

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.

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 Chiew 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 Poulrier 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. Poulrier 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. Poulrier 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. Poulrier 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.”

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 x 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.”

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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.

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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?