



SPRINT ICON

CANAGASABAI KUNALAN overcame his small build and a late start to become a sprint legend. Off the track, the Olympian continues to inspire with sporting values of tenacity, diligence and a strong dose of humility – in teaching, love and life.

October 1, 2012. The Children's Day celebrations were in full swing at Sembawang Primary School. Canagasabai Kunalan, with his silvery strands of hair and wiry 1.63m frame, stood out from the sea of youthful faces. The man had just given a talk about his athletics accomplishments during the morning assembly. Now, he was getting ready to confront a more physical task.

The school's principal, Kiran Kumar Gosian, had challenged his students to do a minute's worth of sit-ups with Kunalan. So, everyone had his or her knees bent, with feet flat on the ground. A teacher started the timer. By the time the whistle sounded, Kunalan had finished 77 sit-ups, a figure most people two-thirds his age can barely hit. "The teacher announced that I had equalled

my record set in 1994, when I was 52!" the soft-spoken man grins. He turned 70 last October.

Age never seems to slow Kunalan down. Even now, the man sprints around his semi-detached house off Orchard Boulevard every morning. Then, it is on to sit-ups and push-ups – 80 each. It would be unseemly for him to be out of shape, as he is a senior manager of Sports Alumni at Singapore Sports Council (SSC). "Do people have to train less as they grow old? No!" he exclaims affably. "It is the same in work and life – you don't have to slow down. You go all the way."

It is precisely this unrelenting attitude that made Kunalan one of Singapore's greatest sprinters. In a career that spanned over a decade from 1963, he won five medals in the Asian Games and 15 in the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games (later known as the Southeast Asian Games). He was the only 100m and 200m gold medalist for Singapore in over 50 years of SEA Games – and he still is.

He is also a two-time Olympian, clocking in at 10.38s for the 100m event at the 1968 Mexico Olympics. That stood as the national record for 33 years, until U. K. Shyam bettered it by 0.01s in 2001.

Over the years, Kunalan's achievements on the track have translated to success in life. As he pushed himself physically, the sporting values he acquired along the way guided him through teaching, love and life.

BAREFOOTED ADVENTURES

Growing up, Kunalan lived with his parents and two elder sisters in the staff quarters of the Malayan Breweries (now known as Asia Pacific Breweries) on Alexandra Road. His father, N. Canagasabai, was a "dresser" – much like our modern-day general practitioner – and attended to the basic medical needs of the brewery's employees. His mother, Janagi, was a housewife who later joined her husband at the clinic as an assistant.

At Pasir Panjang English School, neither studies nor sport were top priorities. "I failed in most subjects, and broke my parents' hearts." Kunalan's diminutive size also meant that he did not shine on Sports Day – competitors in those days were categorised by height. There were other things that mattered more, anyway – like flying kites and plucking mangos.

His favourite, though, was "drain running". Just opposite his home, there was a large drain with steep sloping sides. It was cemented and banked like a cycling velodrome. Kunalan used to run along the sides. When he could not hold the pace and began to fall, he would leap to the other side and continue

to sprint, repeating the process until he reached the bottom. That, perhaps, laid the foundation for the agility that would eventually make Kunalan a champion sprinter.

But it was at Pasir Panjang Secondary School that Kunalan would have his first taste of competitive running. While he failed to qualify for the sprints during annual sports meets, he came in third for the One-Mile Open Race. He participated in other inter-school and inter-district races but did not impress. Kunalan always ran barefoot, just as he had as a kampong boy. He did not have proper running shoes and did not care for them – not that it stopped him from running on to bigger things.

PERSEVERING IN SPORTS - AND LOVE

Kunalan's talent for sprinting was only discovered when he was a trainee at the then-Teachers' Training College (TTC). There, as Kunalan was playing soccer, the late Tan Eng Yoon – a TTC lecturer and honorary national coach – noticed his rapid-fire gait. Despite Kunalan's short strides, Eng Yoon was convinced that the 20-year-old had the potential to develop his speed. So, he tried persuading him to join his athletics trainings at the Farrer Park track.

Kunalan was initially resistant to the idea. "I wanted to focus on my work as a

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teacher at Tiong Bahru Primary School and play soccer, my obsession at that time," says Kunalan, who managed to keep himself out of Eng Yoon's way. Eventually, a brief encounter with Eng Yoon along a corridor in TTC changed Kunalan's mind. "He asked me why I hadn't turned up for training, and that he didn't like to see talent wasted. He also offered to coach me on an individual basis when most of the athletes had gone for an overseas competition."

Finally, in 1963, he joined Eng Yoon's national squad. As a show of his commitment, he gave up soccer completely. With his potential, he represented Singapore at the first Merdeka Games in Kuala Lumpur – just five months after he started. He came home with a gold, silver and bronze, smashing two national relay records along the way. Kunalan was greatly encouraged by his wins. He recounts: "I was competing with the top sprinters in Malaysia, and it felt really good!"

The future was bright for Kunalan. Even in love. Around this time, Kunalan started dating a fellow sprinter on the TTC Athletics team, Elizabeth Chong Yoong Yin. The two were complete opposites – Kunalan was a country boy,

and she was a city girl – but sparks flew during a Physical Education Camp in 1964. “Everyone in the Swifts Athletes Club team called one another ‘Koyok’, a brand of Japanese medicated plaster. It symbolised friends sticking together in good and bad times,” he shares. “Soon, we were the only two calling each other that.”

Mixed-race relationships were not common in those days, and the tender courtship saw furious opposition from both their families. Kunalan was told by his father to “leave the Chinese girl or never return home.” He left with only the clothes on his back. Yoong Yin was given a similar ultimatum. The tide of heated disapproval – even from outsiders – affected them greatly. When a distraught Yoong Yin suggested a break-up, Kunalan insisted on staying together.

Kunalan is fond of saying that running gave him a good wife, because it was the sport that gave him the final push to persevere in the relationship. He saw how people from diverse cultures and backgrounds could work together harmoniously for a common goal in sports; he was certain that they could do the same for love. His determination rubbed off on Yoong Yin – and they married in 1966. While Kunalan’s family accepted Yoong Yin once she converted to Hinduism, Yoong Yin’s father only relented when their first child was born.

The couple now have three daughters – Soma, Mona and Gina – and are happy grandparents.

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STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE

Kunalan’s competitive career truly kicked off at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, where he participated in the 4 x 100m relay – and clocked 41.4s with the team. By the end of 1966, Kunalan held five national records, three for individual events – 100m, 200m and 400m – and two for relays, the 4 x 100m and 4 x 400m.

These records were not just the result of Kunalan’s natural talent – he worked hard for his achievements. “Good genes can only let you lead the first 20 metres,” says Kunalan. “It is with tough training that you can continue to lead the remaining 80 metres and win the race.”

Throughout that year, he trained six days a week. The toughest training to Kunalan was the seemingly endless repetitions of 150m sprints. After each 150m, the athletes had to return to the starting line with numb, aching legs

– to do it all over again. When he felt that he had not reached the point of exhaustion, he strove to do other workouts just to improve. He explains: “You reap what you sow. When you push yourself in sports, you stress your physiological system bit by bit. As you bear the ‘discomfort’, your body adapts to it. Only then will you get the rewards.”

This unyielding determination is made more admirable by how Kunalan had to juggle full-time teaching work while training with limited resources. He recalls how he always turned up for training on the dot – the only other athlete who was equally serious about training was his friend and rival, Mani Jegathesan. Kunalan had the same attitude towards his responsibilities in teaching. “My life just changed when I became a teacher,” he says in a 2010 *The Straits Times* report.

When he started teaching at Tiong Bahru Primary School in 1961 and, later, at Dunearn Secondary Technical School (DSTS) in 1967, he embraced the role wholeheartedly. Though never academically inclined, he felt a deep sense of accountability towards his students. So much so that he was willing to put in extra effort to brush up on his knowledge of each subject, especially mathematics – his weakest subject – late into the night. He would try every problem sum in the chapter till he got the right answer. When he could not solve a sum, he would turn to his colleagues, like A. C. Abdeen, for help. “It is just like sports – I started late in sprinting and didn’t have the build for the sport. But with hard work, I could still achieve the same results.”

HUMILITY IN SUCCESS

Kunalan’s tough training paid off during the 1966 Asian Games in Bangkok. He made it to the 100m finals but lost the coveted gold to Jegathesan by a hairline – a result based on a photo finish. Instead of sulking over his loss, Kunalan put it aside immediately to anchor the 4 x 400m relay team to a bronze medal.

Later, in a year-end review of Singapore’s sporting achievements, *The Straits Times* journalist Norman Siebel awarded a medal of another sort to Kunalan. He wrote: “Kunalan bore this disappointment with a quiet dignity and sportsmanship which qualifies him for the Singapore medal for chivalry.”

Kunalan’s trademark humility would be observed through the highs and lows of competitive running. In 1968, he became the first Singaporean to qualify for the second round of the Mexico Olympics. For that – and the fact that he was ranked fourth among the sprinters from the Commonwealth nations – he won the Sportsman of the Year Award. The next year, he won

gold medals in the 100m and 200m races before anchoring the 4 x 400m relay to another gold medal at the SEAP Games in Rangoon – and another Sportsman of the Year Award for him.

Despite the mounting accolades, success never went to his head. Unless Kunalan is asked, he never mentions past sporting glories. At his office in NIE, there were no sporting plaques or medals on display. At home, all the medals are packed away. “I donated the important ones, like the 1966 Asian Games silver medal and the Sportsman of the Year awards, to the Sports Museum. For me, that’s more meaningful because there will be other pairs of eyes looking at them, and not just mine.”

The lowest point in Kunalan’s sprinting career came in 1970. “It was the saddest year,” recalls the man. He had woken up one day with a sharp pain in his left foot. “It turned out that I had a Calcaneal spur, an abnormal growth in the heel bone resulting from calcium leaching. No treatment helped.”

He had to rely on hydrocortisone shots to soothe the pain but kept on training. “A sense of duty to do something well, especially if the task affects other people, keeps me going.”

Perhaps this has something to do with Eng Yoon, too. “I tried very hard not to let him down. He was my first mentor.”

Still, he continued to be plagued by the pain at the Commonwealth Games in Scotland. To aggravate matters, he had to run with a swollen Achilles tendon in the cold. His result of 10.7s – though understandable – was deeply disappointing. Later that year, he was third in both the 100m and 200m events at the Asian Games. Kunalan was not in top form. “I went home so, so, so sad – and it was the major reason for hanging up my spikes.”

And he did. After that year, he retired from the competitive scene. While some athletes would flaunt past victories to score lucrative careers, Kunalan refrained from doing so. He has never nominated himself for any position. He says: “It may sound clichéd, but it’s the journey that matters – not the winning. For me, it has always been about the training, feeling the tension build up, finishing the race and going home. After that, a new chapter begins.”

LASTING STRIDES

Kunalan’s decision to retire from sprinting was an emotional one. He says: “At first, I felt ‘justified’ in giving up. But in the recesses of my mind, I felt that I had

let people down. It was hard to live with that.”

He began to feel better about himself as he focused on teaching with renewed vigour. At that time, Ian Choong Yan, the principal at DSTS, called on Kunalan to start coaching athletics. “He told me that half of the school’s students were not academically inclined and that we could instil confidence and a sense of achievement in them through sports.” By 1973, the DSTS track and field team had won the “A” Division Boys’ title at the Bukit Timah Championships and, later, the National School Championships. That became a great morale booster for the boys, who affectionately called Kunalan “Mr. K”.

During his time at DSTS, Kunalan talent-spotted and transformed many boys into national athletes, like a 15-year-old Alan Koh, Kok Peng Mun, and Serjit Singh. For Kunalan, competitive sports work as a “crucible” for students to learn important life lessons like perseverance, sportsmanship, hard work and humility. “Every time you prepare and take part in a competition, you have the opportunity to grow. You will learn to appreciate the Olympic values, be it excellence, friendship or respect.”

The same year, Kunalan was invited to be the last torchbearer for the 1973 SEA Games, hosted by Singapore at the brand new National Stadium. With his heel spur becoming less severe, he also made a brief comeback. That year, he anchored the team to a silver medal in the 4 x 400m relay. Then 1975 came. It was “the best year”, Kunalan says. At 33 years old, he qualified for six events at the SEA Games in Thailand, eventually anchoring the Singapore team to a gold medal in the 4 x 400m event. After that, sprinting finally took a backseat. Kunalan went back to school.

He applied for a two-year part-time course, Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE), in 1976 but was rejected without explanation. Kunalan felt let down, especially since the course potentially carried two increments on his salary. “Each time I was passed over for promotions or scholarships, I had that hollow feeling inside. But when you have sprinted for your country, nothing in the world fazes you.” So, he just continued doing his best.

Fortunately, his principal Tan Choong Yan stepped in. “He made a personal appeal to the Institute of Education (IE).” His hard work eventually paid off. In 1980, he left for a nine-month Colombo Plan Scholarship for a Certificate Course in Physical Education, Health, Dance and Recreation in Perth. When he returned a year later, he was accepted as a seconded officer to lecture at IE, where he was highly respected because of his diligence and experience.

In the 1980s, he went to West Germany for a 14-month course. When he

“YOU REAP WHAT YOU SOW.”

returned, he joined the newly formed College of Physical Education (CPE) to continue training PE teachers. His boss, Professor Paul Robinson, once said that Kunalan had the “ability to inspire and motivate students he taught.” With that, he was given a two-year scholarship to study a Master’s degree in Sports Science at the Loughborough University of Technology. Even though he did not have a science background, he graduated among the top three.

Eventually, he became a lecturer at the National Institute of Education (NIE). Even after Kunalan reached the retirement age at 55, NIE kept him on for another 13 years until he left in 2010. When he left, he was an assistant professor in the Physical Education and Sports Science department. “Being a good teacher is my proudest achievement. It’s very satisfying. I feel that it’s my duty.”

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These days, he is still not taking it slow. Besides his SSC appointment, he is the honorary secretary of Singapore Olympians Association and the vice-president of Training and Selection at the

Singapore Athletic Association (SAA). But what he is most passionate about is spreading Olympic values to youths. “Since 2011, the Sports Alumni has come under the Sports Museum, which houses the Singapore 2010 Youth Olympic Games (YOG) Gallery. There, I regularly conduct gallery tours and talks,” shares Kunalan.

“I also take on invitations to speak at schools.” Kunalan gives these talks for free. “I always tell students that goals can be achieved as long as you have the interest. If I can do it, they can do it even better.” With his busy schedule, he continues to take comfort in his fitness regime – rising as early as 5 a.m. to start working out. In the end, it is sports that continue to push him further. “At my age, I don’t think I have any further to go actually,” he laughs. “But I’ll stay on for as long as people need me.”

VALUES

Perseverance • Diligence • Accountability • Humility

REFLECTION

1. Kunalan defied many odds to become a sprint legend. He did not allow circumstances to stop him from pursuing his destiny as a runner. What obstacles are you facing in the pursuit of your dreams and ambitions? What can you learn from Kunalan’s story?
2. Kunalan has run a long journey – from a sprint champion in 1963 to a highly respected educator today. He has demonstrated a tireless commitment to empowering people to achieve their potential. What are some of Kunalan’s key attributes you can apply to your life’s journey?