When the club offered a sailing course for children, he signed up immediately. "You could say it was a natural progression from sandcastle building," he laughs. Like most kids, Wearn Haw started out in the Optimist, a sailing dinghy popularly known as the "bathtub" because of its small size. As an adult, he would go on to become versatile in different classes, from single-handed to double-handed, windsurfing to keelboats, mega-yachts to Extreme 40 catamarans.

Everything about sailing intrigued the young boy. "Out in the waters, it was always such an adventure. I remember sailing from Changi to East Coast and being scared of big waves – everything just seemed bigger when you were kid-sized!" reminisces Wearn Haw. But he relished the independence that sailing brought him. "As children, we couldn't drive cars or pilot planes, but we could definitely sail."

Soon, Wearn Haw went on to join one of Singapore's earliest junior sailing programmes under the then-Optimist Dinghy Association of Singapore (ODAS). It was put into place by past sailing presidents like Ng Ser Miang, Peter Lim and Ong Siong Kai. As part of the pioneer batch of about 20 young sailors, Wearn Haw benefited from systematic training at club and national levels. "We trained on weekends and school holidays," says Wearn Haw. "We sailed, played and grew up together. We still keep in touch to this day."

Training closely with his fellow young sailors helped Wearn Haw to appreciate the value of teamwork early in life. "The adults at the club believed that young sailors should learn to do everything themselves. They never, ever helped to rig up the boats." Instead, the boys had to rely on one another, even going so far as to form teams of four to carry the boats onto the trolleys. "Working as a team rubbed off on me," says Wearn Haw of the strong camaraderie he felt with the other boys. "I grew to understand that I couldn't do everything myself, whether it's in sailing or running an organisation."

It was a valuable lesson. Even today, Wearn Haw recognises that different

“WORKING AS A TEAM  
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DO EVERYTHING MYSELF.”

people have different strengths. At SSF, he does not believe that he alone can run the ship. "I constantly seek advice from those who have more experience than I do in the sailing community," he explains, referring to sailors from the generation before him. "'Elders' like 'Uncle' Jason (SSF's Secretary General Jason Lim) and Dr. Benedict Tan (SSF's President), along with many more from both local and international sailing circles have given me much advice from the very start."

### **PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT**

Sailing quickly opened up Wearn Haw's world. At just eight years old, he raced in the National Optimist Championships, fighting strong waves in the waters off Changi during a northeast monsoon. "I finished in 11th place, with the skin on my knees all torn off." The next year, he got into the top five and was selected to compete in the World Championships in France in 1988.

It was Wearn Haw's maiden voyage overseas. "I felt intimidated, and not just because it was my first big trip out of Singapore," he says. "Besides having to contend with sailing in a totally foreign environment, the cold was also unbearable." The boy finished in the bottom 10, out of 160 boats. Still, it was a memorable experience, one that made him realise what the world had to offer.

With that, Wearn Haw started pushing himself hard. Although it was intense juggling school and sailing, he did not succumb to the stress. "Although my parents were both teachers, they cut me a lot of slack. I had no tuition, so I sailed," he says. Besides, sailing has always been more "pleasure than pressure" for Wearn Haw. Unsurprisingly, the Victoria Schoolboy sailed through the system with both straight As and sporting feats. His secret: Being prepared.

"In sailing, you can be stuck out in the stormy seas. If you're ill-prepared, you're putting yourself in danger. Before setting off, it's important to do the necessary preparative work, like checking the boat, the tides and weather forecast," explains Wearn Haw, who was crowned Sportsboy of the Year in 1993. "To me, practice makes perfect." He applied this line of thought to his studies, too. "I would prepare to the best of my ability so that I would be able to answer any question in the examinations."

When he turned 18, the Raffles Junior College (RJC) alumni member scored the prestigious Public Service Commission (PSC) Undergraduate Scholarship to read Aeronautical Engineering in France. He later graduated from Imperial College in London, United Kingdom, with a Master's degree



in Aeronautical Engineering. “I did not even do any ‘S’ papers, the usual prerequisite for a PSC scholarship, but my junior college principal put in an application based on my merits in sports, and perhaps his faith in me,” he says. “It was only through sailing that I had a shot at the scholarship, and a shot at moving up in life.”

During the late 1990s, Wearn Haw took a year-long sabbatical from his studies to focus on a full-time Olympic campaign. It was a struggle funding the campaign out of his pocket. “With my teammate, we slept in tents and hitchhiked during our campaign trail through Europe. I also saved money by munching on bread and salad all through the weeks,” he recounts.

“There were also numerous setbacks throughout the four-year campaign, such as having to battle through changing selection processes, selection politics and having my partner barred from sailing by the sailing administration just six months before the Olympics.” But, Wearn Haw admits that the overall experience was not that bad – it actually toughened him up. He eventually ranked 28th place in the men’s two-person dinghy event.

## HONING ADAPTABILITY

Then, news that his father was dying of colon cancer reached Wearn Haw after restarting the school term. From London, he flew back to Singapore immediately. For the next month, Wearn Haw stayed by his father’s bedside, tending to his every need until the end.

During this difficult time, it was windsurfing that helped him to weather the storm. At that time, Wearn Haw was taking a hiatus from sailing. “I started windsurfing at East Coast Beach – it was my way of getting some time to rest and recharge. Somehow, I enjoyed the sense of freedom in windsurfing – all I needed to get into the waters were my board shorts and a harness.” The sport eased the emotional turmoil that Wearn Haw felt. “I would sleep better after a windsurfing session.”

Wearn Haw went back into the boat in 2006. Armed with the aim to sail alongside world-class sailors like Chris Dickson, Wearn Haw took a two-year no-pay leave from MCYS – where he was a sports development officer – to join the 32nd America’s Cup in Valencia, Spain. Together with his former Olympic campaign teammate, Charles Lim, he made it into the Sino-French Challenger, China Team by *le défi*.

Wearn Haw achieved this by virtue of his engineering background and multilingual abilities – he had picked up French “. . . from zero to university level in just six months.” As part of the core group of the afterguard, he raced

first as a navigator, then as a strategist with the 17-men crew. "It was the first time I experienced the pressure of having to prove myself at every waking moment," says Wearn Haw. "We were all working towards the same goal – to win as a team, but we were also competing for places on the boat. And if I were to fall sick or get injured, I would lose my position on the boat. The team dynamics and the constant pressure provided a steep learning curve."

But Wearn Haw's experience as a youth sailor had built him up for the challenge. He says: "I made sure that I was always well-prepared, so that I could replicate what I'd done in training. But sailing is uncertain. So it's about prepping myself with ample skill sets – from technical knowledge to sailing tactics – and then dealing with what Mother Nature throws at me in the open water."

He compares this to life itself. "Thanks to sailing, I've been thrown into many different, and difficult, life situations, like moving to France without knowing the language and getting lost in the metro," he recalls. "It is only when you're thrown into the deep end that you can learn what you are truly capable of – sailing hones that sense of adaptability."

## GIVING BACK

From the America's Cup, Wearn Haw would continually add new sailing experiences like racing on mega-yachts to Extreme 40 catamarans around the world. As one of the most versatile sailors in Singapore today, he is the right man for the top seat at SSF.

But Wearn Haw reveals that – as in any sports association – "the paycheck doesn't justify the pressures." "Not everyone will agree with what you want to do, and problems will always crop up," he says. "It's a matter of gritting your teeth and dealing with it." It helps that Wearn Haw is motivated not by cash, but by his sheer passion for the sport and a willingness to serve.

He reveals that he took up the CEO position at SSF because of his desire to give back to the sport that has given him so much. "Many have the impression that sailing is a sport reserved for the privileged, but I actually came from a humble background," he reveals. "I grew up in a Housing & Development Board (HDB) flat, and went to a neighbourhood primary school (Teck Ghee Primary School). I only got a chance to sail because of the programmes that past presidents and stalwarts of SSF (then called the Singapore Yachting Association) have put in place."

Wearn Haw reflects openly that, without sailing, he would not have had the chance to study, work and live overseas, and experience the world. "My

story says a lot about what Singapore is. As long as you work hard, and grab opportunities that come your way, you will be able to succeed.” This success has spurred him on to make sure that everyone who wants to, will have a chance to sail and go further in life through sailing.

Suddenly, Wearn Haw recalls a time he chatted with a taxi driver in Auckland, New Zealand, when he was there for the Louis Vuitton Pacific Series after the 2007 America’s Cup. “He mentioned how much he enjoyed sailing and what the sport meant to the Kiwis, and we spent much of that car journey just sharing about the sport – as one fellow sailor to another. It was amazing to see that people can embrace sailing as a lifestyle. To me, that is Singapore’s utopia for sailing. There is still a long way to go, but with time, it can be achieved.”

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SENSE OF ADAPTABILITY.”

## VALUES

Teamwork • Discipline • Humility • Tenacity

## REFLECTION

1. Sailing taught Tan Wearn Haw the importance of teamwork. Whether it was sport or business, he learned that he could not do everything himself. What is your working style? Do you give yourself opportunities to work with and learn from others? Do you find it easier or harder to achieve outcomes in a collective environment? What are the key factors that determine the results?
2. How do you respond to change? Do you see change as an opportunity or a problem? How do your values come to bear in difficult situations?

# RULING THE GAME

As the second Singaporean referee to have ever officiated football matches at the FIFA World Cup, **SHAMSUL MAIDIN** has proven that top-level referees can emerge from a small country like ours. He reveals what refereeing has taught him about work ethics and family responsibility.

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**A**t Stadium Dortmund in Germany, Shamsul Maidin was getting ready to officiate his first international-level match at the 2006 FIFA World Cup – the group stage game between Trinidad & Tobago and Sweden. It was a good two hours before kick-off, but Shamsul preferred to be early. He had arrived, passing a frenzied, cheering crowd en route, earlier than the stipulated 90-minute allowance for referees.

There, Shamsul meticulously inspected the field of play, ensured that the ball used met FIFA requirements, and checked through the players' equipment, which included jerseys, shorts, socks, football boots, shin pads and gloves. "I believe in being well-prepared for



each and every match, ” says the 47 -year-old: “One of the most important qualities refereeing has taught me is discipline, which led me to fulfilling my dream role as a World Cup referee the best I can. ”

That was a day to remember for Shamsul, who later brandished the first red card of the tournament to Trinidad & Tobago’s Avery John at the 46th minute and sent him off: “There were no complaints about the decision, ” he says. “After that match, people congratulated me for being brave enough to hand out the first red card of the 2006 FIFA World Cup. ” The defining decision of the 0-0 draw thrust Shamsul into the spotlight.

Shamsul also refereed the group stage game between Mexico and Angola, where he sent off Angola’s André Macanga with another red card, becoming the first referee to produce two red cards. He then went on to referee the Poland-Costa Rica group stage game, making him the first referee to officiate three games in the tournament.

But his reputation as a referee goes beyond the mere handing out of cards.

The two-time Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Referee of the Year is widely recognised as one of Asia’s best-ever referees, and helped raise the profile of refereeing in Asia. For Shamsul, who only started refereeing seriously at the age of 25, reaching the World Cup was a dream come true. He is the second Singaporean referee to achieve the feat, after George Suppiah in 1974. In his distinctive soft-spoken way, he says: “To be able to represent Singapore was a great honour. ”

## LEARNING DISCIPLINE

As a boy, Shamsul’s youthful enthusiasm for football made perfect sense. His father, Maidin Singah, was a FIFA referee and brought him to support local football matches, especially those he refereed. Shamsul remembers the matches as great times of bonding for his family and friends: “We had a lot of fun, ” reminisces Shamsul. “In particular, the Malaysia Cup matches were memorable to me. The atmosphere at each game was electrifying. ”

It was only natural that Shamsul started playing football in secondary school. He did so all through National Service (NS), when he was in the Singapore Police Force (SPF) and played at the premier league level. But he acknowledges that he was never talented enough to enter the national team. “We had nine national players, including three goalkeepers, on the police team, so I was always on the substitutes’ bench. ”

Still, he did not stop playing. “It was competitive, but I didn’t give up

because of the love and passion I had for football." One thing that pushed him on was the camaraderie he felt on and off the pitch. "We trained daily, and played matches on weekends. It was a sport that kept my friends and I together throughout my NS life," says Shamsul. "Even now, when I sit down to have a meal with friends, conversation revolves around football."

When Shamsul realised that he was not able to go far in professional football, he decided to adapt to a different role – refereeing. "I was very inspired by my father, who became a top referee," says Shamsul. "He went to the Asian Cup, and even reached the pre-World Cup level. But he had to retire then because of an injury in his Achilles tendon." Shamsul was certain that with his father's blessings and guidance, he too could become a top-level referee some day.

In 1990, he took up the Referees Basic Course at the Football Association of Singapore (FAS). It was a five-day certified course that covered both the theoretical and practical aspects of refereeing. "After that, I became a Class 3 referee, and was given low-level local matches to officiate," says Shamsul. He was also fortunate to have his father by his side to guide him along.

"In a sense, he was my 'personal coach' in refereeing. When I was learning about the role, he showed me relevant DVDs and did a lot of personal analysis for me."

Shamsul improved gradually, but it was his father's disciplined work ethic that would eventually rub off on him. He says: "Growing up, I tagged along with my father whenever he refereed. I even ironed his jersey and polished his boots before every match." That was an early introduction into the game of discipline for Shamsul. "I watched him prepare thoroughly for every match, and realised that was why he commanded a lot of respect as a referee both locally and internationally. He often told me that referees have to embrace professionalism through discipline, commitment and attitude, both on and off the pitch."

“REFEREES HAVE TO EMBRACE PROFESSIONALISM THROUGH DISCIPLINE, COMMITMENT AND ATTITUDE, BOTH ON AND OFF THE PITCH.”

## MANAGING MATCHES

Shamsul, a rookie referee, was soon assigned challenging matches. He performed consistently and rose to become a Class 1 referee in 1995. "There was a lot of talk because my father was, by then, the secretary for the referee

committee. But we decided to stay focused, do our jobs and let my actions do the talking.”

A year later, Shamsul officiated his first international tournament – the AFC Asian Cup in Abu Dhabi. He would go on to feature in two more Asian Cups in 2000 and 2004, as well as the 2001 and 2003 FIFA World Youth Championship.

Shamsul has always stood out on the pitch as a referee who does not flaunt his authority. For him, refereeing goes beyond the mere flashing of yellow or red cards. “I prefer to manage the players within the laws of the game,” says Shamsul. “I believe in speaking to errant players and giving them a chance first. But if they refuse to listen, I will go ahead with the necessary disciplinary action.”

Doing so was not always easy, especially in major matches where the tempo was high and bags of prize money were at stake. Still, Shamsul carried himself with confidence – and was never ruffled by player aggression. “I’ve met players who got upset and would shout vulgarities if they were unhappy

**“IT’S NOT EASY TO JUGGLE DIFFERENT LIFE RESPONSIBILITIES, BUT REFEREEING HAS EQUIPPED ME WITH SKILLS TO DO SO.”**

I would try to bring the tempo down – just like how a conductor would lead his orchestra – by speaking to them calmly. Most players respond better to that.”

At 29, Shamsul was appointed a FIFA referee. He was the

youngest-ever referee to reach that level. That year, he was assigned to officiate at the AFC Under-16 Football Championship Finals and the 2000 Asian Cup. Coincidentally, the 2000 Asian Cup reaffirmed the importance of proper planning – not just in refereeing but also in family responsibility. Shamsul recalls: “The timing of the match coincided with my daughter’s approaching birth. Even though I had to be away, I made sure I did everything in my power to ensure that my wife would have a smooth delivery. We decided on a date for the caesarean, checked with the gynaecologist and also arranged for my parents to be around to tend to her needs,” says Shamsul, who only saw his child seven days after her birth.

While the doting father of three still feels that he missed out on the birth of his only daughter, Shamsul believes in managing any life situation the best he can. “It’s not easy to juggle different life responsibilities, but refereeing has equipped me with skills to do so. Like understanding how planning and preparation can lead to success,” says Shamsul. “As my father used to tell





me: 'If you fail to prepare, prepare to fail.'"

In 2004, FIFA announced Shamsul as a World Cup candidate. Two years later, he was one of the seven referees from Asia. From then on, it was a whirlwind of training and thorough preparations for the biggest event in football. He joined the Singapore Sports Council (SSC) formally as a physiotherapist's assistant, but was allowed to devote most of his time to training. "SSC gave me a lot of support, putting together a team consisting of a nutritionist, sport psychologist and even an FAS national coach to train me."

For the young man, each and every match was a learning journey. "The harder I trained for the World Cup in 2006, the more I learned. For instance, following the comprehensive programme that SSC set out for me made me realise what discipline was all about," explains Shamsul. Managing such a world-level match also honed his ability to handle pressure. "I was a little lost when I blew the first whistle. But 10 minutes into the first match, I knew I would do okay as I had prepared amply for it." That same year, Shamsul was also the only non-African referee at the Africa Cup of Nations.

## GIVING HIS ALL

Shamsul would have gone on to officiate at his fourth Asian Cup in 2007, but a knee injury five days before the tournament forced him to pull out. "While training for it, I sustained a severe tear to the meniscus of my left knee. I knew I wouldn't be able to give 100% to the role even if I went, so I decided to retire from the scene."

Shamsul has no regrets retiring at the relatively young age of 41. He says: "Having conducted FIFA World Cup matches, I felt that I had reached the highest level of my career. That was enough for me." But he was not about to let football go, and took on key roles in AFC and later, FAS.

In 2008, FIFA announced his appointment as a referee instructor. He was the first referee from Southeast Asia (SEA) to work in that capacity with the international association. Shamsul, who is still with FIFA now, shares: "Educating referees has proven to be challenging work." But it is a challenge he relishes. His role involves looking after the World Cup referee candidates all over the world from a tactical perspective. For the 2010 World Cup, Shamsul was elated to travel to South Africa as a referee instructor.

Today, Shamsul is hopeful about the refereeing scene in Singapore. He observes: "Singapore has four elite referees now. That's not bad for a small country. In Japan, there are six, while Malaysia has two." Still, Shamsul feels

that more can be done to groom potential elite referees who possess the three Fs: Fitness, Fairness, and Firmness. He adds: “A good referee has to be fit enough to run throughout the 90-minute duration of a match, be fair to all players without fear or favour, and stand firm when making decisions.”

As Shamsul does his part to groom young referees, he strives to pass on the life lessons he has learned from refereeing. “I do a lot of sharing as I lead them, but I also keep the communication two-way,”

“DREAMS CAN COME TRUE  
AS LONG AS YOU STRIVE  
FOR EXCELLENCE.”

says Shamsul. “I like to give them the chance to speak their minds, and guide them to the right solutions.” It is his dream that more Singaporean referees can make it to the World Cup. “I always tell younger referees that if I can achieve the goal of reaching the World Cup, so can they – dreams can come true as long as you strive for excellence.”

## VALUES

Discipline • Fairness • Humility • Perseverance • Leadership

## REFLECTION

1. Shamsul was motivated to become a FIFA World Cup referee by his father who taught him the importance of discipline, professionalism and hard work. Who have been your role models in life? How did they influence your values and choices in life? Have you been a role model to others? What values have you shared?
2. Managing others is not an easy feat as it requires soft skills such as humility and fairness. Shamsul has been able to manage the expectations of top-class players at the FIFA World Cup in addition to his fellow referees. What are your personal values that have helped you in managing people and relationships successfully?



# FIGHTING SPIRIT

For 12 years, wushu exponent and Southeast Asian (SEA) Games gold medallist **TAO YI JUN** was in perpetual pursuit of perfect form and focus. Now a physics teacher, the petite 28-year-old strives to impart the life lessons learned from sports to her students.

**F** or a fraction of a second, Tao Yi Jun stood still on the competition carpet. With a *taijijian* (straight sword) in hand, she breathed evenly, focused on the moment when the routine would start. The minute it did, she set out in a series of choreographed movements – each one executed with a fluid, almost poetic, quality.

During this timed *taolu* (routine) at the 2006 Asian Games in Doha, Qatar, Yi Jun was a picture of poise. But she failed to impress the nine judges and was placed in 11th position with a score of 9.35. She was crushed. To train for the competition, the then-21-year-old Yi Jun had taken a semester off from National University of Singapore (NUS), where she was studying Electrical & Computer Engineering. She says: “I did my best to concentrate on my

routine, but I still fell short of my competitors' standards."

But Yi Jun did not stay discouraged for long. With a morale boost from her coach and teammates, she decided to strive harder to achieve a good *taolu*, characterised by fluid, graceful and powerful movements that must be carried out according to strict aesthetic, technical and conceptual guidelines. "It has a lot to do with focus," she explains. "A wushu exponent has to concentrate hard so that there is an unbroken thread of intent from one movement to the next."

So, Yi Jun threw herself into intense training, all the while juggling her studies at NUS. "A typical session consisted of warm-up exercises, stretches, basic techniques like kicks and jumps, difficult moves like balances, *taijijian* and *taijiquan* movements, as well as physical training," she describes. Her hard work paid off – six years later.

At the 2011 World Wushu Championships in Ankara, Turkey, Yi Jun won the *dujian* (sparring) event with her teammates Tay Yu Juan and Emily Sin. It was Singapore's first gold medal in 16 years. Later, at the 2011 Southeast

**“ WUSHU HAS TAUGHT ME NOT TO DWELL ON PAST LOSSES - OR GLORIES - BUT TO ALWAYS FOCUS ON DOING BETTER THE NEXT TIME. ”**

Asian (SEA) Games in Jakarta, Indonesia, the team clinched gold again in the same segment. Yi Jun herself considers the double win in 2011 as one of her biggest sporting achievements. "Getting there was a tough journey, but it was one that was truly worthwhile," she says. "In fact, through this experience, wushu has taught me not to dwell on past losses – or glories – but to always focus on doing better the next time."

### WINNING AS A TEAM

Although Yi Jun's pet event was *taijiquan*, she was most successful in the *dujian* event. In wushu, the *dujian* event is a one-minute choreography of sparring wushu exponents, featuring rapid weapon thrusts and acrobatic flips. As it is a team event, the ability to work together greatly influences the result.

"When Yu Juan, Emily and I sparred during training, it was very common for us to make mistakes in the coordination or the positioning of our weapons," Yi Jun explains. "Sometimes, these mistakes cannot be solved in one session, and it may get frustrating for everyone." The team would spend

hours tweaking their moves to match one another perfectly.

It was not an easy process, as each athlete was used to a certain way of moving. “We had to be open when discussing problems in our teamwork, or it would have led to misunderstandings and unhappiness,” says Yi Jun. Through this process, however, Yi Jun and her two teammates gradually became more accepting of the differences between them. “From this, I understood the importance of open, honest communication and how teamwork can bring out the best in people.”

It was how the trio took home top honours at the 2011 World Wushu Championships, beating Vietnam’s Hoang Thi Phuong Giang and Duong Thuy Vi. And how, a month later at the 2011 SEA Games, they scored 9.71 points to edge out Brunei’s Lee Ying Shi and Faustina Woo by a mere 0.01 point. For these achievements, the team won the Team of the Year (Event) award at Singapore Sports Awards 2012.

## RESPECT IN RIVALRY

Yi Jun was naturally drawn to wushu from a young age. “As a child, I was fascinated by Chinese wuxia films like Jet Li’s *Once Upon a Time in China* series as well as Japanese manga (comics) like *Dragon Ball*.” But it was not until 1999 – when Yi Jun was 14 – that she realised learning wushu was a possibility.

A family friend, who was a stunt double at MediaCorp Studios, visited often. “He noticed my interest in wushu and started to teach me basic backflips in the house,” Yi Jun recalls. “When I discovered that I could do all the cool stunts in wuxia films, I got hooked.”

Yi Jun entered the national wushu team in 2000, armed with nothing but her potential. In 2005, she competed for the first time in the 8th World Wushu Championships in Hanoi, Vietnam. “I participated in two events, Freestyle Taijiquan and Taijijian. It was a nerve-wracking but eye-opening experience to perform before a large international crowd,” shares Yi Jun. It took immense will to not buckle under the stress.

Yi Jun quickly realised that the best way to deal with competition pressure was to ensure that she had sufficient practice. “I believe in the phrase ‘practice makes perfect’. The more practice I have, the more familiar I am with the movements, and the more confident I become. It took years of wushu training

“EVEN DURING WUSHU  
COMPETITIONS, YOU WILL  
FIND COMPETITORS CHEERING  
EACH OTHER ON.”

and competition experience to build the level of confidence I have today.”

Yi Jun went on to compete in other international competitions like the 2008 Asian Championships in Macau, China; 2009 SEA Games in Vientiane, Laos; 2010 SportAccord Combat Games in Beijing, China; and 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou, China. Ever since she started competing internationally, she has seen her competitors not as rivals for the gold – but as fellow wushu exponents to learn from.

“There is a collective sense of community that fosters individual growth in wushu,” Yi Jun notes. “Even during wushu competitions, you will find competitors cheering each other on. Because of this sense of mutual respect, I have formed strong friendships with fellow wushu exponents from Taipei, Canada and Japan. While there is a language barrier between some of us, a common passion for wushu binds us together.” She had various opportunities to train with overseas competitors throughout the years, and she respected them as her role models. “I witnessed their strong dedication to the sport, the sacrifices they made, and also the positive attitude they displayed during training. These only inspired me to work harder.”

### A SWITCH IN FOCUS

After the highs of 2011, Yi Jun decided to retire from the competitive scene. She says: “I had been juggling sports, work and my personal life since I was

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14. It was time to pursue other things in life. Besides, I wanted to end things on a high note.” So, she turned her focus to her other passion – teaching. Since then, she has been concentrating more on her role as a physics teacher at Maris Stella High School. She says: “In wushu events like *duilian*, a lack of focus can cause us to miss the right moment and hit our teammates, causing injuries. Just as I’d learned to focus on my role as an athlete, I now stay true to my job as an educator, doing my best for my students.”

Yi Jun finds great purpose in her role as an educator. She adds: “Clichéd as it may sound, I believe that children are our future and hope. Through teaching, I’m able to directly shape young minds – and their future.” In the classroom, she makes it a point to share wushu life lessons with her students. She says: “Wushu is not only a sport, but also a way of living. The philosophies



behind the sport – with an emphasis on balance and harmony – make it particularly meaningful. With that, I always nudge my students to put in a little more effort during each examination so that they can keep improving.”

Even though Yi Jun no longer competes, she still contributes to the local wushu scene by training young athletes and helping to groom future champions. “In a way, I will never really leave the sport.” She has a dream for the future of wushu. “Wushu is still not recognised as a full-fledged official Olympic sport, although it is one of the eight sports that will be considered for inclusion in the 2020 Summer Olympics.” She adds contemplatively, “Hopefully, we will be able to groom our young talents into Olympic gold medallists one day.”

## VALUES

Teamwork • Respect • Sportsmanship

## REFLECTION

1. Wushu has taught Tao Yi Jun not to dwell on past glories or losses but to focus on improving for the next time. What matters most to you in life? How does a desire for learning and improvement play a role in your decision-making? How do you see your successes and failures?
2. It is common to find wushu competitors cheering for each other during competitions. What can we learn from this “spirit of wushu” – grace in defeat, humility in victory, and camaraderie in sport? How does it strengthen individuals and the wushu community? How have you applied these principles in your life?

# THE PIONEERING PADDLER

Shanghai-born **JING JUNHONG** moved to Singapore for love but ended up sparking a table tennis renaissance here. All through the years, the national women's team coach has never been daunted by the ups and downs in life – thanks to everything the sport has taught her.

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In the training hall at Singapore Table Tennis Association (STTA), Jing Junhong leans lightly on a table tennis table. Her eyes glisten in concentration as she animatedly instructs the young paddlers in her team. Junhong observes their techniques closely, demonstrates, and murmurs words of encouragement.

Then, she realises that it is 11.30 a.m. She gets ready for yet another responsibility as the head coach of the national women's table tennis team: Media interviews. "Time management skills are crucial for any athlete," remarks the 45-year-old, as she settles down for the interview. "Years of table tennis training have taught me that there is a time for every task. There is a time for work, and there is a time for play. It is just like how, in life, there is a



time to be happy or sad, proud or disappointed.”

Junhong should know, after going through the highs and lows that come with the different roles of being a professional paddler, wife and mother in Singapore. Since she started representing the Republic in various international tournaments in 1991, she has won gold in singles, doubles and team events at the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games and Commonwealth Games. But the pinnacle of her professional career was her fourth place finish at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. Twenty years ago, the country would not have dreamed of such success on the world stage.

But Junhong, who is affectionately known as “da jie” (big sister) by her fellow paddlers and the staff at STTA, never dwells on former glories. Instead, she views the life lessons that she has learned from the sport as more significant. “I find that the skills that table tennis have instilled in me transcend the sport and can be used in every facet of life.”

### LIFE SKILLS - ON THE COURT

Junhong first picked up a table tennis bat at the age of seven. At that time, she was studying at the Shanghai Julu Road Primary School, one of the top schools in the district known for its student excellence in table tennis. She says: “During my first year, a teacher visited every class to select students with potential.”

**“ I USED TO CRY BITTERLY  
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TO FACE UP TO IT.”**

During the trials, the teachers observed how a young Junhong handled a table tennis bat and served the ball. She did well without much guidance and was eventually picked to join the school team. For the rest of her early years, Junhong’s life was consumed by the sport. “I had school till 3 p.m., but would train after that. Then, there would be a supervised study session, which I used to complete my daily homework. After that, we would train again till nightfall. You could say playing table tennis instilled discipline in me.”

It was a very structured life and left little playtime for Junhong. But she didn’t mind as she found table tennis fun. She says: “There weren’t many diversions for children in those days anyway. I was an active child and enjoyed playing the sport with my friends.” What was more difficult to overcome was the physical exhaustion. “I reached home bone-tired every night, but happy because I was mentally fulfilled.”

A display cabinet of gleaming trophies in the school's training hall also motivated her. "By then, I had realised that my *alma mater* had nurtured many national table tennis champions in China, and that left me in awe." As time went by, Junhong's love for the sport grew. Her disciplined training structure and effective time management skills saw her devoted diligence on the court bear fruit.

As a Primary Three student, she could easily defeat a Primary Five opponent. Two years later, she even emerged top in the national championships in her age group. "It was the first time I realised I had the potential to go far, so I felt immensely encouraged," says Junhong. "I also learned that hard work breeds success. As long as I continued training, I would move up."

Even when Junhong lost a table tennis match, she would persevere. "I used to cry bitterly in the school toilet after losing a game, but soon learned to face up to it. I told myself it's all right to lose, but I must figure out what went wrong and return to the court a better player." And she did. By the late 1980s, Junhong was not only a member of the powerful China national team – she was ranked third in the country.

## EMBRACING CHANGE

The Singapore chapter of Junhong's life began in 1992, when she relocated here to marry local paddler and SEA Games individual gold medalist, Loy Soo Han. The pair met in Shanghai in 1988, when Soo Han was training in the city for the Kuala Lumpur SEA Games. Junhong was stepping out of a stadium when Soo Han caught sight of her. Later, he discovered that the big-eyed girl was his coach's former student – and got him to play matchmaker.

Love blossomed between them. Soo Han would commute on long train rides just to visit Junhong, who was then training in Nanjing. When he returned to Singapore, they continued the relationship through letters and long-distance telephone calls. After three years of long-distance dating, the couple decided to tie the knot. In love, Junhong was prepared to leave everything behind. "I felt that I had already accomplished what I wanted in the sport. I was yearning for change. I wanted to lead a simple and quiet life with my husband in Singapore and raise a family of our own."

When she arrived, she found that she could adapt to life here without a hitch. "Most people speak Mandarin here, and there are Chinese faces everywhere." But mostly she attributes the smooth transition to table tennis. "Table tennis helped me to adapt to life in Singapore more easily. As an athlete, I was used to trying new things and travelling abroad for competitions.

I didn't even see my relocation as a challenge."

Playing for Singapore was never part of the plan, but she was soon courted back into the sporting scene. She recalls: "Man proposes, but God disposes. A lot of things happen without you planning for them to." She remembers her debut under the Singapore banner fondly. "I went to the Vietnam Golden Racket Championships to make up the numbers, but ended up winning the event."

Then, she was sent to the 1993 World Championships in Sweden, where she beat then-world No. 1 and reigning world and Olympic champion Deng Yaping of China. "Things got out of hand from there," Junhong chuckles. The following year, Junhong received her citizenship, and went on to amass medal after medal for Singapore in international tournaments. In the 1994 and 1995 Commonwealth Table Tennis Championships, she was second in both the singles and doubles events. Gold came her way in the 1997 Commonwealth Table Tennis Championships, one of the first major breakthroughs for Singapore that would set the stage for future successes.

**“ I TOLD MYSELF IT'S ALL RIGHT TO LOSE, BUT I MUST FIGURE OUT WHAT WENT WRONG AND RETURN TO THE COURT A BETTER PLAYER. ”**

The country's interest in the sport was revived. In 1996, she became Singapore's first representative at the Olympic Games in Atlanta, USA. She won 16 medals between 1995 and 2003, including 11 golds, three silvers, and two bronzes at the SEA Games. As the driving force behind the Singapore team, she was dubbed "Singapore's daughter-in-law".

### OLYMPIC LESSONS

With Junhong's talent in table tennis and the skills she acquired through years of tough training, it seemed no challenge was insurmountable. But she recalls the gruelling preparation for the Sydney Olympics in 2000 as a period that truly tested her ability to take pressure and push forward.

In 1998, Junhong gave birth to her only son, Darren Loy. The very next year, she was asked to return to the national team. "There was no one else who could helm the team," she says. "Li Jiawei showed promise but she was only 18 then. I knew without a doubt that I had to rejoin the team." Her sense of responsibility towards the Singapore team was so deep-seated that she was prepared to give her all – even though her body was still recovering from the birth.

"I had gained 10kg in weight," says Junhong. "I struggled on the court, barely running because it felt like I was carrying a slab of pork around my tummy!" She also had to nurse her baby at night, but would turn up for training early the following day. "It was physically tough for me to continue playing professionally after Darren was born. In fact, not many mothers would return to the competitive scene so soon after giving birth. But for me, it's about having a sense of responsibility towards my role."

In between the training, she also travelled frequently to overseas competitions like the Swedish Open in Umeå and the Polish Open in Warsaw. This took her away from her young son, sometimes for as long as a month. "I spent less time with him than full-time mothers, or even working mothers, would with their babies. It was a torture to be apart from him."

But she wished desperately for an Olympic breakthrough for Singapore. At the 2000 Sydney Olympics, she faced Taiwan's Chen Jing in a nail-biting fight for the women's singles bronze as Singaporeans stayed riveted to their television sets. But a medal was not meant to be. While she lost 3-1 and eventually scored a fourth place finish, the brave performance was the first time Singapore had even come close to a medal since weightlifter Tan Howe Liang's silver medal finish in the 1960 Rome Olympics. Despite the loss, Junhong arrived in Singapore to a heroine's welcome.

From the world stage, Junhong brought back an important life lesson. She says: "Sport can teach you how to aim high, withstand mental pressure and endure physical trials to reach your ultimate goal. Even at an athlete's lowest point, the goal is clear – the gold medal. So, it's always easy to stay true to the path. I've translated this attitude to life itself. As long as I have a goal in mind, the highs and lows of life will not deter me from trying to reach it."

## NURTURING TALENTS

In 2009, Junhong was appointed the deputy head coach of the national women's table tennis team. She was earmarked by STTA to assume the head coach post eventually, but did not accept the role until late 2012. She explains: "I couldn't accept the head coach role as I wasn't prepared for it. I had to know that I have the ability before I could coach a team."

So Junhong used the next four years to prepare herself for the new role. "I read books on management and travelled with the team for overseas competitions, keeping an eye out for opportunities to learn the necessary skill sets." Through it all, she believed that she would be able to do well as a coach. Again, it was her sports training that gave her the confidence. "Athletes have to go through tough training to achieve excellence in their respective arenas. Once they have achieved that, they can succeed in any role – even if it's beyond the sporting arena – as long as they put their minds to it."

Succession is the most pressing problem the national women's table tennis team is now facing. Veterans like Li Jiawei, Wang Yuegu and Sun Beibei have already retired. With their exit, Junhong is now tasked with an even greater

**“IT WAS PHYSICALLY TOUGH FOR ME TO CONTINUE PLAYING PROFESSIONALLY AFTER DARREN WAS BORN... BUT FOR ME, IT'S ABOUT HAVING A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS MY ROLE.”**

challenge – to train young Singaporean paddlers like Zena Sim, Yu Mengyu and Isabelle Li to battle for top honours both regionally and worldwide. "Their skills still need plenty of polishing, but I believe that they have the potential and perseverance to pull through the training," observes Junhong.

To Junhong, nurturing the right qualities in her team members is paramount. She explains: "A paddler can only reach full potential if he or she has a clear goal, works hard towards it and is not afraid of challenges along the way." And these are all the traits she tries to instill in her own son, who is now 15 and a table tennis player at the Singapore Sports School. "He has shown much interest in the sport, and I have guided him to be disciplined in managing his time and told him the importance of having goals."

Right now, Junhong is cautious in her outlook regarding the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. But she has the belief. "I will coach the team to the best of my ability. If we work hard as a team and stay confident, there is a good chance we can score a medal."

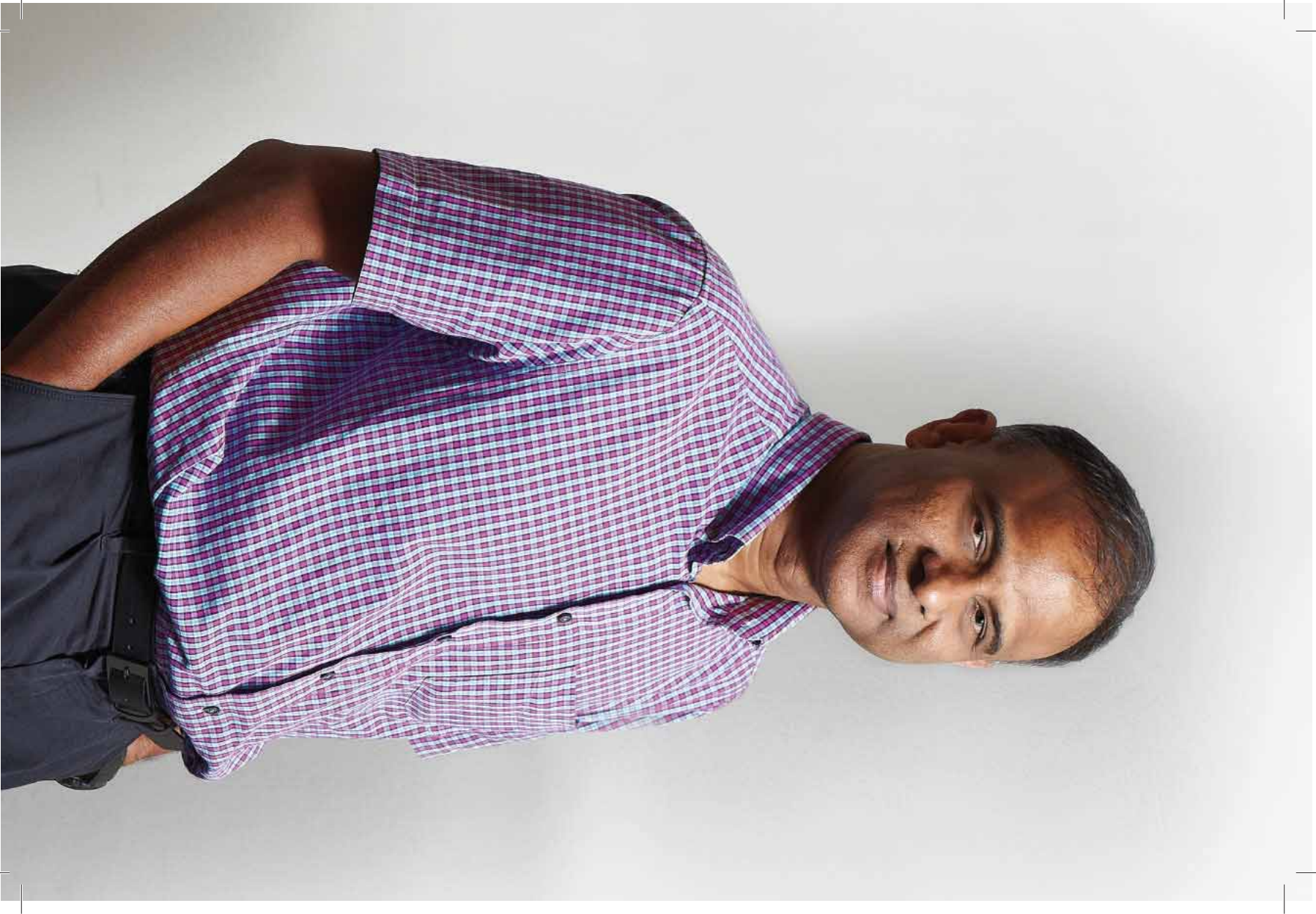


## VALUES

Perseverance • Diligence • Responsibility

## REFLECTION

1. Through her long career, Junhong has learned that “hard work breeds success”. Do you share this philosophy? What values have you applied in your pursuit of success? How have you managed your priorities to achieve your desired outcomes?
2. Junhong returned to the competitive scene soon after giving birth to her son, because she wanted to be true to her responsibility to Sporting Singapore. Have you been asked to make a sacrifice for a greater good? Have you been asked to put aside personal achievement in favour of a commitment to a team or school? How did your values shape your decision?



# THE DECISION MAKER

As a hockey umpire, former deputy public prosecutor **MATHAVAN DEVADAS** was always concerned with fair play on the field. Today, the law lecturer at Temasek Polytechnic (TP) motivates his students with the qualities he acquired through the sport.

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**E**very morning, Mathavan Devadas reaches Temasek Polytechnic's (TP) Tampines campus at 7.30 a.m. There, he takes pleasure in starting the day early, getting much of his paperwork done before the office crowd buzzes in at nine. The section head of TP's Law and Management department deliberately skips the evening rush hour as well, preferring to stay back till 8 p.m. on most days to get more work done.

Lecturing at the polytechnic is just one of Mathavan's responsibilities. The 53-year-old is also a vice-president of the Singapore Hockey Federation (SHF), a position he has held since 2010. Besides these two roles, he is also the hockey convener for the Singapore Cricket Club, the competition secretary for the Asian Hockey Federation and a member of the competition

committee of the International Hockey Federation.

His workload would be overwhelming to most people, but Mathavan simply takes it in his stride – administrative paperwork and all. He says good-naturedly: “Time management is the key here. There are always pockets of time during the day to get things done. I usually make lists and get a lot of satisfaction from striking tasks off.”

And this is a skill that Mathavan – a former school hockey player – has learned from years of juggling training and umpiring with studies and work. He says: “Hockey has taught me so much about time management and teamwork as well as sportsmanship and fair play.” In fact, these are the very qualities that pushed him through school, and careers in law and education.

### FRIENDSHIP ON THE FIELD

Like his schoolmates in Anglo-Chinese School (ACS), Mathavan was exposed to a variety of sports during physical education (PE) lessons. He recalls: “I

“**HOCKEY HAS TAUGHT ME SO MUCH ABOUT TIME MANAGEMENT AND TEAMWORK, AS WELL AS SPORTSMANSHIP AND FAIR PLAY.**”

used to do athletics but never made it to the school team. I enjoyed football and even had a favourite football team.”

At the time, the secondary school boy was naturally drawn to hockey because his father, S. Velupillai Devadas, was a national hockey player. “He represented Singapore in the 1956 Olympic Games – it was the first and only time our country made it that far. To top it off, Singapore finished in eighth place, beating our closest opponent, Malaysia, who was in ninth place,” says Mathavan, clearly proud of his father’s achievements.

As a boy, he yearned to follow in his father’s footsteps. Yet, his father immediately dissuaded him. “The first reason he didn’t allow me to take up hockey was because I wasn’t doing well in my studies,” says Mathavan. “As hockey involved lots of running and hitting, he also felt that it could lead to physical injuries.”

It was only when he reached Anglo-Chinese Junior College (ACJC) that his father finally relented and allowed him to pursue his love for hockey. He enjoyed the game tremendously. When in season, he trained three times a week and played at left-half – the position his father played. “Even when we

were not preparing for any inter-school matches, the hockey team would find one reason or another to play," laughs Mathavan.

Being a team sport, hockey actually kept Mathavan's social calendar full. "I made a lot of friends in hockey, more than when I was doing athletics in ACS. There was a whole squad of boys, and all of us would hang out after training sessions. We would go to the nearby hawkler centre, buy packets of sugarcane juice and eat char kway teow together," says Mathavan. "I treasured the camaraderie most, and many of my former teammates have become lifelong friends – even after 40 years!"

Mathavan was so devoted to the sport that he continued playing it through his A-level. He says: "Playing a short game of hockey became a relief from staring at the books all day. I found that I was often able to concentrate better after that." Perhaps, hockey indeed played a significant role in ensuring that the then-18-year-old scored well enough to pursue law at the University of Buckingham, and, later, at the University of Cambridge in United Kingdom.

For Mathavan, university days were the best times of his life. "There was a great sporting culture, especially in Cambridge," reminisces Mathavan. "Even in winter, we would play football, rugby or hockey – it was marvellous how they truly encouraged their students to play sports." Mathavan now advises his students to use sports as a stress buster. "They shouldn't be cramming all day. Instead, they should play sports or do other outdoor activities. That way, they will go to the examination hall as happier and more fulfilled students," he says. "People produce their best work by being happy. I truly believe that works in studies, work and life."

“PLAYING A SHORT GAME  
OF HOCKEY BECAME A  
RELIEF FROM STARING AT  
THE BOOKS ALL DAY.”

### FAIR PLAY IN LAW AND SPORT

It was at Cambridge that Mathavan also got involved in umpiring, a duty that most hockey players shun. "I'd watch a hockey game and think: 'No, that's not how the rule should be interpreted,'" says Mathavan. So when the opportunity came up for him to umpire a school game, he volunteered.

The art of officiating a hockey game – with 22 players and a small ball – is not half as easy as it may appear from a close-up camera angle. Besides being able to see the ball clearly at all times, an umpire has to be well-versed in the rules of the game. On top of that, he has to be composed and convincing

when “selling” a decision. “It’s not uncommon for players to lash out at the umpires in the heat of the moment,” admits Mathavan. “But I am most motivated by the desire to create a fair environment for players to enjoy the game.”

Mathavan relished the umpiring experience so much that he enrolled for an umpiring course with the SHF upon his return to Singapore. By then, he was working full-time as an advocate and solicitor in private practice, and spent his weekends umpiring at the lower league. He says: “It was a lot of fun, and soon I started umpiring premier division games too.”

That was quite a challenge for Mathavan, who by then had started work as a deputy public prosecutor with the Attorney-General’s Chambers. He found premier division games to be fast and vigorous. “The players tended to be more physical and the pace was a lot faster,” adds Mathavan. “It was an ‘awakening’ of sorts, as I quickly realised that I had to keep myself very fit to keep up with the game, and learn to read the game more.”

It turned out that being trained in law helped – he grasped the game’s rules and regulations extremely well. “Officiating is all about the rules,” he remarks. He adds that the difference between a player and an umpire is that while the former wants the best for his team, the latter wants the best for both teams. From the time he officiated in his first Southeast Asian (SEA) Games in 1995 as a technical official, he always made sure that he treated both teams as equally as possible.

“Before the game started, I would talk to the managers from both teams, and try to understand what they needed to make their teams more comfortable and make sure that they were generally satisfied,” describes Mathavan. “I would let everyone know that I’m in the middle – what I do for one team, I will do for the other.” It helped, and Mathavan soon garnered a strong reputation as a fair and decisive official. “Fair play has to be the winner in the end.”

## ENCOURAGING SPORTSMANSHIP

After 11 years as a deputy public prosecutor, Mathavan decided to switch roles. He joined TP as a law lecturer in 2000, noting the somewhat rocky transition from lawyer to educator. “There was a huge drop in salary,” says Mathavan. “But I was getting on in age, and preferred to have a less stressful work life.”

The move has turned out to be an excellent decision on Mathavan’s part. While he misses the adrenaline rush in criminal courts, he realises that he enjoys interacting with his students. Brimming with youth, he reveals that they have a certain naiveté that endears them to him. “They are positive, and always willing to learn new things.”

And if he hadn’t accepted TP’s offer, he would not have been able to officiate at the 2002, 2006 and 2010 Asian Games, as well as the 2006 FIFA World Cup and the 2004, 2008 and 2012 Olympic Games. “TP allowed me to rearrange my classes whenever I had officiating duties at these overseas games. They have been immensely supportive of my sporting responsibilities.”

As an accredited International Technical Official, Mathavan was not just involved in umpiring during the games. Behind the scenes, he would

prepare himself by studying video clips of games in a workshop. He was also responsible for the discipline of the hockey players – and this was where sportsmanship came in. “In an intensive game like hockey, players can be so wound up that they end up shouting at the umpire,” he says. “But conduct is very important. That’s why I always made the extra effort to compliment players who showed sportsmanship during the games.”

To Mathavan, being a good sport – even in the face of losing a game – matters. “Once, my school team dominated an inter-school game. We were on top of things, yet lost to an inferior team. I couldn’t believe it at first, and sat on the pitch after the game in tears.” But that experience made him realise that such disappointments can happen in life. “We just have to play within the rules of the game,” he adds. “When I went into law after, and lost a case even though I was pretty sure that the accused was guilty, I accepted it. I wouldn’t have been able to accept the defeat if I wasn’t a sporting person.”

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These are the lessons that Mathavan now strives to pass on to his students. In his lectures, he takes time to share sporting examples to guide them in studies and life. "Storytelling is the best way to get their attention," smiles Mathavan, who until recently, used to spend even weekends at the hockey stadium. Now, he is taking a step back from the physical sport. On weekends, however, he still keeps fit by hitting the gym.

It is clear, however, that hockey will forever be a major part of Mathavan's life. He continues to commit his time and energy to both teaching at TP and administrative duties at the various federations. "Umpiring has turned out to be my calling. Officiating a good and fair game – that's all that matters."

## VALUES

Discipline • Teamwork • Integrity

## REFLECTION

1. Success and failure are part of life, as with victory and defeat in competitions. The important thing, Mathavan points out, is to play by the rules – whether you're on the pitch or in the boardroom. How do you maintain your integrity while pursuing your personal or corporate goals? How do you manage constraints to ensure that you play by the rules?
2. Mathavan emphasises the importance of good sportsmanship, of being gracious in victory and noble in defeat. How do you respond to success and failure?



# NO BOUNDARIES

"Things work out best for those who make the best of the way things work out." Legendary basketball coach John Wooden could have been talking about the people profiled in No Boundaries. Neither catastrophic injury nor deteriorating disability diverted these individuals from the pursuit of excellence. Their stories reveal the human spirit at its most tenacious and resilient.

# IN HER ELEMENT

Para-swimmer **YIP PIN XIU** made sports history when she clinched gold for Singapore at the 2008 Beijing Paralympics. But this remarkable victory belies a debilitating and deteriorating condition that threatens her future in sports. Still, the optimistic 21-year-old believes in doing her best to overcome all odds.

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**W**hen Yip Pin Xiu slips from her wheelchair into the water, she does it like it is the most natural thing in the world. In the pool, she propels effortlessly through the water with each forceful backstroke.

"It may sound clichéd, but I truly belong in the water. I can walk, do handstands and perform somersaults. It is only in the water that I can move freely and do whatever anyone else can do," says Pin Xiu, who was diagnosed with hereditary sensorimotor neuropathy when she was just two, after an aunt noticed that she could not seem to flex her ankles.

A form of muscular dystrophy, the condition causes nerve functions and muscles to progressively deteriorate over time. Since Pin Xiu was 13, she has



been wheelchair-bound. Now 21, she is gradually losing control of motor skills in her wrist and grip. The vision in her left eye is blurring.

It is no wonder she finds reprieve in the water. Unlike able-bodied swimmers, Pin Xiu swims with her head tilted back and submerged to allow her hips to be raised. This is done to reduce the drag caused by her limp legs. As she cannot catch the optimum amount of water in her clenched fists to swim efficiently, she improvises by increasing the speed of her stroke. When turning in the water, she swivels 180-degrees on her back. She adds: "Every time my condition deteriorates, I have to put in more hours in training and go to more physiotherapy sessions."

Yet Pin Xiu never lets this get her down. In 2008, she won Singapore's first Olympic-level gold medal in the women's 50m backstroke at the Beijing Paralympics. With a time of 58.75s, she beat the runner-up by more than seven seconds and seven metres. She also won silver in the 50m freestyle, and set two world records at the heats for both events. "With this, I've proven to myself – and fellow Singaporeans – that nothing is impossible once you've set your heart on it." Over the

**“ I KNEW THAT IF I'M POSITIVE AND PASSIONATE ABOUT SOMETHING, I WOULD BE ABLE TO DO IT WELL. ”**

years, she has earned many more medals, all displayed prominently in her Serangoon home.

At the interview, Pin Xiu – who is studying social sciences at Singapore Management University (SMU) – appears relaxed. She gleefully announces that her first-year examinations are just over and that she "has never studied so hard!" She chimes: "And I'm leaving for Bangkok next week for a shopping trip!" Like any other sociable young adult, she is constantly checking her phone for WhatsApp messages from friends. Talk to her, and her cheerful, confident disposition shines through. But she has not always been this way.

## **BUILDING CONFIDENCE - UNDERWATER**

Pin Xiu's first – and impromptu – swimming lesson was at Kallang Swimming Complex, where her two elder brothers were taking swimming lessons. She may have been just five years old then, but she remembers the details vividly. "I got bored playing at the baby pool, so I asked my mother to let me join the beginner's class."

At that age, Pin Xiu could still walk. In fact, she was "just like any other

able-bodied kid". So, she was allowed to join the class. "The first time I swam, I didn't even have a swimming costume! I just went into the water in a dress," laughs Pin Xiu. "It was so fun. We did bunny hops and walked sideways like crabs in the pool."

Growing up, Pin Xiu's parents – engineering firm partner Yip Chee Khiong and Singapore Airlines senior officer Margaret Chong – never gave her any special care. "If I fell down, I had to learn to pick myself up. They didn't believe in mollycoddling me just because of my condition," says Pin Xiu. "They were also fair." Whatever her brothers – Alvin, 27; Augustus, 25 – received in terms of toys, enrichment classes and affection, she would get too. "If they went on roller coaster rides, I got to go, too."

But as her mobility deteriorated, so did her social acceptance at school. "In primary school, I was bullied because I was different from the rest of my classmates. This caused me to be very diffident and introverted," reveals Pin Xiu, who found comfort in swimming. "When I'm underwater, I cannot hear a thing so it feels really peaceful."

In early 2004, when Pin Xiu was 12 years old, she was talent-spotted by Danny Ong, a sports volunteer from Singapore Disability Sports Council. He saw that the girl could not only catch up with, but also outpace, her able-bodied peers in the water. Pin Xiu entered the National Junior Championships a few months later, emerging with gold medals in all six events she took part in.

"After that, I started to train with the elite team. It was the first time I found friends and felt accepted," shares Pin Xiu. "Slowly, I gained more confidence and opened up more easily to people." One of her closest confidantes today is fellow Paralympic swimmer, Theresa Goh. "Theresa makes trainings fun," says Pin Xiu cheerfully. "We're both foodies, so we enjoy trying out new cafés and restaurants, like Wall St Bistro on Figaro Street."

## LEARNING ABOUT RESPECT

Pin Xiu lost the ability to walk when she started Secondary One at Bendemeer Secondary School. She adapted to it without much fuss. "I was happy to get a wheelchair because that meant I would finally be able to catch up with the rest of my friends," she says.

For the next three years, Pin Xiu juggled training with studies. “Whenever I was preparing for a competition, I would swim 12 times a week. Each pool session was two hours and would lead to a one-and-a-half-hour gym workout,” says Pin Xiu. “My days were mostly divided into school, swimming, gym and physiotherapy sessions.”

She concedes that those early morning training sessions taught her much. “When I was younger, I used to be late for 6.30 a.m. trainings. But over time, I grew to understand that punctuality has a lot to do with respect,” she says. “I have to respect my coach by turning up on time.”

The tough training yielded results. In 2005, she participated in the Asia Paralympics Swimming Championship, winning two gold medals. Her first international competition was the World Wheelchair and Amputee Games the same year, where she won two gold medals and a bronze. In 2006, she received four gold medals at the DSE Long Course Swimming Championships. In 2007, she won three gold medals at the Japan Paralympic Swimming Championships and four gold medals at the World Wheelchair and Amputee Games.

## STEELY RESOLVE

2008 was, in Pin Xiu’s own words, “spectacular”. She clocked a world and Paralympic record time of 57.62 seconds during the heats of the 50m backstroke for S3, one of the categories of disabilities – which includes muscular dystrophy – in the Beijing 2008 Paralympics. “That was when things started getting exciting,” Pin Xiu recalls. “I felt then that I had a real shot at winning, so I trained extra hard. It was also my O-level year, and I wasn’t in school much.”

Instead, she trained aggressively with her coach, former Olympian Ang Peng Siong. “Uncle Peng Siong knew exactly how he wanted me to train, so I felt confident following his instructions.” Pin Xiu also relied heavily on the expertise of her support team, which included a doctor, nutritionist, physiotherapist and psychologist.

Training was so intensive that Pin Xiu did not catch a movie that entire year. But no matter how tough it got, Pin Xiu rarely entertained negative thoughts. Neither did she feel like giving up. “Even if I did, it would just be a thought bubble that pops quite quickly, usually right after training ends,” she laughs. “There were low moments, but I tend to forget about unhappy things.”

What she does remember are the wonderful moments of her Beijing Paralympics experience. “To help us relax before the competition, Uncle



Peng Siong brought Theresa – who was also competing – and me, as well as the entire support team of seven people, to the Great Wall of China,” she reminisces. “It wasn’t the most accessible of places, but everyone rallied around to push us up the Great Wall – there were a lot of laughs!”

After the Beijing Paralympics, Pin Xiu resolved to focus on her studies. “I had such horrible results for my O-level that I wanted to start my first year in Republic Polytechnic right and achieve results in another part of my life.” For the next 18 months, she reduced her swim training to just thrice weekly.

With the extra time, she worked towards a diploma in the Sports and Exercise Sciences course. “I chose the course because my Beijing Paralympics experience helped me to understand how important a good support team is to an athlete,” she explains. “From swimming, I know that if I’m positive and passionate about something, I will

be able to do it well.”

So, Pin Xiu used the same level of determination in her swim training and applied it to her studies. “As a child, I used to get distracted by the television.

But now, I have no problems staying off the television to concentrate on my studies.” She graduated with merit in early 2012. She was even picked to be the polytechnic’s back-up valedictorian.

### A PERSONAL BEST

During her study break, Pin Xiu competed in smaller competitions like the 2009 ASEAN Para Games, the 2010 IPC Swimming World Championships and the 2011 Pan Pacific Para-Swimming Championships. She emerged the winner in all the events.

Pin Xiu returned to serious training for the 2012 London Paralympics, but she missed out on a medal when she finished fourth in the 100m freestyle. Shrugging off the recent loss, she says: “If I put in my all and I lose, I’m fine with it. But if I don’t put in any effort, and I win, I wouldn’t feel so great.” She adds that she is more concerned about achieving a personal best instead of competing with others. “I get more satisfaction from pushing myself to the limit so I always try hard to improve my timings.”

But time is not on Pin Xiu’s side. Younger athletes are catching up fast. Her future in sports is also uncertain because of her degenerative condition. This is a fact that Pin Xiu has come to accept, and she does not dwell upon it. “I know what to expect, since I’ve already gone through the experience of



losing my ability to walk.”

So, Pin Xiu does not worry about what is beyond her control. “I know that my time in swimming is limited, but I don’t want to spend my life swimming anyway. I want to try other things.” Recently, she has taken up equestrian sport at the Riding for the Disabled Association of Singapore (RDA). “I love horses,” she says. “Even though I fell off my horse last week, I think I will continue.”

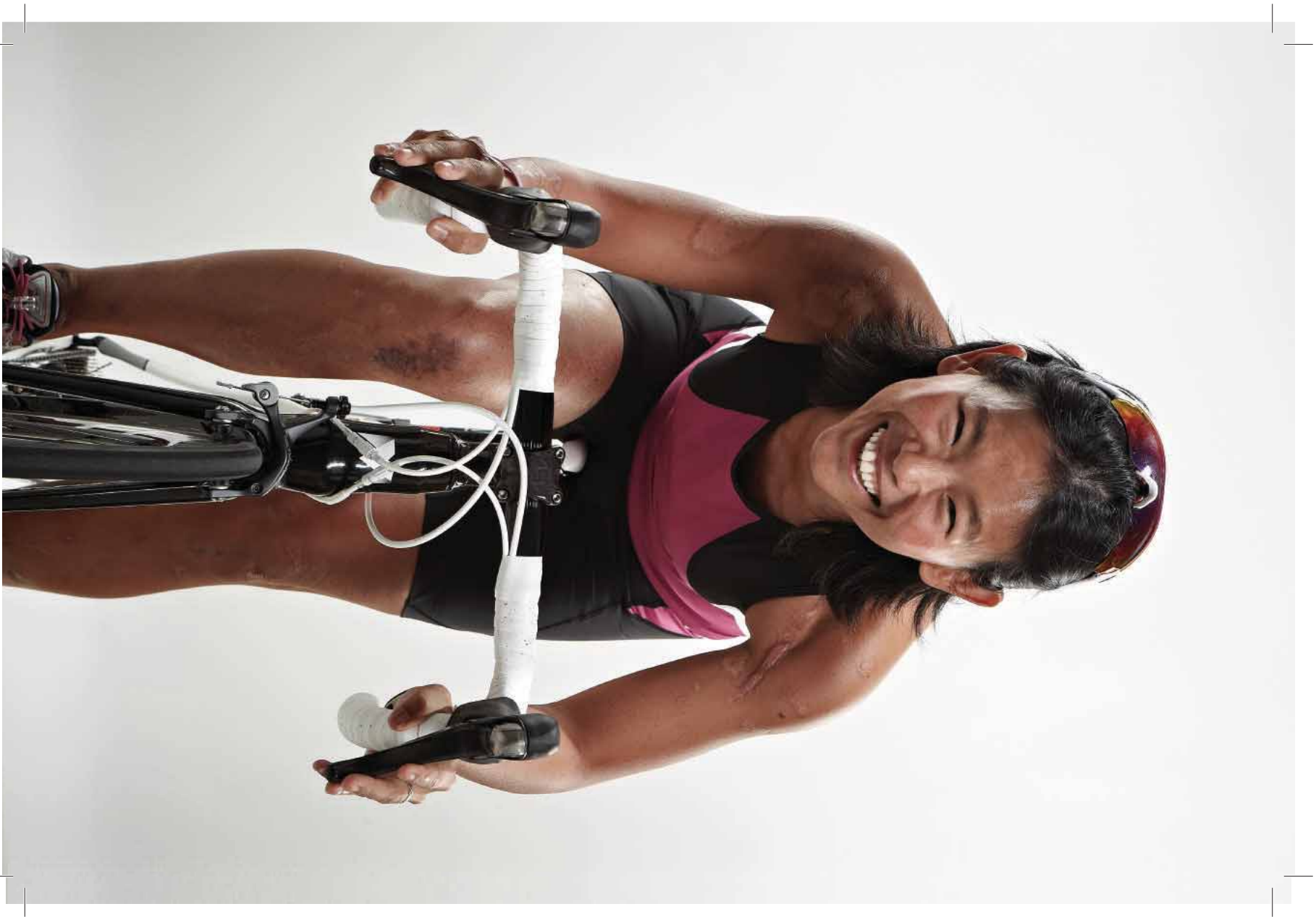
For now, it seems that Pin Xiu is content to give her all in both sport and school. Pin Xiu says: “I still believe in having a positive attitude and pushing myself to the limit.” And that is a characteristic of Pin Xiu that will not change – ever.

## VALUES

Determination • Positivity • Respect

## REFLECTION

1. To win Singapore’s first gold medal in the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing, swimmer Pin Xiu focused on her capabilities instead of her deteriorating physical condition. What lessons can you draw from Pin Xiu’s indomitability and resolve in the face of intensifying adversity?
2. Through swimming, Pin Xiu learned that staying positive and passionate would help her achieve her goals. Do you embrace this philosophy in life? How do you approach changing circumstances and setbacks?



# 20

## TRUE GRIT

After a horrific cycling accident, triathlete **KIRSTEN KOH** thought she would never run again. But in just a year, she triumphed over all odds to complete the Sundown Marathon 2012. She reveals how sports spurred her to stand again – and stay strong.

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**E**ast Coast Park, 10 a.m. Kirsten Koh stands right behind the starting line of the Sundown Marathon 2012. A look of determination flashes across her eyes. Her face is stoic, but her mind is clear. She has not even a sliver of doubt that she will complete the gruelling 42km challenge.

If you look closely, you might realise that she is no typical marathoner. Supportive friends – decked out in tee shirts bearing the words “True Grit” – rally around. One of them carries a set of crutches. Most tellingly, a personal medic hovers near with water and packs of ice. Kirsten would need these – to soothe the pain. Pain, from the cycling accident that left her bedridden for nearly three months in 2011, remains very real.

“I actually factored in the pain, fatigue and even negative thoughts when

I was preparing for this," says the 34-year-old, who regularly did marathons and triathlons before the accident stripped away her identity as an athlete. "I mapped out designated distance markers at progressive time points for the organisers. In fact, I was so well-prepared that I knew I was going to finish walking in my estimated time."

Kirsten's ability to stand on two legs was considered a marvel and, even more so, that she was able to walk again was a miracle. When she first started, she was slow, uncoordinated and in a lot of pain. "I felt sorry for myself. Tears would stream down my face as I walked," she says. But after releasing those feelings of frustration, Kirsten would visualise herself reaching the finishing line. "I would walk while thinking about getting to the starting line, walking the marathon, feeling all the aches and pains, seeing my friends and family cheering me on and, then, finally crossing the finishing line."

Kirsten breathed that image into her mind and heart – and it became as real as the pain. As she walked, nothing could dampen her mood, not even the torrential rain. Draped in a white poncho, she rejoiced in the storm. "I felt happy," she says. "I loved running and cycling in the rain – it had a great 'cleansing' effect, as if it was godsent to cheer me on."

**“ I DIDN'T WANT THE ACCIDENT TO WIN. IF I WITHDRAW FROM SPORTS, THE ACCIDENT WINS. ”**

But though Kirsten's mind was strong, her body was only just recovering from the impact of the accident. Soon, she developed pain in her left leg, even with regular application of the ice packs. "It was the most badly injured of my limbs, so I had to get my crutches out." She was forced to rest several times during the night. Still, she persevered. "I didn't want the accident to win. If I withdraw from sports, the accident wins." The next morning, Kirsten completed the marathon in 10 hours and 21 minutes. *The Straits Times* hailed it as a "miracle marathon".

For Kirsten, it was no less than that. The realisation that she had suffered because of sports but had also been saved by it was not lost on her. The Republic Polytechnic (RP) lecturer reveals: "The accident made a huge dent in my athletic identity and, by association, my self-identity. But it has also helped to reshape my understanding of the role sport plays in my life."

## A LIFE-CHANGING ORDEAL

That fateful day in May 2011, Kirsten was cycling home with her close friend and training partner, Orla Gilmore. They were along Mandai Avenue when a lorry collided with Kirsten's bicycle. Stuck under the lorry, she was dragged for several metres.

She was in a coma for 10 days. Kirsten's body suffered from multiple injuries. Her pelvis was shattered. Her left shoulder, ankles and femurs were fractured. Both her tibia and fibula were open fractures – this meant that her bones were sticking out of her skin. She cut her head, had scratches on her face and lost a lot of skin. Three of her teeth were chipped.

Doctors told her parents to prepare for the worst. Eventually, she pulled through, but only after 19 operations, totalling more than 80 hours, five litres of blood transfusions and 70 stitches. During Kirsten's hospital stay, pain was a constant bedfellow. "When I had visitors, I appeared to be pain-free, but my body was hurting," she recalls. "Sometimes, it hurt so much that I couldn't focus on the conversations.

I would clutch the sheets, enduring the waves of pain until I would concede defeat and press the blue bedside button to ask for pain-relief injections."

Throughout this time, she counted her blessings to have Orla with her. Armed with a

Ph.D. in sport psychology, she would help Kirsten manage the pain through breathing exercises and verbal affirmations. Kirsten's own family never left her side.

“THE ACCIDENT MADE A HUGE DENT IN MY IDENTITY ... BUT IT HAS ALSO HELPED TO RESHAPE MY UNDERSTANDING OF THE ROLE SPORT PLAYS IN MY LIFE.”

## BUILDING MENTAL RESILIENCE

In the aftermath of the accident, Kirsten was devastated by the realisation that she might never race, again. "I fell into an abyss of depression. I couldn't cope with the idea of never doing sports again," she says. After all, sport had been a huge part of her life since childhood.

In primary school, the active student did gymnastics, played badminton and ran. She collected medals at every sports meet. "I participated in track and field events like high jump and running races," she says. Kirsten also remembers going to the tennis courts with her mother, a tennis enthusiast.

“Running around picking up balls was fun. I loved getting sweaty and flushed from the sun and activity, not to mention the fun and laughter everyone shared.”

Later, Kirsten joined the tennis team at St. Anthony's Canossian Secondary School. That time of her life was, as she describes, the “single most defining period of my athletic identity”. She speaks fondly of the late Mr. Quah Siew Kow, a physical education teacher and trainer of the national tennis team in the 1980s. “He believed in tough love,” she recalls. “During tennis training, he would make us do military-style training like bunny hops and duck walks, followed by 100 burpees, 100 push-ups, 100 sit-ups, 100 back extensions and a 2.4km run after. It made us not only physically strong, but also mentally resilient.”

It was precisely this sports-instilled mental strength that pulled Kirsten out of that dark period after her accident. It took four months after she was discharged to come to terms with the limitations of her physical condition. Then, there was no stopping her. It was time to get back on her feet.

### THE GIFT OF PERSISTENCE

To Kirsten, life is all about training. She explains: “We train to be fit enough to compete or meet life’s challenges. If we succeed, we seek a new finishing line, a new challenge. If we don’t, we try again.”

“WE TRAIN TO BE FIT ENOUGH TO COMPETE OR MEET LIFE’S CHALLENGES.”

Life may have thrown Kirsten a tough challenge, but she was prepared to train to overcome it. She needed to walk again – no matter what doctors said. And she knew she was not too old to relearn how.

After all, she only learned how to swim freestyle in university. “I spent six months trying in a semi-heated swimming pool,” she recalls. “I looked like a drowning rat at first. I must have gulped down enough water to raise the university’s water charges that year.” But she persisted. By year-end, she was swimming laps in freestyle. She is proud to share that she had improved the most in her class. “It was a defining moment in my life. I realised then that I have the gift of persistence.”

This trait would eventually help her through the intensive rehabilitation that was to come. “At week six of my hospitalisation, I started daily 30-minute physiotherapy sessions at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital (KTPH) to regain my mobility,” says Kirsten. The beginning was always the hardest – Kirsten could



not bring herself to struggle through “stupid” exercises like toe pointing and knee bends.

But pride and pain soon gave way to Kirsten’s strong desire to bounce back to health. “I was determined to get most of my life – if not more – back,” she says. After her discharge, she consulted a private physiotherapist with a more aggressive approach. “She got me working with Swiss balls and strengthened my shoulders with Thera-Bands, a type of latex exercise band. I did everything as told, and soon I could do the exercises on my own.” But she still could not stand.

Kirsten refused to let the fact that she was wheelchair-bound hinder her from doing sports. “I had to be carried into the pool,” she says, adding that people often stared at the curious sight. “But once I was in the water, I swam faster than the average pool user.” She finally got the doctor’s clearance to

stand in February 2012. She pushed herself to put one foot in front of the other.

Walking around her block, a 600m distance, took her 13 minutes at first.

As time went by, she walked faster, and faster. Now, she runs on weekends, swims thrice weekly, and cycles every other day. “I love to test my limits, both physically and mentally. Knowing that I will always come out of these physical challenges a stronger person motivates me.”

## EMBRACING NEW CHALLENGES

Kirsten has a lot to look forward to in life. Her next comeback event is a mega-triathlon that will be held in the United Kingdom in April 2013. She says: “I will be attempting to complete a 4km swim, 352km bike ride and 42.2km run to raise funds for a friend’s daughter and the A-T Society.” Ataxia telangiectasia (A-T) is a progressive, degenerative condition that causes severe disability and early death.

For Kirsten, sport now holds a far greater meaning than before the accident. “It is more than the air I breathe,” she says. “It has the potential to create a social fabric that binds every single member of society. I have learned the hard way that sports can help vulnerable segments of society to develop their sense of identity and self-worth, while the more robust members of society can practise their abilities to provide social support to the less fortunate.”



This is why she has chosen to pursue a Ph.D. in sport psychology. But to do so, she had to leave her family and start all over again in a foreign environment. “I just had to move on. I have to make full use of what I have gone through to give back to sport,” says Kirsten, who is researching the psychological factors that influence rehabilitation success following athletic injury.

Moving to Perth to do so was not an easy decision for Kirsten, but sport has taught her never to regret the decisions she makes. “I have learned to trust my decisions.” Kirsten ruminates: “In any sport, you play to win. You have to make the decisions to get you there and you cannot control lots of things. You have to let the game unfold and improvise on your strategy as you go along.”

## VALUES

Resilience • Perseverance • Courage

## REFLECTION

1. For Kirsten, the life lessons she learned in sport kept her motivated and moving forward during her long, and often emotionally fraught, recovery period after her accident. What are the driving forces helping you to overcome your life challenges?
2. Despite her own still-fragile physical condition, Kirsten is planning to raise funds for a friend's daughter and the A-T Society (ataxia telangiectasia is a progressive, degenerative condition that causes severe disability and early death). Do you think many people would be willing to rise above their own hardships to help others? What would it take?



# MASTER OF STORMS

Born with cerebral palsy, **JOVIN TAN** did not let his disability stop him from sailing and competing in the Paralympics – thrice. The 27-year-old reveals how the sport helped him to overcome physical and mental barriers to success.

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**T**he race was about to start at the 2004 Athens Paralympics, but Jovin Tan was still not on his keelboat. He had arrived at the competition venue early – a habit honed from years of disciplined training – and done all the necessary preparations. But when it was time to get onto the boat, no volunteer was available to carry him.

Jovin, who was born with cerebral palsy, took a quick look around. Indeed, there was no able-bodied person who could help. His teammates were also disabled. He shrugged, and decided to do it himself. He swung himself off the wheelchair and onto the concrete platform. Without a single shred of hesitation, he crawled swiftly towards his keelboat, hoisted himself up, and put his legs in. Then, he got down to business.

This can-do spirit is characteristic of Jovin, one of the first Singaporean sailors to participate in the Paralympics. He says: "I actually have one of my coaches, Edward Yow, to thank for that. When he was training me for the 2004 Athens Paralympics, he didn't allow anyone to assist me. Even if it was a hot day, I had to walk down the gangway by myself, then get on my knees to crawl into the boat." Jovin recalls suffering plenty of minor cuts and bruises on his elbows and knees. "I wanted to give up then, but I told myself that if I did, all my effort would be wasted. I might as well hang tight and fight till the end."

And he did fight. From that first taste of world-level competition at the Athens Paralympics, Jovin went on to compete in two more Paralympics – Beijing 2008 and London 2012 – as well as local and international regattas. At the Beijing Paralympics, he and his teammate, Desiree Lim, sailed to a credible eighth placing in the Two-Person Keelboat, SKUD 18 category. In 2012, they clinched the seventh overall position at the London Paralympics. For his sporting achievements, Jovin won the Singapore Youth Award 2012.

In sailing – as in life – Jovin has weathered countless storms. Yet, instead of a weary spirit, the 27-year-old has gained an infallible resilience towards adversity. During the interview at the Singapore Disability Sports Council (SDSC), Jovin says: "No matter where you want to get to, there are bound to be obstacles. In sailing, competition conditions are different every time. In life, challenges crop up. Having the right mindset and attitude will help you to overcome these difficulties."

## TESTING WATERS

Before he started sailing, Jovin endured a bleak existence. Even as a child, his condition meant that mobility from the neck down was severely limited. The wheelchair was already a permanent fixture in his life. So most of his formative years were spent cooped up at home, either in bed or on the sofa facing the television screen.

Day-to-day tasks were daunting to the boy. "I couldn't feed myself well, or get dressed on my own." In fact, one of his earliest memories was that of his devoted mother carrying him to school on her back. At Hong Wen Primary School, he could only watch as his classmates ran around and played games during physical education (PE) lessons. "There was no special PE programme for disabled children then, so I was always told to stay at the side and look after everyone's belongings," says Jovin, who has two younger siblings, Gina and Kevin.

The situation at home was no better. At that time, Jovin's mother had to

work two jobs – as part-time supermarket cashier and at Singapore Pools – to make ends meet. He was left in the care of his hot-tempered father during weekends. “I would get a scolding if I even dropped something on the floor,” says Jovin. “He also made some unpleasant remarks, which made me feel lousy about my disability.”

It was only when he was 15 that he found a way out. Jovin recalls: “I had been attending camps and activities organised by the Asian Women’s Welfare Association (AWWA) since I was two. They referred me to the SDSC, where there was a sailing programme in place.”

He signed up for it when he realised that it would take him out of his house on Sunday mornings. As Neptune Orient Lines/APL (NOL/APL) sponsored it, he did not have to pay a single cent. The Singaporean shipping company even arranged for staff volunteers to ferry Jovin to and from Changi Sailing Club. There were also volunteer members from Changi Sailing Club who assisted Jovin and other para-sailors to launch the boats into the water and recover them afterwards.

“**HAVING THE RIGHT MINDSET AND ATTITUDE WILL HELP YOU TO OVERCOME DIFFICULTIES.**”

While sailing was initially a way of fleeing from his domestic unhappiness, it proved to be an enriching experience for Jovin. “I still remember the first time I tried sailing,” laughs Jovin. “Everyone had a partner but me, so I had to try it out alone. The coach was standing at the jetty, shouting instructions through a loudhailer. I was so scared that I would fall over.” He had good reason to fear the sea. Even today, Jovin cannot swim due to his disability.

But he did not want to give up just like that. “Unlike other teenagers, I couldn’t go out on my own at all. I couldn’t visit shopping centres or watch a movie. All I wanted then was to get out of the house.” Gradually, he discovered that he looked forward to those Sunday sailing sessions. Over time, his confidence and fitness grew. So did his social circle.

True passion only arrived later, during the Sailability Singapore Regatta in 2001. In that breakout performance, he finished in fourth place. “I had only been sailing recreationally for about four months before the competition, and my physical condition was not comparable to other sailors,” says Jovin, who was studying in Bendemeer Secondary School then. “But it was the first medal I had ever received in my life. After that race, I started to feel that there was something I can excel in, and that’s why I told myself to push hard and do my best.”

## PLANNING AHEAD

It would be an understatement to say that sailing has changed Jovin's life for the better. The most obvious would be his physical transformation from a frail teenager into the tanned and brawny man he is today. Jovin shares: "I used to fall sick easily. If I happened to be out in a drizzle or under the sun, I would spend the next day nursing a flu in bed."

But as he progressed in his sailing, Jovin became physically stronger. Pulling, tying and tightening ropes on the single-seater boat helped him to build arm strength. "Steering the boat also trained my endurance. I also keep fit at the gym, especially when I train for major competitions," he says. All these add a new level of independence to his life. "Daily tasks like transferring myself from the wheelchair to the bed are no longer a hindrance."

At the same time, Jovin was acquiring essential life skills during sailing sessions. He became more aware of his limitations. "It would take three seconds for a stronger sailor to pull the ropes on board, but I need 10 seconds to accomplish that feat," says Jovin. From there, he started to realise that planning ahead was important. He would drill himself in all the necessary steps – and allocate enough time for pulling the ropes. "I have to be well-prepared to minimise the possibility of making mistakes."

### “IF DISABLED PEOPLE CAN DRIVE CARS, WHY NOT BOATS?”

When there were races, it was not unusual to see Jovin at the competition venue hours earlier. With the help of volunteers like his siblings, he would wash and rig up the boat. "I believe in showing opponents that I am always prepared and ever ready to compete." And, indeed, he always is. In 2005, he beat a field of able-bodied sailors to win the Singapore Straits Regatta and also the Ambassadors' Cup. That same year, he won the MPPP/PSC International Sailing Regatta. In 2006, he moved on to compete in the Far East and South Pacific Games for the Disabled, and was awarded SDSC's coveted Sportsman of the Year Award.

Jovin applies this philosophy in school and life as well. "When I was studying, I made it a point to finish my schoolwork so I could sail on weekends without worrying about grades. If I'm meeting friends, I will start getting ready earlier because I take longer to get dressed and travel to the meeting location in a taxi." This is why Jovin is rarely late for any appointments, whether they are social engagements or work-related meetings.

## BEING ACCOUNTABLE

Jovin's crowning glory came in 2008, when his team won the International Association for Disabled Sailing (IFDS) Two-Person Keelboat World Championship. With his teammate, Desiree Lim, he faced a daunting competition field featuring international heavyweights like Portugal and China.

But they retained their composure, and emerged world champions with the tightest of margins. With that, the team also won Singapore's qualification for the Beijing 2008 Paralympic Games. "There were 10 races, and we did well in the first three. But we fell behind when our boat equipment failed." His coach, Lock Hong Kit, did not pressure them. He told the team a bronze was good enough. "But that was not my style. I went back, calculated the points, and knew that it was possible to fight for the first place. On the last race, we circled the right number of rounds and went straight for the finish line." It was Jovin's proudest moment in sailing.

After the Beijing Paralympics, Jovin won the Stars of SHINE Award.

He then competed in the 2009 ASEAN Para Games in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In 2011, he placed first in a series of boat games at the 6th National Disability League (NDL) Sailing Regatta and Western Circuit Regatta, among others.

For Jovin, the toughest challenge he faces in sailing does not happen in choppy seas. Instead, juggling work and sport has proved to be the most trying. After graduating from the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) College East with a Higher NITEC in Information Technology, he joined the workforce to help defray household expenses.

His parents had divorced years earlier – and his mother was left with the task of bringing up all three children. As the eldest boy, Jovin decided to shoulder some responsibility to ease his mother's burden. He took on various contract positions at first, but the hourly rate he was paid was too low for him to sustain a regular lifestyle. Eventually, he joined a recruitment company full-time.

His employer, however, was not supportive of his sporting pursuits. "When I qualified for the London Paralympics, I had to take even more time off work to train in the gym, clock in water time at sea, or visit the physiotherapist," says Jovin. It was an impossible schedule without the understanding of his employer. He was told to leave the job.

“I’M NEVER WORRIED  
ABOUT HOW PEOPLE VIEW  
ME AND MY DISABILITY.”

SDSC then heard about his predicament, and referred him to The Chapman Consulting Group, where he is now an executive assistant and assists department directors in scheduling call screenings with job seekers. Jovin lavishes praise on his current employer. He says: "We have a give-and-take relationship. They allow me to take time off to train or fulfil other sporting responsibilities, while I always make sure that I complete all the tasks that I'm assigned."

Early this year, he had to be away for three weeks to train in London, before the actual Paralympics started. The racing took another three weeks. He ensured a smooth handover before leaving Singapore. "To compensate Chapman, I took the initiative to clock more hours at work whenever I could," says Jovin, who works from home. The official work hours are till 5.30 p.m., but he often checks and replies emails till midnight – even if he's exhausted from training.

This level of accountability has become a habit for Jovin. "It's about having the discipline to manage my time properly so that I can sail and hold down a job at the same time." He shrugs it off as no big deal. "Even if I have days off after competitions, I feel strange not having anything to do."

## SAILING FORTH

Jovin acknowledges that he could not have advanced so fast and far in sailing without the support and sacrifice of his siblings. Gina was just 16 when she first stepped into the sailing club. "She came out of curiosity, stayed on to watch me train, and even carried me into the boat! From then on, she committed herself to supporting me," says Jovin.

Over time, Gina worked behind the scenes to realise her brother's sporting dreams. She was, as Jovin affectionately calls her, the "boat girl" and took charge of rigging and unrigging the boat. At both local and international competitions, she was Jovin's main caregiver and, sometimes, even played a team manager role. "She did everything, from sorting out the schedules to doing minor repairs."

When she graduated from polytechnic, she even put her career on hold just to help him train for the Beijing Paralympics. Jovin acknowledges: "It wasn't easy for her – young girls all like to go shopping on weekends, but she would be out in the sun with me every Sunday morning without fail." Gina is now applying to be a flight attendant.

Their younger brother, Kevin, who is studying Fitness and Wellness at ITE College East, is poised to take over as Jovin gears up for the next



Paralympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 2016. “I hope to win a medal this time,” says Jovin. He also harbours hopes of becoming a coach. “Overseas, there are disabled coaches. But in Singapore, you need a Powered Pleasure Craft Driving Licence (PPCDL) to become a coach, and that is not something that’s open to disabled sailors.” In time, Jovin hopes to challenge that. He says: “If disabled people can drive cars, why not boats? In life, it boils down to whether you want to do it or not. If you want something bad enough, you will find a way to achieve it.”

Jovin, who sports a diamond ear stud and blond streaks in his hair, has come a long way since he was a frail and reserved teen. In his free time, he enjoys hanging out at cafes and pubs. He says: “I’m never worried about how people view me and my disability.” By the time he reaches the big 3-0, he hopes to be able to drive, have a family and a stable career. With his undaunted spirit, rigorous discipline and positive work habits, it seems like these dreams can certainly come true.

## VALUES

Discipline • Perseverance • Accountability

## REFLECTION

1. Jovin was born with cerebral palsy, but he does not let this condition prevent him from living a full life. He has participated in three Paralympic Games and developed a strong following as a motivational speaker. What are the lessons that you can learn from Jovin’s perspective on life?
2. Basketball coach John Wooden said that “Things work out best for those who make the best of the way things work out.” What values are implicit in this statement? How would you apply this philosophy to your life?





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## RIDING ON

Para-equestrienne **LAURENTIA TAN** did not let cerebral palsy and profound deafness stop her from becoming Singapore's first Paralympic medallist. She reveals her secrets to sporting success – endless practice, trusted teamwork, humour and a strong dose of determination.

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**T**he music started, but Laurentia Tan – perched on top of her horse, Ruben James II – could not hear it. She glanced ever so slightly towards the sidelines, where a permitted team member immediately signalled for her to start. For her, this was the easier part of the “Freestyle to Music” (or “kur”) event at the 2012 London Paralympics.

Laurentia then rode confidently into the arena, using permitted assistive devices like special looped reins, pacing her movements lightly, rhythmically. Despite her unstable muscle movements, she maintained precise control of Ruben James II, directing him to walk accurately sized circles or trot in a serpentine pattern.

Knowing when to finish, however, was the toughest part. “I was not able

to hear the music at all, let alone hear when the music was trailing off,” says Laurentia, 33, who competed under Grade 1-A (athletes whose severe disability has the greatest impact on their ability to ride). “I would have loved to have a visual aid, like a live orchestra or flashing lights, so that I could have ‘seen’ the music. But that was not possible.”

Instead, all Laurentia could rely on was her well-honed understanding of her horse. “From his steps and rhythm, I could work out whether we were ahead of or lagging behind the music.” Laurentia did well, scoring 79,000 to finish behind Britain’s Sophie Christiansen, and ahead of Ireland’s Helen Kearney. That silver medal was her second at the London Paralympics. Earlier, she had won bronze in the individual championship test. With the addition of these two medals, Laurentia became Singapore’s most bemedalled Paralympian. In February this year, she was crowned *The Straits Times* Athlete of the Year for 2012 for her achievements in London.

Laurentia first made history – and shot to international fame – at the 2008 Beijing Paralympics. Riding Harvey (also known as “Nothing to Lose”), a 20-year-old chestnut gelding, she became Singapore’s first Paralympic medalist when she came in third in the individual championship event at the Hong Kong Olympic Equestrian Centre in Shatin. It was also Asia’s first Paralympic equestrian medal. Later, she also won a bronze in the individual freestyle test. For her extraordinary achievements that year, she was named as one of Singapore’s most outstanding athletes and conferred the Pingat Bakti Masyarakat (Public Service Medal) by President S. R. Nathan.

“RIDING HAS  
ENABLED ME  
TO ‘FLY’.”

Laurentia’s sporting successes are remarkable, considering how she had developed cerebral palsy and profound deafness shortly after birth. At that time, doctors declared her “spastic”, and informed her parents that she would probably not be able to walk or talk. They also recommended that she be institutionalised. Yet today, Laurentia is fiercely independent. She lip-reads, walks unaided, and drives to and from Kent (about 100km away from her home in Surrey) four times a week for training. It takes six hours for Laurentia to drive to her training sessions in Kent, groom and tack up the horse, train, untack the horse, and drive home. She rides in all weathers, through rain, sun, wind and hail – but she says: “It never feels like hard work.”

It has been five years since her Paralympic breakthrough in 2008. But Laurentia’s deep-seated passion for the sport is evident. “On a horse, I have the energy and freedom of movement that my own legs cannot give me,” Laurentia says emphatically. “Through riding my horses, it has given me

inspiration that anything is possible in life. While there are times when things may not go well, it is how one responds to or approaches a problem that really counts. Often, there are many ways to solve a problem. In a way, riding has enabled me to ‘fly’.”

## YOUTHFUL DETERMINATION

When Laurentia was three, she moved to the United Kingdom with her parents – Anselm and Jannie Tan – and an elder brother, Ephraim. The family relocated because of Anselm’s business commitments and eventually stayed on because England had better medical and specialist educational support facilities for Laurentia.

Growing up, Laurentia struggled with her physical disabilities. Being deaf, she missed out on conversations with family and friends, even though everyone around her willingly repeated their sentences for her benefit. Her condition also meant that she was always physically slower than her friends, and she fell over so often and sustained so many minor injuries that her teachers and the school nurse nicknamed her “Trouble”.

“ I DON’T THINK  
IT IS POSSIBLE TO  
ACHIEVE OUR GREATEST  
POTENTIAL WITHOUT  
PUSHING OURSELVES.”

At five years old, upon the advice of her physiotherapist, her parents arranged for her to take up horse riding at the Diamond Centre for Disabled Riders in London. “I couldn’t stay upright, so two people had to hold me in a sitting position on each side of the pony as a third person led the way,” reminisces Laurentia. “I remember that first ride as being a very bouncy one and I absolutely loved the experience!”

For the next few years, Laurentia would find riding extremely therapeutic. She says: “It helps with my balance, stamina and coordination while strengthening my core muscles. My posture and walk also improved over time.” Gradually, so did her self-esteem.

Even in the face of physical challenges, a young Laurentia always strived to do everything that able-bodied children could. “I was always running around with my friends in the playground, and copying their cartwheels and rollovers,” she laughs. “I even asked for roller skates and everyone laughed saying I would never be able to balance properly. But my response to that was: “How will we know I can’t do it, unless I try . . . ?”

It was with this mindset that she decided to pursue equestrian dressage

in 2005. By then, she had completed her A-level at the Mary Hare Grammar School, a boarding school for the deaf, graduated from Oxford Brookes University with an honours degree in hospitality management and tourism, and was working as a mental health worker. She says: "I had stopped riding to concentrate on university and my job, but I missed the sport terribly."

### FINDING HARMONY IN TEAMWORK

So Laurentia returned to the Diamond Centre for Disabled Riders, where she met her coach, Heather "Penny" Pegrum. In 2006, she participated in dressage competitions at her coach's encouragement.

By the end of that year, she had progressed to the Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) Nationals. Then in 2007, the Riding for the Disability Association (RDA) Singapore invited Laurentia to join the Singapore team for the World Para Dressage Championships. It was also a qualifier for the 2008 Beijing Paralympics.

Over the years, Laurentia has trained with different horses, mostly borrowed. There was the older and more gentlemanly Harvey; a sensitive but reassuring Ruben James II; as well as Laurentia's own horse, a younger and playful Rubin (or "Redcliff"). She says: "In a way, having a partner in a horse is the challenge. Like people, horses have their own personalities and temperaments. But I have to learn to perform in harmony with all of them."

**“ I WILL NEVER KNOW  
WHETHER I CAN DO  
IT UNTIL I TRY! ”**

Laurentia remembers an instance at the World Para Dressage Championships in July 2007, when she felt hesitant and unsure in the arena. "I had been training with Harvey for only three months then, and it was the first international competition for the both of us. Then I remembered that in training, he had shown me I could do it." That worked, and the pair performed wonderfully. In both her team and individual tests, she achieved at least a 63%. She was placed fourth in a field of 18 riders with a best score of 67.94%.

The high scores kick-started Laurentia's para-equestrian career. In June 2008, preparations for the Beijing Paralympics got more intense, and Laurentia quit her job as a mental health worker to ride full-time, training with Penny and physiotherapist Anthea Pell.

Beyond working in partnership with her horses, Laurentia believes that the teamwork extends to her support team of coaches, vets, grooms,

physiotherapists, British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters and even horse owners. “Dressage is not just about the partnership between the horse and rider. In equestrian especially, there is also a large support team. Through my trainings, I have learned the importance of communication and trust in partnership and teamwork.”

### PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

These days, Laurentia spends most of her time training in England, where she still lives, as well as in Germany, where some of the horses are based. She also participates in various regional, national and international competitions, mostly held in Europe.

“Before any big event or competition, I would ride two or three times nearly every day,” she says. “Even when I’m not riding, I would be busy in the gym, doing physiotherapy exercises and stretches. I still have to do this every day to help me to be more supple and balance better on the horse.” But while there have been times when Laurentia was truly exhausted by her training sessions, she confesses to enjoying the mental challenges and physical agility of the sport too much to give up.

The challenge of competition enthralled her. “In the arena, anything can happen and I have to try to manage the situation and do the best I can under any circumstances. I don’t think it is possible to achieve our greatest potential without pushing ourselves. I’m always trying to improve my equestrian skills and scores, and be a better rider.”

Those around Laurentia have observed in her a perfectionist streak. She can spend hours just trying to perform a certain movement down pat. “There are frustrating moments, of course. But I find that practice, practice and more practice can usually help make it better.” It is this perseverance to practise till perfection is achieved that has propelled Laurentia into the international limelight.

For Laurentia, winning the first Paralympic medal for Singapore was not only a personal achievement. She saw it as a strong example of what people with disabilities can achieve if given the right opportunities. “I am very lucky to be able to do what I love,” she says, adding that she is working

“YOU WILL NEVER KNOW  
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to raise awareness of the sport through talks in schools and corporations. She adds: "My achievements in equestrian have shown me that dreams and opportunities come in disguise. You will never know where things may lead, so it is important to focus on the things that you enjoy and follow your dreams."

### VALUES

Perseverance • Tenacity • Teamwork • Harmony

### REFLECTION

1. She may look fragile, but Laurentia has proven her strength over many years. She has overcome adversity to define herself as a resilient Paralympian athlete. Have you struggled with adversity in your life? What resources did you draw upon to rise above the circumstances? What lessons did you learn during the experience? Have you counselled someone who has been in need – a colleague, friend or family member who needed guidance or moral support? How did you show your care and encouragement? How would you describe yourself as a mentor or a leader?
2. "In the arena, anything can happen and I have to try to manage the situation and do the best I can under any circumstances," Laurentia says. Have you been in a situation where your team has given its best but has not been able to achieve the desired outcome? How did you manage your own frustration or disappointment? As a team leader, how did you motivate your team to stay focused? How did you manage the criticism or expectations of management?



# PRIDE OF THE NATION

What makes us proud? Valour in struggle. Grace in triumph. The unexpected victory. A commitment of will in the face of great adversity. An ordinary person doing something extraordinary and inspiring us to believe that we can, too. These three individuals made us proud as they rose to conquer – a mountain, a long-standing national record and an Olympic standard.



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# THE UNASSUMING STAR

**LIM HEEM WEI** made history when she became the first Singaporean gymnast to qualify for the 2012 London Olympics. The 24-year-old discusses the challenges of training hard for competitions – and how she triumphed through determination, hard work and a desire for excellence.

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**W**hen national gymnast Lim Heem Wei awoke some mornings, it was to an immediate overwhelming sensation of pain. Day after day of relentless stretching, twisting, bending and leaping was taking its toll on her body as she prepared for competition after competition.

However the petite athlete has always been known for her mental determination to overcome whatever obstacles that come her way – and that includes pain. Since she debuted in competitive gymnastics at the 2001 Southeast Asian (SEA) Games, her body has endured a litany of injuries. Over the phone, she casually brushes them aside. “They are not life-threatening,” the 24-year-old says. “Besides, injuries are part and parcel of sport – it

shouldn't stop anyone from continuing to work hard."

Her nonchalance towards her injuries may be surprising to some. While sprains and strains are all too common for serious gymnasts, she has been through much worse. In 2007, she suffered a stress fracture to her lower back. The next year, she fractured her left foot while training for the Asian Gymnastics Championships.

Still, she persisted in competing in the team event. The National University of Singapore (NUS) business undergraduate explains: "I didn't consider backing out because my team would have been affected." Eventually, the team won bronze. But her recovery was severely compromised. By 2009, she knew she had to undergo bone graft surgery – or risk not being able to walk properly in the future. Two screws were implanted in her bone.

Recovery was long, painful and difficult. At 20, she was already considered old in the gymnastics world. Most gymnasts peak in their early to late teens. In her long absence from training, she had also put on weight. After being

in a cast for seven weeks, she had to cope with regaining the flexibility and range of her ankle, rebuilding her physical fitness, and scheduling physiotherapy and rehabilitation sessions into her already-heckic routine. All of this could easily have spelled the end of her gymnastics career, but she refused to give up.

Finally, Heem Wei's determination paid off when she competed at the Artistic Gymnastics World Championships in Tokyo in 2010. That qualified her for the Olympic test event held in January 2012, where she did well enough to qualify for the 2012 London Olympic Games. She made history by being the first Singaporean gymnast to win a spot in the games. "To be able to qualify and then participate in the Olympics was a dream come true," she says.

At the Olympics, Heem Wei gave a strong and poised performance before a full arena, with her parents sitting proudly in the stands. She achieved a combined score of 50.7999 on four apparatuses – the balance beam, uneven bars, vault and floor – and finished 45th out of 98 competitors. While she did not qualify for the all-around final, it was a credible result considering that Heem Wei was Singapore's first representative at the event.

Heem Wei's remarkable trajectory to the Olympics is a story that truly inspires. While it may be a tale marked by physical pain, she has shown how a strong dose of determination, sheer hard work and a desire for excellence have gotten her to where she is today.

## TEAM ENCOURAGEMENT

When Heem Wei started Primary One at Singapore Chinese Girls' School (SCGS), her teacher, Ann Ravi, noticed how lively and energetic she was. The self-professed tomboy, who is a middle child with two sisters, recalls: "I would climb trees, ride bicycles and play with dogs. I even had a boy's haircut! So Mrs. Ravi asked if I was keen to join the gymnastics team."

At the time, Heem Wei did not even know the difference between handstands and cartwheels. But curiosity pushed her to say yes, and she started spending two afternoons every week at gymnastics class. "The training involved running, jumping and tumbling around the gym," says Heem Wei. "I think my parents were glad that I found an avenue to unleash my energy in a productive way."

Heem Wei enjoyed the trainings, as her seniors doted on her. With her parents' loving support, Heem Wei continued doing gymnastics throughout her primary school years, even joining the Singapore Amateur Gymnastics Association when she was 10. At 12, she was given the opportunity to compete in the women's team floor exercise and balance beam events at the 2001 SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. "It was a big leap for me. Unlike my teammates, I had only participated in local competitions before." She was also the youngest in the team.

Before the start of each event, Heem Wei remembers being jittery and nervous. But she quickly looked to her teammates for guidance and reassurance. "I saw how everyone, especially my leader, Low San May, remained calm and composed. Since they could deal with the pressure, I was sure I could too." For Heem Wei, the camaraderie she felt with her team also spurred her on. "Even though we didn't win any medals in that SEA Games, just working towards a common goal made the training journey worth it. I also gained experience from participating."

Her passion for her sport is evident. "Gymnastics is a perfectionist sport. Unlike other sports, we are expected to deliver our skills in an almost flawless form," mulls Heem Wei, who adds that she admires the Russians for their ability to execute their skills with power, elegance and precision.

“IT IS POSSIBLE TO REMAIN  
TOUGH MENTALLY, PICK  
OURSELVES UP, OVERCOME THE  
CHALLENGES, AND MOVE ON.”

## DAILY DRILLS IN DISCIPLINE

After her first SEA Games, Heem Wei considered quitting the sport. She had observed that, compared to other gymnasts of her age, she was merely average. "I wasn't exceptionally flexible or strong – there were so many gymnasts around me who displayed more talent," she states emphatically. Yet, that did not stop her from trying her best. "Talent wasn't going to drop from the sky. I knew that I had to make up for any intrinsic shortfalls with sheer hard work. I just kept working, working, working towards it."

Naturally, it was a task easier said than done. But Heem Wei put her mind to it. She trained four to five hours every day, six times a week. "Sometimes, it got so tough I didn't even feel 'human' anymore," she admits. As she trained, she had to manage her studies, first at SCGS, then at Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP). The Sport and Wellness Management diploma student even sacrificed time with family and friends just to train. "Social engagements like movie

**“GYMNASTICS HAS SHAPED ME TO BECOME A DISCIPLINED, DILIGENT AND DOWN-TO-EARTH PERSON.”**

dates and personal activities like surfing the net definitely took a back seat."

Little wonder that thoughts of giving up regularly flashed through her mind. "But to me, there were two ways about it – I

could give up, or I could go all the way," she reflects. "Once I decided not to take the easy way out, I knew I had to push through and get by. If you only put in 50%, you cannot expect a miracle in the competition results."

For a young Heem Wei, discipline had a lot to do with it. "There are only 24 hours in a day. I had to know what I expected of myself – to do well in competitions and to score a place in a local university – and be disciplined enough to work towards it. Just as I worked on my strengths and weaknesses in gymnastics, I studied the best I could in school."

Each time Heem Wei struggled in training, she would think of everyone who supported her, like her parents, coaches and schools. "I figured that I had to at least give my best shot in overcoming all my challenges, be it physical or psychological. It wouldn't be fair to them if I gave up just like that."

She remembers one of the toughest decisions she had to make – whether or not to defer her O-level to train full-time for the 2005 SEA Games. It was with the support of SCGS principal Rosalind Heng that she eventually decided to do so. Heem Wei adds: "She even allowed me to train at the High Performance Training Centre, and counted that attendance and effort as my



CCA. I had to work hard to repay that level of trust she accorded to me.”

Her hard work paid off, as she became part of the women’s team that won Singapore’s first team gold in the Philippines in 2005. She would eventually score two more gold medals in the 2007 and 2011 SEA Games. Locally, she also scored a series of gold medals at the Singapore Gymnastics Open Championship in 2011.

Besides five SEA Games, Heem Wei also competed in two Asian Games (2006, 2010). Before her success at the London Olympics, her defining achievement was winning the Republic’s first-ever gymnastics silver medal for the women’s balance beam event at the New Delhi Commonwealth Games in 2010.

## HUMILITY IN EXCELLENCE

Heem Wei has good reason to be proud of her sporting achievements, but she remains grounded and modest. “I definitely did not walk this journey alone,” she says. “Besides my parents and my former principal, I also have

“**GYMNASTICS IS A PERFECTIONIST SPORT. UNLIKE OTHER SPORTS, WE ARE EXPECTED TO DELIVER OUR SKILLS IN AN ALMOST FLAWLESS FORM.**”

NYP and NUS, the Singapore Sports Institute (SSI) medical team, Singapore Amateur Gymnastics Association, as well as my two coaches – Yuan Kexia and Zhao Qun – to thank.”

She cites the Chinese gymnasts as her inspiration in humility. “They are such great gymnasts but never come across as arrogant or overconfident.

Even when they win, they do not snub other athletes.” Heem Wei also saw how they respected their coaches by always addressing them formally, and she applied those standards to her coaches.

With her Olympic successes solidly behind her, Heem Wei is now at a stage where she has to carefully consider her future. “It was a privilege and an honour to have been able to compete at the highest platform, and it will always be a wonderful memory.” After she graduates from NUS, she looks forward to competing in the corporate world for a change. “I would like to do something related to business, but I hope to give back to the sport, probably as a gymnastics coach or an international judge.” Interestingly, she is also longing to try out water sports like windsurfing, sailing and wakeboarding – all activities that she never got to try because of her unfailing commitment to gymnastics.



The sport remains close to her heart. “I feel that gymnastics has shaped me to become a disciplined, diligent and down-to-earth person,” she says contemplatively. “Beyond that, it has nurtured my emotional resilience. From my injuries, I’ve learned that things don’t always go the way we want them to go in life. But it is possible to remain tough mentally, pick ourselves up, overcome the challenges, and move on.”

## VALUES

Perseverance • Humility • Diligence

## REFLECTION

1. It took a strong will to overcome injuries and naysayers in gymnastics. There were times that she thought about giving up. But she was determined to go the distance. On the back of that will, Heem Wei became the first Singaporean to qualify as a gymnast at the 2012 London Olympic Games. Have you been in professional situations where you have had to persevere through adversity? What values helped you stay true to your goals or dreams? Have you mentored or counselled a colleague or friend in similarly difficult situations? How did you help motivate them?
2. Great athletes rise to the top of the podium with commitment, talent and a community of support from people who care. Through their experiences and their role models, athletes have learned to be gracious in winning and noble in defeat. How have you handled success? Have you graciously acknowledged the people who have helped you along the way? Do you make an effort to be a good role model to your friends and colleagues? How would people describe you as a leader or mentor?



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# SCALING NEW HEIGHTS

**JANE LEE** not only beat the danger of avalanches, 118-mile-an-hour winds and low oxygen levels to summit Mount Everest, she made history as part of the first all-women team from Singapore to accomplish the feat. The postgraduate student reveals how climbing has taught her diligence, teamwork, adaptability and perseverance.

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**L**ife on the highest mountain in the world was anything but a breeze. For two and a half months in 2009, Jane Lee – and five other female members of the Singapore Women's Everest Team (SWET) – learned to survive not only in the harshest of temperatures, but also in the most primitive of conditions at Everest Base Camp.

As temperatures plunged to as low as minus 73 degrees Celsius after sunset, the team huddled in small 2m by 2m tents to keep warm. They had to get used to cleaning their bodies with wet wipes. Frozen laundry was a norm. Despite the inconveniences, Jane and her team remained focused on their goal of reaching the summit of the 8,850m mountain. In May, they prepared themselves for the summit push by ascending from Everest Base Camp – at



5,320m above sea level – to Camps One, Two and Three repeatedly over several weeks. These acclimatisation “cycles” at a slow and steady pace helped them to get used to the altitude and eventually aided their final ascent to the summit on 20 and 22 May.

“We divided into two teams to maximise our chances,” says Jane, who led the first team to summit successfully. “When the second team radioed us the next day to let us know that they had made it to the top, and that everyone was safe and sound, we were elated.” Not only had the team overcome the risks of avalanches, 118-mile-an-hour winds and low oxygen levels to summit Mount Everest, they were also the first all-women team from Singapore to scale the peak.

“When I climb, every moment is enjoyment to me,” reveals Jane. “The summit is just the icing on the cake – it gives me a goal to look forward to.” With the completion of one climb soon came the desire for another. From 2010, she went on to scale the Seven Summits – the highest peaks of seven continents, including Everest, Kilimanjaro, Denali, Elbrus, Aconcagua, Kosciuszko, and Vinson – and she eventually became the first female from Southeast Asia, and the 37th woman in history, to do so.

For Jane, who recently graduated with a Master of Business Administration from Yale University, mountaineering is more than just a sport. Over the years, the passion to climb more mountains has kept her motivated and has continued to inculcate in her the values of diligence, teamwork, adaptability and perseverance. In short, her passion for climbing has prepared her for life.

## CHILDHOOD ADVENTURES

Growing up, Jane had an active and adventurous childhood. Playtime was constantly filled with outdoor activities such as riding a bicycle, flying a kite, or going fishing. Her father – businessman Lee Hua Lam – believed in letting children experience nature as much as possible.

When she was just four, he tossed her into a waterfall pool in Kota Tinggi, Malaysia. The family, including Jane’s mother Susan Sng and two siblings, was there for a weekend getaway. “There! Swim!” her father commanded, as he stood by the edge of the pool to ensure that she would not be in any danger. As the proud father expected, Jane struggled and splashed around, but somehow managed to stay afloat and swim. “That became one of my very first lessons in life - just dive in!”

Her love for the outdoors continued into her teens. By then, she was

studying at the Raffles Girls' School (RGS). "At that time, RGS was one of the only two schools in Singapore with an outdoor adventure club. So, I consider myself fortunate to have been exposed to such a wide range of outdoor sports and activities from a young age." Soon, Jane realised that she really enjoyed hiking and trekking, and went on to scale nearby peaks like Gunung Tahan and Mount Ophir in Malaysia.

By the time she turned 18, Jane had made her first trek to the Himalayas. She says: "I managed to convince two friends to hike to the Annapurna Base Camp (ABC) in Nepal with me." Armed with little more than a printout of some Internet guides, and dad in a cheap windbreaker that was later bartered for a Tibetan dzibead, the trio reached ABC. There, Jane looked around and saw that while the ABC was their destination, it was merely the starting point for other climbers.

That was a moment of stark realisation for Jane. "I figured that if a group of six-foot-tall men who lived in arctic temperatures through the dead of Russian winters could climb a mountain, then so could I – notwithstanding the fact that living in Singapore, the coldest it ever gets is in an air-conditioned room, and the tallest 'hill' we have is a 164m bump in the ground."

She returned to Singapore with a burning desire to climb.

"I climbed my first mountain in the New Zealand Alps in 2003

with my university mountaineering team," says Jane, who majored in English Literature at the National University of Singapore (NUS). In 2004, she scaled Island Peak, her first Himalayan peak in eastern Nepal. "The most significant memory from my university years is the 95% of the time that was devoted to climbing: training, or thinking about climbing. Probably only 5% of my time was spent cramming Shakespeare and Dante!"

“CLIMBING MOUNT EVEREST  
TAUGHT ME SO MUCH  
ABOUT TEAMWORK.”

## COMMITMENT TO HARD WORK

By 2005, Jane found herself leading the Singapore Women's Everest Team (SWET), comprising co-leader Sim Yi Hui, logistics in-charge Joanne Soo, communications in-charge Lee Peh Gee, medic in-charge Lee Li Hui and media relations in-charge Esther Tan. They were the country's first all-women team, juggling climbing responsibilities with full-time jobs. Jane was then a student development officer at Republic Polytechnic.

"The idea for an all-female Everest team actually came about in 2004,

and we thought it would be pretty awesome to put together such a team as it had never been done in Singapore or Southeast Asia," says Jane. "People usually have this impression that mountaineers are big, burly, bearded men, but I believed that ordinary women like us could also undertake such an endeavour." Over the next five years, Jane and her teammates would prove their mettle.

Once the goal of summiting Mount Everest was set, Jane committed herself to the hard work involved. She trained six days every week, twice a day. The all-round training included long endurance runs, short interval runs, circuit training on stairs and weights training in the gym. As part of the training regime, she also climbed a 30-storey Housing & Development Board (HDB) block with 22kg loads for 12 sets per session. "Since we lacked mountains in Singapore, we climbed high-rise buildings instead. We saw it as an exercise in creativity," she laughs.

For technical training, SWET also scaled various peaks, such as Mera Peak in Nepal, Cho Oyu in Tibet, and peaks in the Four Sisters Range and elsewhere in China. They had the guidance of Lim Kim Boon, a climbing instructor based in the United Kingdom. "He was a half-strict coach and half-indulgent father figure. While he would insist that we load our backpacks with 20kg of rocks for circuits on an icefall in China that simulated the terrain on the Lhotse

Face on Mount Everest, he would also appear mid-circuit to deliver a snack or an encouraging pat on the head."

It was tough, but never once did Jane and her teammates ever consider giving up. Jane, the self-acknowledged "slave driver" of the team, explains: "Challenges, like unpredictable weather changes, were aplenty on the mountains. As these were out of our control, it was important that we were as prepared as we could possibly be. Being fit took away some of that fear and uncertainty."

After Jane finally scaled Everest, NUS awarded her the "Outstanding Young Alumni Award" in recognition of her achievements. For her, Mount Everest meant more than just the world's highest peak – it also represented a powerful lesson that determination pays off. "We spent five years training for the expedition. I felt that all the hard work was worth it," says Jane. "This really proved to me that as long as you set your mind to your goal and work towards it, you will succeed."

## ADAPTABILITY IN TEAMWORK

The period that Jane took to plan, train and climb Mount Everest was life-defining. “The six of us had to do everything ourselves, from looking for sponsors to marketing our team to holding publicity events,” explains Jane. “We even learned first aid and fixed our solar-powered communications system ourselves.”

It helped that each member of the team had different strengths. For Jane, that was a real-life paradigm of how each member of a team could contribute in different ways towards a common goal. “Climbing Mount Everest taught me so much about teamwork,” she says. “Before the expedition, I used to think that strong, effective leaders had to be “take-charge” types. Later I realised that leadership should also be about building a strong, talented team from within.”

She applied this philosophy to her studies at Yale, harnessing the individual talents of her fellow students in group projects. “If I was in a leadership position, I kept an open mind and made sure everyone’s opinions got heard.” This has a lot to do with adaptability as well, notes Jane. “Everyone had a different working style, so I had to adapt quickly and effectively to that.”

Likewise, adaptability is a skill that Jane has learned from mountaineering. In 2005, during an expedition to Muztagh Ata in Xinjiang, China, she and her team came to a point where they had to decide between risking a summit attempt in bad weather and retreating to base camp for safety. “We opted for the latter – and it turned out to be the wiser decision,” says Jane. “In no other sport is adaptability more important than when you’re on a mountain. While we should always be well-prepared, it’s also crucial to be able to improvise and think on your feet.”

## PERSEVERING ON THE PATH

After her Everest feat, Jane became a professional mountaineer, securing corporate sponsorships for her climbs. She counts scaling Mount McKinley (or Denali) in Alaska in 2010 as one of her more challenging climbs since Everest. “We did that independently, without guides and carrying our own supplies,” says Jane.

It was a physically tiring climb. At one point, she had to be on the move for more than 24 hours without rest. “This is when climbing becomes a mental challenge as much as a physical one. When you’ve climbed for a full day, the mind takes over and keeps the body going. You can always take another step,

it's whether you want to." When she summited Denali, Jane truly felt that she had improved as a climber.

This level of mental perseverance has also influenced her studies at Yale. "I took a big leap, from an English major to a business school student. I was never good in math, but I kept trying and trying in all my assignments until I eventually got better at it," says Jane.

With the rest of SWET, Jane also took time to give motivational talks at organisations and schools. "For us, Everest was a literal mountain to climb. But it is also a powerful metaphor that can be applied to any life goal, from scoring straight As to being the next Fandi Ahmad." The most important lesson that she always tries to pass on, is the courage to dream. "Too often, we are caught up in what we think is doable right now. But that limits us." She advises: "Keep your head in the clouds, but your feet on the ground."

And true to her nature, Jane is now choosing the road less travelled once again. She has been taking a break from professional mountaineering since 2011 when she began her studies at Yale, although she continues to find time to climb. But rather than starting her own adventure company – like most would expect her to – Jane will soon join McKinsey & Company as a consultant. "It's definitely a departure."

But as expected, the challenge does not daunt her. Jane says: "Since I have successfully climbed Everest, I will take the lessons learned from the mountain as a form of personal encouragement." And as she prepares for the next phase of her life, she is the living embodiment of her own belief that "there's no limit to human potential."



## VALUES

Teamwork • Diligence • Commitment • Perseverance • Leadership

## REFLECTION

1. Like Jane, everyone has an “Everest” in his/her life, a seemingly impossible goal that requires resourcefulness, teamwork, and discipline in thinking and action to achieve. What is your Everest? What values are you bringing to bear to achieve this goal?
2. What kind of approach do you have to life? What goals do you set for yourself? What goals have others set for you? Are they similar or very different?

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# IN FULL SPRINT

In every race, national sprinter and Olympian **GARY YEO** strives to win while surpassing his personal best. The 27-year-old business undergraduate, who has taken a year off to concentrate on the next World Championships, shares the life lessons he has learned on the track.

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**L**ondon, 2012. In Lane 2 of the running track at the Olympic Stadium, Gary Yeo was doing his warm-up behind the starting block. The Singaporean sprinter was in the third preliminary qualifying heat for the 100m race, alongside big names like Usain Bolt and Yohan Blake.

In the spectator stand, 80,000 people were already waiting in anticipation. Gary could feel the thrill of competing in front of a full stadium in his bones. At the sound of the starting gun, Gary – and the other sprinters – dashed off. In the blink of an eye, he had finished in second place with a time of 10.57s, beating his previous personal best of 10.62s at the World Championships 2011. The timing was good enough for him to enter the first official round – and he returned to the same track two hours later.





This time, Gary was up against Tyson Gay, the second-fastest athlete ever. He was off to a good start. But along the 50m mark, he felt his hamstring seizing up. The sudden tightness in his thigh prevented him from maintaining his speed and he lagged behind. Eventually, he finished in last place, clocking 10.69s. Tyson topped the heat with a timing of 10.08s. "I had a good start but not a good finish," shrugs the 27-year-old. With his timing, Gary was placed 50th out of 54 runners.

While an Olympic medal eluded him, being able to represent Singapore was already "an honour and a dream". He says: "At a world-level race like the Olympics, sometimes you know you can't win given the high standard of other athletes. But just being able to race against top names like Usain Bolt makes me see that they are not just the stuff of legends. They are also human, and this means that if I am disciplined and work hard, I may achieve my full potential one day."

Widely considered as one of the fastest men in the region, Gary had a 2012 that was nothing short of phenomenal. A Southeast Asian (SEA) Games silver medalist, Gary recently won the 100m final at the 2012 ASEAN University Games. He even clocked a new personal best time of 10.44s. In doing so, he became the fourth-fastest Singaporean in the distance. Only sprint legends like U. K. Shyam (who holds the current national 100m record of 10.37s), Canagasabai Kunalan and Muhammad Hosni have clocked better timings.

While these track successes may appear to be bursts of brilliance from the young man, he actually went through years of disciplined training behind the scenes before reaching this standard. "It is not just about luck or talent. To do well in both sports and life, it is about having the discipline to work towards better timings, the perseverance to stick to the path, and the mental strength to overcome any obstacle."

## A DETERMINATION TO SPRINT

With Gary's sporting accomplishments, it may come as a surprise that he failed to make the track and field team when he first entered Victoria School. "I was of a smaller size as compared to my peers and felt that I ran pretty fast," recalls Gary, who was also a former school hockey player. "So, when the time came for us to choose a co-curricular activity (CCA), I went straight for the trials – but ended up not being selected."

To say that Gary was disappointed would be an understatement. He says: "I really wanted to join the track and field team, especially since many of my close friends were there." He decided to stick it out in athletics by turning up

for training, anyway. “I managed to join the training squad instead of the main team.” He never missed a single training session. “I trained hard, followed my coach’s instructions and gradually improved.”

At 14, he finally had a chance to compete: “It was an inter-school 100m race, and Victoria School was in the running for the division title,” says Gary, who came in fourth. “While I didn’t make it to the top three, it felt really good to be able to represent my school and do my part.” They won the overall “C” Division Title for Boys that year. For Gary, there was no turning back – his track career was in full sprint.

Looking back at those days, Gary acknowledges that he did not set out to be a sprint star: “I just felt very determined towards running. As I thoroughly enjoyed the training sessions, I did not consciously set out to be so disciplined on the track,” he reveals. “The times spent with my coach and teammates were actually my strongest motivator. While many consider athletics to be an individual sport, teamwork actually played a significant role in my case.”

Gary adds: “Sprinters train by themselves to meet their personal targets and eventually, run solo against other competitors. But there will definitely be moments when a sprinter will feel tired and discouraged – this is when the coach and teammates can come in to push him or her to the next set.” For the earnest athlete, teamwork has served him well through the years. “Knowing that I’m part of a team only makes me more determined to work harder.”

“TO ME, ACHIEVING A BETTER PERSONAL TIME IS ALWAYS MORE IMPORTANT THAN BEING THE FIRST TO CROSS THE FINISH LINE.”

### PERSEVERING ON TRACK

While Gary had shown strong potential in his secondary school days, he knew he was still not fast enough. When the then-17-year-old was in Anderson Junior College, he came in first in the “A” Division 100m. But the win was marred by the fact that he did not register an improved personal time.

“To me, achieving a better personal time is always more important than being the first to cross the finish line,” shares Gary. “My real competitor on the track should be myself, and not the other sprinters.” He knew that he had to continue to push himself, and went on to participate in his first regional sporting event in 2004. During this time, he juggled vigorous training with academic demands, which soon proved too challenging for him to handle.

Gary then decided to switch to studying Information Technology (IT) at Singapore Polytechnic in 2005.

Gary's first major breakthrough in sports came when he earned a spot in the 4 × 100m relay team for the 2007 SEA Games. But although the team felt they had a good chance to score either a bronze or silver medal, they came in fourth. "So, even though we broke the national record with a timing of 40.10s, losing out on a medal was a blow for us," he says. Disappointed, he told himself to train even harder. In 2009, the national team consisting of Gary, Muhammad Elfi Mustapa, Lee Cheng Wei and Amirudin Jamal, clinched the silver medal at the 4 × 100m relay at the SEA Games in Vientiane, Laos. The timing of 39.82s set a new national record that year.

At the 2011 SEA Games in Palembang, Indonesia, the national men's team once again scored a silver medal with a timing of 39.91s. With Gary as anchor, they only lost by a hair's breadth to Indonesia. Meanwhile, no one really expected Gary – who was also participating in the 100m event – to win any medal at all. "After all, Singapore had not won any sprint medal in the

“WITH INJURIES, I JUST  
SEE IT AS A CHANCE TO  
COME BACK STRONGER.”

past decade," he says. But a month before the race, Gary and his coach, Melvin Tan, had felt that they had a real chance with the timings that he was registering. "We were quietly hoping for a medal, and when I

achieved a silver medal with 10.46s, it was not a surprise but a validation of our hard work in training."

The two silvers helped Gary end 2011 on a high, after juggling studies, training, and even a knee injury for the better part of the season. The same year, he also competed in various major competitions like the Asian Indoor Athletics Championships and the World Indoor Championships in Istanbul. He even rewrote the national record for the 4 × 100m relay with his team when they clocked 39.58s at the Kanchanaburi leg of the Asian Grand Prix in May.

"Perseverance matters," observes Gary. "I daydream a lot about going faster and attaining better timings. Then I tell myself that I can do it." The crucial thing, for Gary, is not to be let down by any setbacks – be it a busy schedule or sporting injuries. "As an athlete, I tend to miss many classes in school. For a major competition, I can lose up to four weeks at the start of a semester. So I always have to put in more effort to catch up, and apply the consistency with which I train into my studies. It helps that I have supportive classmates who are willing to guide me along." He adds: "With injuries, I just see it as a chance to come back stronger. No matter what kind of obstacles

there are, having a positive outlook can help you stay mentally strong. When you feel you can do it, half the battle is won.”

### STRIVING FOR PERSONAL BEST

Gary has taken the bold step of deferring the final year of his undergraduate studies at Singapore Management University (SMU) to train full-time. He explains: “Our national relay team is trying to qualify for the World Championships. If we qualify, it will be a significant step ahead for Singapore athletics as no team has qualified for it in the past. Also, it will signal our country’s desire to do well in athletics.”

For Gary, this means intensive training sessions of up to 10 times a week. “We will be doing full-day trainings, with breaks in between,” he shares. “It will include predominantly gym, sprint and relay training, long intervals as well as core workouts.” In 2013, he will also participate in the 100m and 4 x 100m relay at the SEA Games in Naypyidaw, Myanmar. “I’m aiming for gold in each event. In the relay, winning is very possible as we’ve bettered our national mark.”

After that, he plans to bring the curtain down on his running career when Singapore hosts the SEA Games in 2015. “When I go overseas to compete at major games, the crowd is not made up of Singaporeans. Running in front of the cheering home crowd at the new National Stadium will definitely be a rewarding swan song for me.”

When the time arrives, he believes he will have no regrets. “I will miss running, especially the training.” But Gary, who recently got engaged to his childhood sweetheart of 13 years, adds: “However, I know that my sporting experience has equipped me well for any challenge I choose to undertake in the future. The ability to work hard and persevere while keeping the faith will ensure that I do well – be it in studies, work or life.”

“WHEN YOU FEEL  
YOU CAN DO IT, HALF  
THE BATTLE IS WON.”

## VALUES

Discipline • Perseverance • Teamwork • Tenacity

## REFLECTION

1. Gary had to make some tough decisions when he was assigned to his school's hockey team instead of his preferred track and field. How do you rise above disappointment and other forms of conflict?
2. In his pursuit of excellence in athletics, Gary has had to balance many demands and challenges. How do you manage long-term goals against short-term setbacks? How do you set a "do-not-cross" line in your endeavours? How do you stay mentally strong?



# CONCLUSION

**A**t the beginning of this book, we commented that “Game for Life” is about 25 very different people with very different backgrounds who, nonetheless, share a common thread – a belief in the power of sport to inspire and transform lives.

Sport enabled the individuals profiled in these pages to develop a resolute sense of self, to thrive in the face of adversity and to have a meaningful impact on the world in which they live. Whatever natural talents or personalities they were born with, sport challenged, revealed and shaped the development of their values and character.

In these increasingly complex and, yes, tougher times, well-designed sport does more than create heroes on the field. Sport creates people characterised by extraordinary resilience and tenacity, strong integrity, respect for teamwork, and a defining sense of purpose and commitment to a greater good.

Sport makes you “Game for Life”.



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