

THE PIONEERING PADDLER

Shanghai-born **JING JUNHONG** moved to Singapore for love but ended up sparking a table tennis renaissance here. All through the years, the national women's team coach has never been daunted by the ups and downs in life – thanks to everything the sport has taught her.

In the training hall at Singapore Table Tennis Association (STTA), Jing Junhong leans lightly on a table tennis table. Her eyes glisten in concentration as she animatedly instructs the young paddlers in her team. Junhong observes their techniques closely, demonstrates, and murmurs words of encouragement.

Then, she realises that it is 11.30 a.m. She gets ready for yet another responsibility as the head coach of the national women's table tennis team: Media interviews. "Time management skills are crucial for any athlete," remarks the 45-year-old, as she settles down for the interview. "Years of table tennis training have taught me that there is a time for every task. There is a time for work, and there is a time for play. It is just like how, in life, there is a



time to be happy or sad, proud or disappointed.”

Junhong should know, after going through the highs and lows that come with the different roles of being a professional paddler, wife and mother in Singapore. Since she started representing the Republic in various international tournaments in 1991, she has won gold in singles, doubles and team events at the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games and Commonwealth Games. But the pinnacle of her professional career was her fourth place finish at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. Twenty years ago, the country would not have dreamed of such success on the world stage.

But Junhong, who is affectionately known as “da jie” (big sister) by her fellow paddlers and the staff at STTA, never dwells on former glories. Instead, she views the life lessons that she has learned from the sport as more significant. “I find that the skills that table tennis have instilled in me transcend the sport and can be used in every facet of life.”

LIFE SKILLS - ON THE COURT

Junhong first picked up a table tennis bat at the age of seven. At that time, she was studying at the Shanghai Julu Road Primary School, one of the top schools in the district known for its

student excellence in table tennis. She says: “During my first year, a teacher visited every class to select students with potential.”

During the trials, the teachers observed how a young Junhong handled a table tennis bat and served the ball. She did well without much guidance and was eventually picked to join the school team. For the rest of her early years, Junhong’s life was consumed by the sport. “I had school till 3 p.m., but would train after that. Then, there would be a supervised study session, which I used to complete my daily homework. After that, we would train again till nightfall. You could say playing table tennis instilled discipline in me.”

It was a very structured life and left little playtime for Junhong. But she didn’t mind as she found table tennis fun. She says: “There weren’t many diversions for children in those days anyway. I was an active child and enjoyed playing the sport with my friends.” What was more difficult to overcome was the physical exhaustion. “I reached home bone-tired every night, but happy because I was mentally fulfilled.”

A display cabinet of gleaming trophies in the school’s training hall also motivated her. “By then, I had realised that my *alma mater* had nurtured many national table tennis champions in China, and that left me in awe.” As time went by, Junhong’s love for the sport grew. Her disciplined training structure and effective time management skills saw her devoted diligence on the court bear fruit.

As a Primary Three student, she could easily defeat a Primary Five opponent. Two years later, she even emerged top in the national championships in her age group. “It was the first time I realised I had the potential to go far, so I felt immensely encouraged,” says Junhong. “I also learned that hard work breeds success. As long as I continued training, I would move up.”

Even when Junhong lost a table tennis match, she would persevere. “I used to cry bitterly in the school toilet after losing a game, but soon learned to face up to it. I told myself it’s all right to lose, but I must figure out what went wrong and return to the court a better player.” And she did. By the late 1980s, Junhong was not only a member of the powerful China national team – she was ranked third in the country.

EMBRACING CHANGE

The Singapore chapter of Junhong’s life began in 1992, when she relocated here to marry local paddler and SEA Games individual gold medallist, Loy Soo Han. The pair met in Shanghai in 1988, when Soo Han was training in the city for the Kuala Lumpur SEA Games. Junhong was stepping out of a stadium when Soo Han caught sight of her. Later, he discovered that the big-eyed girl was his coach’s former student – and got him to play matchmaker.

Love blossomed between them. Soo Han would commute on long train rides just to visit Junhong, who was then training in Nanjing. When he returned to Singapore, they continued the relationship through letters and long-distance telephone calls. After three years of long-distance dating, the couple decided to tie the knot. In love, Junhong was prepared to leave everything behind. “I felt that I had already accomplished what I wanted in the sport. I was yearning for change. I wanted to lead a simple and quiet life with my husband in Singapore and raise a family of our own.”

When she arrived, she found that she could adapt to life here without a hitch. “Most people speak Mandarin here, and there are Chinese faces everywhere.” But mostly she attributes the smooth transition to table tennis. “Table tennis helped me to adapt to life in Singapore more easily. As an athlete, I was used to trying new things and travelling abroad for competitions.

I didn't even see my relocation as a challenge."

Playing for Singapore was never part of the plan, but she was soon courted back into the sporting scene. She recalls: "Man proposes, but God disposes. A lot of things happen without you planning for them to." She remembers her debut under the Singapore banner fondly. "I went to the Vietnam Golden Racket Championships to make up the numbers, but ended up winning the event."

Then, she was sent to the 1993 World Championships in Sweden, where she beat then-world No. 1 and reigning world and Olympic champion Deng Yaping of China. "Things got out of hand from there," Junhong chuckles. The following year, Junhong received her citizenship, and went on to amass medal after medal for Singapore in international tournaments. In the 1994 and 1995 Commonwealth Table Tennis Championships, she was second in both the singles and doubles events. Gold came her way in the 1997 Commonwealth Table Tennis Championships, one of the first major breakthroughs for Singapore that would set the stage for future successes.

The country's interest in the sport was revived. In 1996, she became Singapore's first representative at the Olympic Games in Atlanta, USA. She won 16 medals between 1995 and 2003, including 11 golds, three silvers, and two bronzes at the SEA Games. As the driving force behind the Singapore team, she was dubbed "Singapore's daughter-in-law".

OLYMPIC LESSONS

With Junhong's talent in table tennis and the skills she acquired through years of tough training, it seemed no challenge was insurmountable. But she recalls the gruelling preparation for the Sydney Olympics in 2000 as a period that truly tested her ability to take pressure and push forward.

In 1998, Junhong gave birth to her only son, Darren Loy. The very next year, she was asked to return to the national team. "There was no one else who could helm the team," she says. "Li Jiawei showed promise but she was only 18 then. I knew without a doubt that I had to rejoin the team." Her sense of responsibility towards the Singapore team was so deep-seated that she was prepared to give her all – even though her body was still recovering from the birth.

"I had gained 10kg in weight," says Junhong. "I struggled on the court, barely running because it felt like I was carrying a slab of pork around my tummy!" She also had to nurse her baby at night, but would turn up for training early the following day. "It was physically tough for me to continue playing professionally after Darren was born. In fact, not many mothers would return to the competitive scene so soon after giving birth. But for me, it's about having a sense of responsibility towards my role."

In between the training, she also travelled frequently to overseas competitions like the Swedish Open in Umeå and the Polish Open in Warsaw. This took her away from her young son, sometimes for as long as a month. "I spent less time with him than full-time mothers, or even working mothers, would with their babies. It was a torture to be apart from him."

But she wished desperately for an Olympic breakthrough for Singapore. At the 2000 Sydney Olympics, she faced Taiwan's Chen Jing in a nail-biting fight for the women's singles bronze as Singaporeans stayed riveted to their television sets. But a medal was not meant to be. While she lost 3-1 and eventually scored a fourth place finish, the brave performance was the first time Singapore had even come close to a medal since weightlifter Tan Howe Liang's silver medal finish in the 1960 Rome Olympics. Despite the loss, Junhong arrived in Singapore to a heroine's welcome.

From the world stage, Junhong brought back an important life lesson. She says: "Sport can teach you how to aim high, withstand mental pressure and endure physical trials to reach your ultimate goal. Even at an athlete's lowest point, the goal is clear – the gold medal. So, it's always easy to stay true to the path. I've translated this attitude to life itself. As long as I have a goal in mind, the highs and lows of life will not deter me from trying to reach it."

NURTURING TALENTS

In 2009, Junhong was appointed the deputy head coach of the national women's table tennis team. She was earmarked by STTA to assume the head coach post eventually, but did not accept the role until late 2012. She explains: "I couldn't accept the head coach role as I wasn't prepared for it. I had to know that I have the ability before I could coach a team."

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So Junhong used the next four years to prepare herself for the new role. "I read books on management and travelled with the team for overseas competitions, keeping an eye out for opportunities to learn the necessary skill sets." Through it all, she believed that she would be able to do well as a coach. Again, it was her sports training that gave her the confidence. "Athletes have to go through tough training to achieve excellence in their respective arenas. Once they have achieved that, they can succeed in any role – even if it's beyond the sporting arena – as long as they put their minds to it."

Succession is the most pressing problem the national women's table tennis team is now facing. Veterans like Li Jiawei, Wang Yuegu and Sun Beibei have already retired. With their exit, Junhong is now tasked with an even greater

challenge – to train young Singaporean paddlers like Zena Sim, Yu Mengyu and Isabelle Li to battle for top honours both regionally and worldwide. "Their skills still need plenty of polishing, but I believe that they have the potential and perseverance to pull through the training," observes Junhong.

To Junhong, nurturing the right qualities in her team members is paramount. She explains: "A paddler can only reach full potential if he or she has a clear goal, works hard towards it and is not afraid of challenges along the way." And these are all the traits she tries to instil in her own son, who is now 15 and a table tennis player at the Singapore Sports School. "He has shown much interest in the sport, and I have guided him to be disciplined in managing his time and told him the importance of having goals."

Right now, Junhong is cautious in her outlook regarding the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. But she has the belief. "I will coach the team to the best of my ability. If we work hard as a team and stay confident, there is a good chance we can score a medal."

VALUES

Perseverance • Diligence • Responsibility

REFLECTION

1. Through her long career, Junhong has learned that "hard work breeds success". Do you share this philosophy? What values have you applied in your pursuit of success? How have you managed your priorities to achieve your desired outcomes?
2. Junhong returned to the competitive scene soon after giving birth to her son, because she wanted to be true to her responsibility to Sporting Singapore. Have you been asked to make a sacrifice for a greater good? Have you been asked to put aside personal achievement in favour of a commitment to a team or school? How did your values shape your decision?