

# THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE SAILOR

Former Olympic sailor **TAN WEARN HAW** became the Chief Executive Officer at the Singapore Sailing Federation in 2011. At 32, he was the youngest person to lead a national sports association here. The forward-looking man shares how sailing has shaped his character and shown him the world.

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**W**hen you first meet Tan Wearn Haw, what immediately strikes you is his swarthy, sunburnt skin. We are at a café at Craig Road in the heart of town, but the former national sailor looks as if he has just returned from sea. However that isn't the case. Instead, Wearn Haw has actually come from a meeting. Since he took up the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) position at the Singapore Sailing Federation (SSF), he has been focusing on his role within the organisation instead of sailing at sea.

"Sailing is just like running an organisation," the 34-year-old explains. "An organisation doesn't operate in a vacuum, so there is an external environment that a CEO cannot change. Likewise, in



sailing, there are conditions beyond a sailor's control, like the wind." He adds: "Then, there are the people within the organisation, like the crew. Put two and two together, and essentially, a CEO – like a skipper – has to learn how to harness the crew's ability on board to deal with external conditions in order to move ahead."

An accomplished sailor, he was not only the winner of the inaugural Optimist Asian Championship in 1990, but also a multiple Southeast Asian (SEA) and Asian Games medallist. In 2000, a 22-year-old Wearn Haw stepped onto the world stage to compete in the Sydney Olympic Games. He eventually progressed to the America's Cup – sailing's most prestigious event – in Valencia, Spain, in 2007.

Despite his long list of sailing accolades, Wearn Haw is reluctant to share at length about his sporting accomplishments. The soft-spoken father-of-one merely states: "Once in the water, I can be very competitive." Perhaps preferring to focus on his present role instead of past glories, he is more interested in discussing his future plans for the SSF, one of the highest-profile of the 64 national sports associations in Singapore. While he has held sports administrative positions in the then-Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) and the Singapore Sports School, his current role is his most challenging yet.

**“SAILING IS TRULY MORE THAN JUST A SPORT – IT IS A LIFE SKILL.”**

Since sailing was first introduced here over 40 years ago, it has gained much prominence and popularity. Medals have been won. Young talents have been selected and rigorously trained. "Today, Singapore is one of the top sailing nations in Asia," Wearn Haw notes. But having come so far, the SSF is striving towards the next challenge – an Olympic medal for the country.

As the CEO of SSF, Wearn Haw plays an active role in developing the sport in Singapore. He is responsible for building pathways for our next generation of sailors – and the one after them. To achieve this, Wearn Haw is returning to the basics. "Just like how sailing is about getting the fundamentals right, it is important that the right systems are first put in place – from sharing the sport with young children to establishing fair, open and robust selection processes to identify the best athletes." He acknowledges that his background in competitive sailing has served him well. "Sailing is truly more than just a sport – it is a life skill."

## SOLIDARITY IN SAILING

Wearn Haw credits his late father, Tan Yeok Keong, for putting the wind in his sails. A former national sailor and SEA Games gold medallist, the senior Tan used to sail at the Changi Sailing Club. As he navigated through the waters, a young Wearn Haw watched him while building sandcastles on the beach.

When the club offered a sailing course for children, he signed up immediately. "You could say it was a natural progression from sandcastle building," he laughs. Like most kids, Wearn Haw started out in the Optimist, a sailing dinghy popularly known as the "bathtub" because of its small size. As an adult, he would go on to become versatile in different classes, from single-handed to double-handed, windsurfing to keelboats, mega-yachts to Extreme 40 catamarans.

Everything about sailing intrigued the young boy. "Out in the waters, it was always such an adventure. I remember sailing from Changi to East Coast and being scared of big waves – everything just seemed bigger when you were kid-sized!" reminisces Wearn Haw. But he relished the independence that sailing brought him. "As children, we couldn't drive cars or pilot planes, but we could definitely sail."

**“WORKING AS A TEAM RUBBED OFF ON ME. I GREW TO UNDERSTAND THAT I COULDN'T DO EVERYTHING MYSELF.”**

Soon, Wearn Haw went on to join one of Singapore's earliest junior sailing programmes under the then-Optimist Dinghy Association of Singapore (ODAS). It was put into place by past sailing presidents like Ng Ser Miang, Peter Lim and Ong Siong Kai. As part of the pioneer batch of about 20 young sailors, Wearn Haw benefited from systematic training at club and national levels. "We trained on weekends and school holidays," says Wearn Haw. "We sailed, played and grew up together. We still keep in touch to this day."

Training closely with his fellow young sailors helped Wearn Haw to appreciate the value of teamwork early in life. "The adults at the club believed that young sailors should learn to do everything themselves. They never, ever helped to rig up the boats." Instead, the boys had to rely on one another, even going so far as to form teams of four to carry the boats onto the trolleys. "Working as a team rubbed off on me," says Wearn Haw of the strong camaraderie he felt with the other boys. "I grew to understand that I couldn't do everything myself, whether it's in sailing or running an organisation."

It was a valuable lesson. Even today, Wearn Haw recognises that different

people have different strengths. At SSF, he does not believe that he alone can run the ship. "I constantly seek advice from those who have more experience than I do in the sailing community," he explains, referring to sailors from the generation before him. "Elders' like 'Uncle' Jason (SSF's Secretary General Jason Lim) and Dr. Benedict Tan (SSF's President), along with many more from both local and international sailing circles have given me much advice from the very start."

### PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Sailing quickly opened up Wearn Haw's world. At just eight years old, he raced in the National Optimist Championships, fighting strong waves in the waters off Changi during a northeast monsoon. "I finished in 11th place, with the skin on my knees all torn off." The next year, he got into the top five and was selected to compete in the World Championships in France in 1988.

It was Wearn Haw's maiden voyage overseas. "I felt intimidated, and not just because it was my first big trip out of Singapore," he says. "Besides having to contend with sailing in a totally foreign environment, the cold was also unbearable." The boy finished in the bottom 10, out of 160 boats. Still, it was a memorable experience, one that made him realise what the world had to offer.

With that, Wearn Haw started pushing himself hard. Although it was intense juggling school and sailing, he did not succumb to the stress. "Although my parents were both teachers, they cut me a lot of slack. I had no tuition, so I sailed," he says. Besides, sailing has always been more "pleasure than pressure" for Wearn Haw. Unsurprisingly, the Victoria School boy sailed through the system with both straight As and sporting feats. His secret: Being prepared.

"In sailing, you can be stuck out in the stormy seas. If you're ill-prepared, you're putting yourself in danger. Before setting off, it's important to do the necessary preparative work, like checking the boat, the tides and weather forecast," explains Wearn Haw, who was crowned Sportsboy of the Year in 1993. "To me, practice makes perfect." He applied this line of thought to his studies, too. "I would prepare to the best of my ability so that I would be able to answer any question in the examinations."

When he turned 18, the Raffles Junior College (RJC) alumni member scored the prestigious Public Service Commission (PSC) Undergraduate Scholarship to read Aeronautical Engineering in France. He later graduated from Imperial College in London, United Kingdom, with a Master's degree

in Aeronautical Engineering. "I did not even do any 'S' papers, the usual prerequisite for a PSC scholarship, but my junior college principal put in an application based on my merits in sports, and perhaps his faith in me," he says. "It was only through sailing that I had a shot at the scholarship, and a shot at moving up in life."

During the late 1990s, Wearn Haw took a year-long sabbatical from his studies to focus on a full-time Olympic campaign. It was a struggle funding the campaign out of his pocket. "With my teammate, we slept in tents and hitchhiked during our campaign trail through Europe. I also saved money by munching on bread and salad all through the weeks," he recounts.

"There were also numerous setbacks throughout the four-year campaign, such as having to battle through changing selection processes, selection politics and having my partner barred from sailing by the sailing administration just six months before the Olympics." But, Wearn Haw admits that the overall experience was not that bad – it actually toughened him up. He eventually ranked 28th place in the men's two-person dinghy event.

### HONING ADAPTABILITY

Then, news that his father was dying of colon cancer reached Wearn Haw after restarting the school term. From London, he flew back to Singapore immediately. For the next month, Wearn Haw stayed by his father's bedside, tending to his every need until the end.

During this difficult time, it was windsurfing that helped him to weather the storm. At that time, Wearn Haw was taking a hiatus from sailing. "I started windsurfing at East Coast Beach – it was my way of getting some time to rest and recharge. Somehow, I enjoyed the sense of freedom in windsurfing – all I needed to get into the waters were my board shorts and a harness." The sport eased the emotional turmoil that Wearn Haw felt. "I would sleep better after a windsurfing session."

Wearn Haw went back into the boat in 2006. Armed with the aim to sail alongside world-class sailors like Chris Dickson, Wearn Haw took a two-year no-pay leave from MCYS – where he was a sports development officer – to join the 32nd America's Cup in Valencia, Spain. Together with his former Olympic campaign teammate, Charles Lim, he made it into the Sino-French Challenger, China Team by *le défi*.

Wearn Haw achieved this by virtue of his engineering background and multilingual abilities – he had picked up French "... from zero to university level in just six months." As part of the core group of the afterguard, he raced



first as a navigator, then as a strategist with the 17-men crew. "It was the first time I experienced the pressure of having to prove myself at every waking moment," says Wearn Haw. "We were all working towards the same goal – to win as a team, but we were also competing for places on the boat. And if I were to fall sick or get injured, I would lose my position on the boat. The team dynamics and the constant pressure provided a steep learning curve."

But Wearn Haw's experience as a youth sailor had built him up for the challenge. He says: "I made sure that I was always well-prepared, so that I could replicate what I'd done in training. But sailing is uncertain. So it's about prepping myself with ample skill sets – from technical knowledge to sailing tactics – and then dealing with what Mother Nature throws at me in the open water."

He compares this to life itself. "Thanks to sailing, I've been thrown into many different, and difficult, life situations, like moving to France without knowing the language and getting lost in the metro," he recalls. "It is only when you're thrown into the deep end that you can learn what you are truly capable of – sailing hones that sense of adaptability."

## GIVING BACK

From the America's Cup, Wearn Haw would continually add new sailing experiences like racing on mega-yachts to Extreme 40 catamarans around the world. As one of the most versatile sailors in Singapore today, he is the right man for the top seat at SSF.

But Wearn Haw reveals that – as in any sports association – "the paycheck doesn't justify the pressures." "Not everyone will agree with what you want to do, and problems will always crop up," he says. "It's a matter of gritting your teeth and dealing with it." It helps that Wearn Haw is motivated not by cash, but by his sheer passion for the sport and a willingness to serve.

He reveals that he took up the CEO position at SSF because of his desire to give back to the sport that has given him so much. "Many have the impression that sailing is a sport reserved for the privileged, but I actually came from a humble background," he reveals. "I grew up in a Housing & Development Board (HDB) flat, and went to a neighbourhood primary school (Teck Ghee Primary School). I only got a chance to sail because of the programmes that past presidents and stalwarts of SSF (then called the Singapore Yachting Association) have put in place."

Wearn Haw reflects openly that, without sailing, he would not have had the chance to study, work and live overseas, and experience the world. "My

story says a lot about what Singapore is. As long as you work hard, and grab opportunities that come your way, you will be able to succeed." This success has spurred him on to make sure that everyone who wants to, will have a chance to sail and go further in life through sailing.

Suddenly, Wearn Haw recalls a time he chatted with a taxi driver in Auckland, New Zealand, when he was there for the Louis Vuitton Pacific Series after the 2007 America's Cup. "He mentioned how much he enjoyed sailing and what the sport meant to the Kiwis, and we spent much of that car journey just sharing about the sport – as one fellow sailor to another. It was amazing to see that people can embrace sailing as a lifestyle. To me, that is Singapore's utopia for sailing. There is still a long way to go, but with time, it can be achieved."

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## VALUES

Teamwork • Discipline • Humility • Tenacity

## REFLECTION

1. Sailing taught Tan Wearn Haw the importance of teamwork. Whether it was sport or business, he learned that he could not do everything himself. What is your working style? Do you give yourself opportunities to work with and learn from others? Do you find it easier or harder to achieve outcomes in a collective environment? What are the key factors that determine the results?
2. How do you respond to change? Do you see change as an opportunity or a problem? How do your values come to bear in difficult situations?