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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.

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."

“SPORT IS A STEPPING STONE TO SOMETHING ELSE, LIKE CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT.”

Over the years, he has sparred with many local sailors like Yurii Siegel, Mik 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 pressuring 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."

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 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?