

# TRACK RECORD

As a talented track and field student athlete, **ALAN KOH SWEET WAN** could have gone on to bigger things. But a hamstring injury and financial hardship killed his dream in athletics. Still, he remains committed to sports. Over the years, he has played a pivotal role in transforming the campus sports scene at Singapore Management University (SMU).

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**A**lan Koh feels most at home in a sports stadium. The oval running track, the green grass field, the spectator stands. After all, this is where the former student athlete spent years training for his specialty events in track and field – the 100-metre dash and the long jump.

“There were so many things I loved about track and field – the smell of the track, the warming up, and the applying of wintergreen oil to soothe bruised muscles,” says the 57-year-old wistfully. “I relished the personal challenge of doing my best during each race, too.”

Alan’s memories of athletics are deeply intertwined with recollections of his childhood. As a 10-year-old child, he used to race his twin brother, Koh Sweet Hua, on the running track after school. They would toss their schoolbags



on the ground, laughing as they got into the starting position. There were no starting blocks, no firing of the starter's pistol. But boys being boys, it was just fun to dash from point A to point B. "Somehow, our race to the finishing line was never about winning – we just really enjoyed running," he says. "There are so many sporting memories that I cherish, but this remains my fondest."

When the teachers at St. Michael's School discovered that the twins had talent, they encouraged them to participate in the school's sports events. The senior associate director of sports and adventure at Singapore Management University (SMU) laughingly recalls: "Swee Hua and I were the bane of other athletes as we would win trophies for most of the events."

### TAKING THE LEAP INTO TEAMWORK

When Alan was 13, he had the opportunity to participate in his first-ever overseas competition. Together with other young athletes like Cheah Kim Teck, the current deputy chairman of Singapore Sports Council (SSC), he left for Ipoh, Malaysia, to represent the Combined Schools in Singapore for the long jump event.

**“A LEADER IS ONE WHO INFLUENCES THE TEAM MEMBERS TO PERFORM TO THEIR BEST ABILITIES.”**

It was the first time Alan belonged to a team. "Even though I was the youngest, I bonded well with my teammates. There was a strong sense of congeniality within the team," he says. "That left a deep impression on my mind." Everything went well until the day of the competition. Upon landing in the pit, Alan broke his arm. He still won third place though. "I was careless in the way I executed the jump. But I remember how my teammate, Maurice Alphonso, stayed by my side and bent my arm back into position so there was less pain. I will never forget that act of kindness."

That feeling of teamwork stayed with Alan through the years, relevant even during Alan's working life at SMU. "Doing sports is like running a department. You choose whom you want in the team, making sure that the strengths and weaknesses of your team – fellow players or colleagues – complement instead of contradict. Then, you work together to achieve a common goal."

In fact, teamwork is the first quality he looks for in new hires at SMU. "No matter how good a candidate's résumé is, what truly matters is whether or not he or she is a team player. If everyone in the team operates selfishly and independently, the department will not function." Even the heads of departments must play a part, Alan says. He explains: "Sometimes, you can

plan a sports event down to the last detail, but a mistake still crops up during the awards ceremony. I have to take the heat and accept responsibility for any mistakes."

Alan adds contemplatively: "A leader is not defined as the one who shouts orders. A leader is one who influences the team members to perform to their best abilities, and to guide them within a certain parameter and allow for mistakes – and learn from them."

### PERSEVERING ON THE TRACK

In the early 1970s, St. Joseph's Institution – now a secondary school – still offered pre-university classes. It was there that Alan continued his track and field career. As a dedicated athlete, he used to push himself so hard that he would keel over, vomiting into the grass.

For Alan, this was part of preparing for a race. He says: "Through the drawing up of a training schedule and sticking to it, athletics training has taught me that if I

want to achieve anything, I have to be focused and committed. Of course, it is also important to trust your coach."

**“SPORTS PROVIDED ME WITH THE KNOW-HOW TO PUSH, PERSUADE AND PERSEVERE TO REACH MY GOALS AT WORK.”**

At one time, Alan was training under Patrick Zehnder.

He was then coaching middle-distance champion Chee Swee Lee, who became the first woman in Singapore to win the 400m gold in the 1974 Asian Games in Tehran, Iran. "That was such a defining moment in Singapore's athletics history that I looked up to her. During my training, I found her to be incredibly focused, committed and disciplined."

Alan became the first schoolboy to break the 11-second barrier in 1973 by achieving a 10.9-second timing during the 100-metre race at Farrer Park Stadium. It was a record that was held for more than a decade. He was also one of the few national athletes with such a good timing. With a score of 6.94 metres, he also held the Schools' record for long jump for about a decade.

As how he trained in athletics, Alan perseveres in pushing his goals at work. He fervently believes that, at a university level, sport should be a co-curricular activity. "It should not be something 'extra', but the general consensus was that a business university like SMU had no need for sport," he explains. "But sport and business can – and should – come together."

To achieve that, Alan had to start from scratch. During his first four years

at SMU, he worked relentlessly to generate interest in sports on campus. “There were zero sports and adventure clubs at SMU then,” he recalls. Today, there are 40 sports clubs and seven adventure clubs, from Ultimate Frisbee to fencing to archery to diving to horse riding. Among them, sailing is one of the most successful.

“Our SMU sailing club has participated in national and international competitions,” says Alan. The club has also organised the biggest regatta in Singapore – the annual SMU-RM Western Circuit Sailing Regatta – known for its challenging courses and fun-filled post-race parties. Over the years, Alan made sure that SMU organised other signature sports events too, like the SMU Night Adventure Race, Gravitical (Bouldering), Diva la Futbol, Asia Pacific Student Cup Regatta and the new wakeboarding event, Wakefest Singapore 2012.

Alan also worked on convincing the SMU management on the importance of sports and started positioning the university in the sports industry. Thanks to his background in athletics, his approach worked. Most recently, SMU signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with SSC to take sports to the next level. A slew of sports-related initiatives – like the launch of new sports electives “Principles of Coaching in Sports” in August 2012 and the Sports Marketing Elective in 2013 – will prepare SMU undergraduates with the knowledge and skills to work in the sports industry. He shares: “Sports provided me with the know-how to push, persuade and persevere to reach my goals at work.”

### STRIDING FORWARD

With Alan’s potential, he could have easily gone on to the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games in 1973. But fortune was not on his side. He had to give that up because of a double whammy – a hamstring injury and financial difficulties.

“The hamstring injury happened as I was running down the slope during a training session,” he says. “Then, my family faced financial challenges as my father retired at the age of 55. Between making ends meet and a professional career in athletics, I chose the former,” says Alan, who started working full-time immediately after National Service (NS).

Not being able to turn professional was a tough reality check for the promising young athlete. But Alan feels no bitterness. “My father happened to get married later than his peers, and had to retire earlier,” he shrugs matter-of-factly. “Life is not a bed of roses. You can’t run away from ups and downs.

The sooner you accept that, the easier it will be.”

What Alan realised, though, was that he could fulfil his love for sports in other ways. “Sport has always been in my blood,” he says passionately. In the army, he played football with his platoon. With his sporting experience, he also represented the Singapore Armed Forces Sports Association (SAFSA) in track and field, and rugby. “Nothing could compensate for the loss of track and field, but rugby was one of the joys I had in the army,” reveals Alan.

Until then, he had only played rugby recreationally. But in the army, he trained aggressively for it to compete at an inter-formation level. “One of the biggest achievements of my life was beating SAFTI Military Institute and Engineers teams – filled with national rugby players – with my team, 2 SIB, in the 7-Aside Inter-Formation competition. With my brother, Swee Hua – the two competitive runners in the team – we were real fast on the wings,” he says, with a hint of pride.

After army, he joined the SSC in 1978. He spent two decades at the Sports for All and Sports Excellence departments. It was there that Alan could once again focus on his deep-seated

passion for sports, albeit on the “other side of the fence”.

He shares: “I travelled to major competitions like the Asian Games, Southeast Asian (SEA) Games and the Commonwealth

Games around the world as an official. Since I was an athlete, I could understand what national athletes needed during the games.”

Working life at the SSC was so fulfilling that Alan’s final decision to leave in 2001 was a tough one. “After so long, I desired a new personal challenge,” reveals Alan. “The offer from SMU came at the right time. As a new campus, they wanted me to come in and create sports vibrancy on campus.”

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### REALISING THE VALUE OF SPORTS

When asked if he might consider retirement soon, Alan shakes his head. He gleefully rattles off a seemingly never-ending to-do list. One of the bullet points: Keeping students interested in sports so that they can commit to the clubs. They have to come to understand the value of sports, he believes. “Sports come as a package deal. Those who do sports not only enjoy the activities, they tend to have better focus, time management skills, and are committed to their goals. These life skills naturally become a part of their lives.”

One way to keep the students engaged is to nurture them in sports and expose them to competitions. In 2005, Alan started the Sport Excellence Programme (SEP) at SMU to raise the standards and profiles of SMU student athletes. "When young athletes enrol in SMU, we help them to grow," he shares. This is done through additional funding for training and, in certain cases, sports scholarship programmes. Athletes who are committed will also be selected to compete on an international level, such as the ASEAN University Games and the World University Games.

Adding value to the students is always at the top of Alan's mind. He shares: "I often ask myself: What do we want to give students after they have graduated? It has to be life skills." This is where sports come in, as "a strategy to better a person, to inculcate values and build character".

This is why he always challenges the students to think about how sport can contribute to their lives. "For instance, sport can hone leadership skills. I've had employers like Barclays and DBS Bank share how SMU graduates are filled with initiative to kick-start new programmes in their companies."

For Alan, it is a regret that he didn't get to go further than he could have in athletics. "I often wonder how far I could have gone if I hadn't traded my sporting dream for a dose of reality," he says softly. "Admittedly, it's a part of my life that is not really fulfilled. But I have had such great times on the track, and now, off the track, I can still continue my passion in sports. So, I am truly satisfied."

## VALUES

Perseverance • Teamwork • Diligence • Leadership

## REFLECTION

1. Alan strongly believes in the importance of teamwork and focusing on the strength of each team member to achieve a common goal. Have you been part of a strong team that has been able to overcome a challenge? How did good teamwork contribute to the success of the project?
2. Sport helps to develop important life skills such as self-confidence, self-management and responsible decision-making. What life skills have you developed or learned through sports?

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