

THE DECISION MAKER

As a hockey umpire, former deputy public prosecutor **MATHAVAN DEVADAS** was always concerned with fair play on the field. Today, the law lecturer at Temasek Polytechnic (TP) motivates his students with the qualities he acquired through the sport.

Every morning, Mathavan Devadas reaches Temasek Polytechnic's (TP) Tampines campus at 7.30 a.m. There, he takes pleasure in starting the day early, getting much of his paperwork done before the office crowd buzzes in at nine. The section head of TP's Law and Management department deliberately skips the evening rush hour as well, preferring to stay back till 8 p.m. on most days to get more work done.

Lecturing at the polytechnic is just one of Mathavan's responsibilities. The 53-year-old is also a vice-president of the Singapore Hockey Federation (SHF), a position he has held since 2010. Besides these two roles, he is also the hockey convener for the Singapore Cricket Club, the competition secretary for the Asian Hockey Federation and a member of the competition



committee of the International Hockey Federation.

His workload would be overwhelming to most people, but Mathavan simply takes it in his stride – administrative paperwork and all. He says good-naturedly: “Time management is the key here. There are always pockets of time during the day to get things done. I usually make lists and get a lot of satisfaction from striking tasks off.”

And this is a skill that Mathavan – a former school hockey player – has learned from years of juggling training and umpiring with studies and work. He says: “Hockey has taught me so much about time management and teamwork as well as sportsmanship and fair play.” In fact, these are the very qualities that pushed him through school, and careers in law and education.

FRIENDSHIP ON THE FIELD

Like his schoolmates in Anglo-Chinese School (ACS), Mathavan was exposed to a variety of sports during physical education (PE) lessons. He recalls: “I used to do athletics but never

made it to the school team. I enjoyed football and even had a favourite football team.”

At the time, the secondary school boy was naturally drawn to hockey because his father, S. Velupillai Devadas, was a national hockey player. “He represented Singapore in the 1956 Olympic Games – it was the first and only time our country made it that far. To top it off, Singapore finished in eighth place, beating our closest opponent, Malaysia, who was in ninth place,” says Mathavan, clearly proud of his father’s achievements.

As a boy, he yearned to follow in his father’s footsteps. Yet, his father immediately dissuaded him. “The first reason he didn’t allow me to take up hockey was because I wasn’t doing well in my studies,” says Mathavan. “As hockey involved lots of running and hitting, he also felt that it could lead to physical injuries.”

It was only when he reached Anglo-Chinese Junior College (ACJC) that his father finally relented and allowed him to pursue his love for hockey. He enjoyed the game tremendously. When in season, he trained three times a week and played at left-half – the position his father played. “Even when we

were not preparing for any inter-school matches, the hockey team would find one reason or another to play,” laughs Mathavan.

Being a team sport, hockey actually kept Mathavan’s social calendar full. “I made a lot of friends in hockey, more than when I was doing athletics in ACS. There was a whole squad of boys, and all of us would hang out after training sessions. We would go to the nearby hawkers centre, buy packets of sugarcane juice and eat char kway teow together,” says Mathavan. “I treasured the camaraderie most, and many of my former teammates have become lifelong friends – even after 40 years!”

Mathavan was so devoted to the sport that he continued playing it through his A-level. He says: “Playing a short game of hockey became a relief from staring at the books all day. I found that I was often able to concentrate better after that.” Perhaps, hockey indeed played a significant role in ensuring that the then-18-year-old scored well enough to pursue law at the University of Buckingham, and, later, at the University of Cambridge in United Kingdom.

For Mathavan, university days were the best times of his life. “There was a great sporting culture, especially in Cambridge,” reminisces Mathavan. “Even in winter, we would play football, rugby or hockey – it was marvellous how they truly encouraged their students to play sports.” Mathavan now advises his students to use sports as a stress buster. “They shouldn’t be cramming all day. Instead, they should play sports or do other outdoor activities. That way, they will go to the examination hall as happier and more fulfilled students,” he says. “People produce their best work by being happy. I truly believe that works in studies, work and life.”

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FAIR PLAY IN LAW AND SPORT

It was at Cambridge that Mathavan also got involved in umpiring, a duty that most hockey players shun. “I’d watch a hockey game and think: ‘No, that’s not how the rule should be interpreted,’” says Mathavan. So when the opportunity came up for him to umpire a school game, he volunteered.

The art of officiating a hockey game – with 22 players and a small ball – is not half as easy as it may appear from a close-up camera angle. Besides being able to see the ball clearly at all times, an umpire has to be well-versed in the rules of the game. On top of that, he has to be composed and convincing

when “selling” a decision. “It’s not uncommon for players to lash out at the umpires in the heat of the moment,” admits Mathavan. “But I am most motivated by the desire to create a fair environment for players to enjoy the game.”

Mathavan relished the umpiring experience so much that he enrolled for an umpiring course with the SHF upon his return to Singapore. By then, he was working full-time as an advocate and solicitor in private practice, and spent his weekends umpiring at the lower league. He says: “It was a lot of fun, and soon I started umpiring premier division games too.”

That was quite a challenge for Mathavan, who by then had started work as a deputy public prosecutor with the Attorney-General’s Chambers. He found premier division games to be fast and vigorous. “The players tended to be more physical and the pace was a lot faster,” adds Mathavan. “It was an ‘awakening’ of sorts, as I quickly realised that I had to keep myself very fit to keep up with the game, and learn to read the game more.”

It turned out that being trained in law helped – he grasped the game’s rules and regulations extremely well. “Officiating is all about the rules,” he remarks. He adds that the difference between a player and an umpire is that while the former wants the best for his team, the latter wants the best for both teams. From the time he officiated in his first Southeast Asian (SEA) Games in 1995 as a technical official, he always made sure that he treated both teams as equally as possible.

“Before the game started, I would talk to the managers from both teams, and try to understand what they needed to make their teams more comfortable and make sure that they were generally satisfied,” describes Mathavan. “I would let everyone know that I’m in the middle – what I do for one team, I will do for the other.” It helped, and Mathavan soon garnered a strong reputation as a fair and decisive official. “Fair play has to be the winner in the end.”

ENCOURAGING SPORTSMANSHIP

After 11 years as a deputy public prosecutor, Mathavan decided to switch roles. He joined TP as a law lecturer in 2000, noting the somewhat rocky transition from lawyer to educator. “There was a huge drop in salary,” says Mathavan. “But I was getting on in age, and preferred to have a less stressful work life.”

The move has turned out to be an excellent decision on Mathavan’s part. While he misses the adrenaline rush in criminal courts, he realises that he enjoys interacting with his students. Brimming with youth, he reveals that they have a certain naiveté that endears them to him. “They are positive, and always willing to learn new things.”

And if he hadn’t accepted TP’s offer, he would not have been able to officiate at the 2002, 2006 and 2010 Asian Games, as well as the 2006 FIFA World Cup and the 2004, 2008 and 2012 Olympic Games. “TP allowed me to rearrange my classes whenever I had officiating duties at these overseas games. They have been immensely supportive of my sporting responsibilities.”

As an accredited International Technical Official, Mathavan was not just involved in umpiring during the games. Behind the scenes, he would prepare himself by studying video clips of games in a workshop. He was also responsible for the discipline of the hockey players – and this was where sportsmanship came in. “In an intensive game like hockey, players can be so wound up that they end up shouting at the umpire,” he says. “But conduct is very important. That’s why I always made the extra effort to compliment players who showed sportsmanship during the games.”

To Mathavan, being a good sport – even in the face of losing a game – matters. “Once, my school team dominated an inter-school game. We were on top of things, yet lost to an inferior team. I couldn’t believe it at first, and sat on the pitch after the game in tears.” But that experience made him realise that such disappointments can happen in life. “We just have to play within the rules of the game,” he adds. “When I went into law after, and lost a case even though I was pretty sure that the accused was guilty, I accepted it. I wouldn’t have been able to accept the defeat if I wasn’t a sporting person.”

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These are the lessons that Mathavan now strives to pass on to his students. In his lectures, he takes time to share sporting examples to guide them in studies and life. "Storytelling is the best way to get their attention," smiles Mathavan, who until recently, used to spend even weekends at the hockey stadium. Now, he is taking a step back from the physical sport. On weekends, however, he still keeps fit by hitting the gym.

It is clear, however, that hockey will forever be a major part of Mathavan's life. He continues to commit his time and energy to both teaching at TP and administrative duties at the various federations. "Umpiring has turned out to be my calling. Officiating a good and fair game – that's all that matters."

VALUES

Discipline • Teamwork • Integrity

REFLECTION

1. Success and failure are part of life, as with victory and defeat in competitions. The important thing, Mathavan points out, is to play by the rules – whether you're on the pitch or in the boardroom. How do you maintain your integrity while pursuing your personal or corporate goals? How do you manage constraints to ensure that you play by the rules?
2. Mathavan emphasises the importance of good sportsmanship, of being gracious in victory and noble in defeat. How do you respond to success and failure?

NO BOUNDARIES

"Things work out best for those who make the best of the way things work out." Legendary basketball coach John Wooden could have been talking about the people profiled in No Boundaries. Neither catastrophic injury nor deteriorating disability diverted these individuals from the pursuit of excellence. Their stories reveal the human spirit at its most tenacious and resilient.