

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.

The 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.

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."

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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."

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.”

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

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 cafés 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?