

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.

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 an alternate source of uninterrupted power supply in case one of the 12 brand new twin-powered 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-

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.

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

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

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 more in life.”

“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.”

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 Lenvin, 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?