

# BOWLING QUEEN

In the 1980s and 1990s, **GRACE YOUNG-DIAO** ruled the nation's bowling alleys with her trademark poise and power. The mother-of-one, who attributes her remarkable rise to the top of her game to hard work, grit and tenacity, shares on giving back to the community through sport.

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**“H**alf a century sounds like a long time,” says Grace Young-Diao, who celebrated her 50th birthday last December. “If you are a teenager or young adult, it’s plain ‘old’. Thank goodness I have enough spirit in me to feel far from old.”

Turning 50 marked a major milestone in the life of the former national bowler. She notes: “I was immersed in bowling for 15 years. Now, I have been out of the bowling scene for as long as I was competitive.” Back in the 1980s and 1990s, Grace was widely hailed as Singapore’s bowling queen for being a seven-time Southeast Asian (SEA) Games gold medalist and three-time Sportswoman of the Year. In fact, her determined, committed and thorough approach to the game – underscored by many defining victories – was well-known.



She was also a familiar face on the small screen, presenting the sports segment on prime-time news and *World of Sports*, a weekly sports update and leisure entertainment programme. Now, she is as much the go-getter as she was in her heyday. Married to Roy Diao, a Chinese-American who runs an asset management firm here, Grace is a full-time mother to her eight-year-old son, Kenneth. Family duties aside, she devotes a large chunk of her time and energy to charitable causes.

Last November, she cycled through the Thai countryside in the Tour of Hope event to raise funds to build and outfit libraries for hill tribe schools. To raise extra funds, she even organised a tennis event the same month, raising a total of \$18,600 for the orphanage she was supporting. Grace says: "We donated bicycles that brought out huge grins in the children. With the money, we were also able to support a programme by Johns Hopkins Hospital to train midwives to conduct Pap smear tests in villages."

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It was her fourth time participating in the international event featuring cyclists from all over the world. "There were rolling hills and some steep hills which you would never be able to find in Singapore. The journey was painful but I managed to stay on the bicycle saddle throughout. My mental strength kept me going, and it proved to me that I can still psych myself up to overcome obstacles – even though I left bowling in 1998," she observes.

"The values and skills inculcated in me through my sporting career have, indeed, taught me well. Now, I see sport as a tool to make a positive difference in the lives of the less fortunate." And her ability to do so can ultimately be attributed to the years she spent bowling.

### DETAILED DILIGENCE

Growing up, Grace enjoyed sports in many forms, such as softball, badminton, roller skating and ice skating. From a young age, she took every game she played seriously, even getting into the Combined Schools team for softball. "No matter which sport I was playing, I would work hard at learning the correct technique."

Yet, Grace was only introduced to bowling at the relatively late age of 21. She had visited Kallang Bowl with friends. As fate would have it – the late national bowling coach, Victor Tham, was coaching the national youth team

six lanes away. Although it was the first time she tried bowling, her potential shone. Victor wasted no time in inviting the budding bowler to join them for training and watched with pride as she readily put the tips he taught her into practice.

That was in 1984. Barely six months later, she broke into the national scene by becoming a Graded Champion in the Singapore Nationals. "It was a totally insane decision to pursue a career in sports then," she quips. Winning a national-level tournament was enough encouragement for Grace to channel all her energies into the sport. But little did she know that the path to glory would not be smooth sailing. For one, she was often up against more experienced players. In the then-nascent local sporting scene, support and grants were very different from what the athletes of today enjoy.

Over the next five years, she met with more disappointment than success. "During those barren years, I often wondered if I had made the right decision to pursue my dream of being an athlete," says Grace. "Although I was athletic, I was not a natural at ten-pin bowling." She had potential but knew that training hard and smart was the real key to sporting success.

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Putting together a holistic approach, which included the physical, mental, technical and emotional elements of the game plan, was a monumental task – especially as proper guidance was lacking. First up, physical training: "Merely rolling a bowling ball down the lanes all day was not going to do it."

A perfectionist by nature, Grace focused on the tiniest of details in every aspect of her training and competitive approaches. Being an ardent fan of international sports stars, she read everything she could get her hands on about their training processes – and incorporated elements into her own training regime. She realised that having a timeline with an endgame, including all the various elements, could consistently steer the 15-pound ball in the right direction. So, Grace began hitting the gym to build both strength and stamina.

Before any competition, Grace would even check the venue to assess the environment she would be competing in. She explains that bowling is a technical sport, and even the specifics like distribution of weight in the bowling ball and lane conditions can affect a bowler's performance. "As time

went by, I added more and more details like these, and it was soon apparent that these extra elements helped to rescue me from mediocrity.”

### **PASSION THROUGH PERSEVERANCE**

As Grace trained, she felt more passion for bowling. But her commitment to the sport – and the struggle to make sense of her life – was interspersed with reluctant multitasking. As support was scarce, she had to play multiple roles in her chosen profession. “I wasn’t just a bowler,” she smiles. “I was also the coach and the manager.”

At the time, the only two coaches she could turn to were Victor Tham and Henry Tan, a former national bowler and co-coach of the national team. But while they were both willing to guide Grace, they held day jobs. She recalls: “My formal coaching in the sport came in the form of recording myself bowling before rushing to review them with Victor or Henry, if they had time to spare.”

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In fact, Grace was so eager for guidance that she would discuss bowling with anyone and everyone – as long as they had the time for her. “I would be pleased as pudding when people at the bowling alley – including my indispensable ball driller, Walter Tan – would show their support for me by dispensing honest views on my techniques,” she says. “I am grateful for all the guidance I have received, especially from my mentors, Victor and Henry, who gave their personal time to train me.”

While working to improve her bowling techniques, Grace also had to meet and negotiate deals with sponsors and learn the finer points of sports presentation so she could raise the sport’s profile. Fortunately, her dogged determination to fulfil these roles well was noticed by many. Soon, she was offered sponsorship contracts with a café, computer firm and sporting goods manufacturer, among others. “These earnings funded my training, travelling and tournament expenses, but they were all jobs in themselves,” says Grace.

“While I often felt exhausted, discouraged and frustrated, I also knew that success lay in my own hands – and values like determination, resilience and a huge dose of courage would bring me closer to my goals.” In 1987, Grace’s determination and diligence were duly rewarded. From the SEA Games in





Jakarta, Indonesia, she brought home a gold in the Five Ladies team event and a bronze in the Trios.

### GLIMMER OF GLORY

Real victory would come in 1989 when she scored a hat-trick by winning the Singles, All-Events and Grand Masters Champion at the Singapore Open. She was also ranked 11th in the World Cup in Dublin, Ireland. "I even won five medals at the SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and was awarded my first Sportswoman of the Year title. It was truly a watershed year for me," says Grace.

It was remarkable that the then 28-year-old could reach such sporting heights. After all, her coach and mentor, Victor, had passed on early that year. She found out during a competition, and had to fight back her sadness to finish the game. Subconsciously, Grace pushed on as a mark of respect for the friend who had guided her through her most challenging years. But she was devastated over his death – and it marked a change in her attitude and direction towards bowling.

"In that emotional phase, I quietly contemplated my future in bowling," she says, adding that she knew she had no one else but herself to carry on the journey. "Until then, I had been training without any breakthrough. An analogy would be going to work every day until it becomes routine, but yet never asking why." So she made some specific training goals to break out of her rut.

Besides continuing with physical training, Grace acknowledged the importance of mental toughness by employing sport psychology. She says: "Only when the mind and the body come together, can an athlete then reach the pinnacle." She was one of the first in the local sporting scene to realise its significance. Keeping an open mind, Grace started working with guest sport psychologists at the Singapore Sports Council (SSC) to improve her training methods. "I was like a sponge when I met my first sport psychologist," she shares. "I knew I was on the right track by including visualisation to help me focus better."

She would go as far as to form a mental checklist the night before every competition, from the time she would wake up to the music she would play in her car as she drove to the venue. "I did not want to be distracted by any 'surprises' that could crop up. Doing this meant I could give my full attention to the game at hand." And the more prepared she was, the less pressure she felt during competitions.

Whenever everything went smoothly during a game, Grace would be elated. "Bowling can be like a symphony when all the elements of the game work for you. Before I committed to the sport, I would never have guessed that it could be such a stimulating game with so many strategies involved."

### SHEER GRIT

While she suffered a back injury that threatened to undermine her preparation for the Manila SEA Games in 1991, she persevered against the odds and competed. In the stepladder finals, she trailed behind the top two players – both Filipinas – but eventually beat them on their home ground to win two gold medals for Singapore. That was, to Grace, one of the best games of her career.

The next year, she not only put in sterling performances at local, Asian and international championships, but was also placed fifth at the prestigious AMF Bowling World Cup in Le Mans, France. For her achievements in bowling, Grace won the Sportswoman of the Year award for three consecutive years: 1989, 1991 and 1992. In 1993, Grace was the torchbearer at the opening ceremony of the Singapore SEA Games. She also clinched gold medals in both the Doubles and Team events. A year later, she took third place in the World Cup, and won a bronze medal in the Asian Games in 1994.

In 1996, Grace struggled with tendonitis as she was preparing for the Singapore Nationals. While she had suffered different injuries as she pushed herself physically, a bout of tendonitis meant that her bowling career could be coming to an end. It was the worst time for such a thing to happen. "I was the defending champion for the second time running. If I won for the third time, I would have gotten to take home the trophy," explains Grace.

At the game, Grace had to endure the excruciating pain in her fingers. It got so bad that she was given time off before the stepladder finals to get injections from the orthopaedic surgeon to numb the pain. When she returned to the bowling alley, she devised a fresh method to deliver her shots without using her fingers. Instead, she used her palm to bear the weight of the ball. It worked, and she emerged triumphant. After that, she rushed back to the surgeon, who gave her three more shots. Grace looked on as her fingers ballooned from the strain, but felt that all the pain was worth it – she got her trophy.

Each time Grace stepped onto the winner's podium, with Singapore's national anthem playing in the background, she would feel overwhelmed with emotions. "That rush of adrenaline followed by the sudden choking in

one's throat that usually result in tears of joy . . . How does one sum up the immersion in one word?" asks Grace. "To this day, those winning moments are precious to me. Somewhere in my heart, there is a memory chip that stores these treasured moments to be savoured by me alone."

### FUTURE READY

Over the years, her fame as a star athlete grew – and caught the eye of the studio producers at the then-Television Corporation of Singapore (now MediaCorp). In 1990, she became a sports news presenter – alongside fellow ex-national bowler Adeline Wee.

Being articulate and telegenic, she performed her role well, even though she was jittery during the first few recordings. "At the time, I felt that it was harder than competing in a bowling tournament!" Besides these two main roles, Grace even found time to work with organisations like the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) and the Singapore Red Cross Society.

**“AS I PROUDLY SERVED MY COUNTRY THROUGH BOWLING ALL THOSE YEARS, I LIVED AND BREATHED THESE VALUES UNTIL THEY HAVE BECOME A PART OF ME.”**

After the 1998 Asian Games, Grace quietly retired from competitive bowling. "I never really announced it because I wanted to keep my options open in case bowling ever became an Olympic sport," she laughs brightly. "It still isn't, but I'm glad to have participated in the 1996 Atlanta Games where ten-pin bowling was featured as a demonstration sport. A treasured experience indeed!"

With her departure from competitive sports – and later, leaving television in 2000 following her marriage – she went on to serve in different committees and boards until four years ago. As the Head of the Athletes' Welfare Department of the Singapore Bowling Federation, she provided support for the new generation of bowlers that she once so sorely lacked.

No matter which roles Grace has chosen to take on – television presenter, wife and mother, social do-gooder – she has embraced them all. "I'm glad that turning 50 has not dampened my enthusiasm for my interests and projects," she says, adding that each role will teach her something. "The learning curve does not stop on the fast lane." For Grace, indeed, the living and learning continues.

Throughout her sporting career, Grace endured plenty of hard knocks.

But she sorely misses the competitive arena. "I don't miss bowling, but I miss how a tournament can drive my adrenaline up and bring me into a different zone." She still believes in keeping a daily exercise regime. "Cycling, swimming, tennis and Pilates keep that skip in my step upbeat," says Grace. "In fact, sports have certainly given me stamina in the roles and projects I have undertaken."

Today, sports still rank high in Grace's family. With Roy, she enjoys tennis and golf. As Grace has benefited so much from sport, she also believes in exposing and encouraging Kenneth to different kinds of sports, like swimming, tennis, horse riding, football and basketball. "He did away with the training wheels of his bicycle at just three years old," she says with a tinge of pride. "Skiing is one of our favourite family sports."

Looking back, Grace is proud of what she has accomplished – so far. She contemplates: "I approached my sport with exuberance, diligence and perseverance. As I proudly served my country through bowling all those years, I lived and breathed these values until they have become a part of me." For now, it seems like Grace is certainly well-prepared for the next phase of her life.

### VALUES

Diligence • Perseverance • Passion • Tenacity

### REFLECTION

1. Success does not come easily for most athletes. During her competitive life, Grace experienced many moments of doubt. She often felt she had made the wrong decision to pursue a career in sport – as she was experiencing more disappointment than success. However, she did not give up and continued to work hard towards her goal. Have you been in situations where you felt like giving up? How did you overcome those challenges? How have you managed transition in your life?
2. The values that Grace learned through sport became part of her life, and she believes that sport will have the same impact on her son. How has sport shaped your values? Is there someone you would like to see benefit from the power of sport to improve lives? How can you engage them in sport?