



# 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.”

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."

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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

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

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"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?