

# LEARNING FIELD

As a former national hockey player, **MELANIE ANN MARTENS** learned powerful lessons that have served her well in work and life. The principal of St. Anthony's Canossian Secondary School now uses sport as a tool to get her students ready for life's challenges.

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It was 1994 at the Asian Games in Hiroshima, Japan. The night before the hockey game against South Korea, Melanie Ann Martens could not sleep. She tossed and turned in bed, knowing that the game would be a tough one. She recalls: "They were world champions, while our team was ranked a lowly 144th. Everyone said we were going to lose."

Melanie's fear continued to haunt her in the hours leading up to the game, and she found it difficult to face up to the challenge. But when the time came, she calmed her nerves and stepped onto the field. "I kept telling myself to just put one foot in front of the other and get out there to play," says the 53-year-old, adding that all that her team wanted was to put a single goal past their opponents. "Even if we were going to lose, we were going to put up a



good fight until the final whistle was blown.”

Ultimately, Melanie scored that goal, even though South Korea won the match by 7-1. “It was a wonderful reverse flick that I remember to this day.” For her, that was one of the defining moments of her sporting career – never mind that her team lost that game. She says resolutely: “I realised that it didn’t matter that we lost. What mattered more was that we conquered our fear of competing against the best, stepped onto the field and did our best.”

For Melanie, losing has turned out to be an important life lesson. “Sport teaches you how to manage failure because this failure is never final. It’s the same thing with work, relationships and life. If you fail at work or in love, you don’t jump off a building. You see how you can do better the next time.” It is precisely this attitude that Melanie, now the principal of St. Anthony’s Canossian Secondary School, strives to instil in her students.

Work-wise, this is one of Melanie’s biggest challenges. “Singaporean parents often link sports with earning power. If their children can’t make a

living doing sports, they don’t go out of their way to encourage them to do it,” observes Melanie, who feels that this mindset must be changed.

She adds: “Australian parents, on the other hand, cheer their children on in sports, but do not need them to become the next Ian Thorpe. Instead, they use sports to develop skills and build character in their children – because they recognise that sports can prepare their children for life.”

## BUILDING CHARACTER

An active and lively girl, Melanie was exposed to sports from a young age. “My father was a hockey coach at St. Joseph’s Institution (SJI), while my mother was the teacher-in-charge of hockey at CHIJ St. Theresa’s Convent. They brought me to all their school games like the SJI clashes with Raffles Institution,” reminisces Melanie. “I felt the school rivalry and the passion that the players had for their sport. I wanted to be a part of it.”

When Melanie’s father cut an adult-sized hockey stick to a suitable length for her, she spent hours hitting a ball in the front yard of her home. “I broke a few flower pots in the process,” she laughs. She soon got hooked on hockey, and made the school team when she started at CHIJ St. Theresa’s Convent. That hockey was a team game enthralled her. “I’m a people person, I feel

energised by people.” As she practised, she also discovered that she enjoyed the technical skills and strategic aspects of the sport. Melanie says: “I had to think a few steps ahead and run through the game in my mind so that I could be quick enough to make the right passes on the field.”

Clearly a talented player, Melanie says she owes everything to her former school coach, V. K. Cheivan. “He trained me in footwork, balancing and dribbling. He taught me how to play the game beautifully,” she says wistfully. “Because of him, I could hold my own against top players.”

But Melanie admits that she was not always the most gracious of losers in her youth. “I was highly competitive and always wanted to win. If we lost, I would be sulking,” she says. Fortunately, her mother – who often umpired hockey matches at CHIJ St. Theresa’s Convent – was there to keep her in check. “If she thought I showed my temper too much, she had no qualms about sending me off the field. I used to get so mad about that, but now, I know that when we lose gracefully, we maintain a sense of self-respect as an athlete.”

She cites former Raffles Institution goalkeeper Graham

Ng as her role model. “He always gave as good as he got but would never deliberately take out an opposing player. He never failed to carry himself with dignity during the game.” So, Melanie emulated his gentlemanly behaviour, and gradually curbed her feisty nature on the field. “I realised that I had a duty to everyone who was watching me play. I had to carry myself well out of respect for them.”

When Melanie went on to Raffles Institution and National University of Singapore (NUS), she continued her involvement with sports. “Besides hockey, I ran relays and hurdles in track meets, threw javelin and played tennis. I felt very lonely training for these events though, and realised quickly that team games suited me more.” At NUS, she even learned swimming at the relatively late age of 24. She had broken her elbow during a hockey game and was advised by her doctor to swim as a form of therapy. “A friend patiently taught me how to swim, helping me overcome my initial fear of water. I still don’t swim very well, but at least I can swim now.”

## PAYOFFS IN HARD WORK

As a 23-year-old, Melanie represented Singapore in the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games in 1983. She then went on to play in the 1989 SEA Games in Kuala

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Lumpur, Malaysia, where the New Straits Times reported that she “gave the Malaysians several uncomfortable moments before the more experienced defending champions asserted their superiority” and won the match.

Besides Melanie’s skilful play and gung-ho determination on the field, her “take-charge” temperament meant that she was often mistaken for the captain of the team. In her time, the women’s national hockey team was widely considered as one of the best Singapore had ever had. But the team had never beaten long-time rival, Malaysia, at a tournament level. “Sure, we’d won in friendly matches, but we kept losing to them in the SEA Games,” says Melanie.

When the 1993 SEA Games drew near, the team threw themselves into intense training. For Melanie, working hard was the only way that she and her team members could have a chance against Malaysia. As the months wore on, Melanie would push herself to train according to schedule every day. “I asked myself: ‘Do I really want to train this hard?’ And the answer was a resounding yes. So, if I had planned to run seven kilometres under 35 minutes, I would not allow myself to get away without doing it.”

Yet, it was inevitable for the team to feel discouraged at times, and that was when sport psychologist Peter Usher entered the picture. “He came to our training and said: ‘I’m looking for the best team in Southeast Asia.’” The team scoffed at his question. Melanie recalls: “Someone sheepishly said: ‘I think you need to look across the Causeway then!’”

But Peter was convinced that Singapore had a good chance, and he gradually turned the situation around. They continued training hard, but added sport psychology exercises to the mix. “We learned to take the focus off the results and concentrated more on the journey of training,” says Melanie. “It became less about winning or losing, and more about improving our skills.”

Team coach Margaret Pierce also showed them how they could play to one another’s strengths. Melanie explains: “For instance, I always attract opposing defenders during the game. So, we decided that I wouldn’t try to score. Instead, whenever they tried to tackle me, I would slip the ball off to my teammates and let them go for the goal instead.”

With that collaborative strategy, Melanie would not have had the glory of scoring. But she didn’t mind. “We had the same vision of winning, and everyone had a different role to play.” The team eventually beat Malaysia to achieve Singapore’s first and only SEA Games gold medal that year. “Victory was sweet,” reminisces Melanie. “Just sweet.”

From that experience, Melanie realised that as long as she was willing to





work hard without obsessing over the end-goal, she could achieve whatever she set out to do. And that's what she often tells her students at school. "I've taught them to focus more on the learning process instead of the number of As on the report card. I may be competitive, but it's more important to equip my students with skills that will last them a lifetime."

### LEADERSHIP IN SPORTS

Besides diligence, Melanie also gained fresh perspectives on teamwork and leadership. "Margaret taught me to value the strengths of others," she says. "This is something that I've since tried to do on a daily basis as I work with the teachers and staff at St. Anthony's. For instance, I think conceptually, but appreciate how some of my staff are better with processes."

Beyond the confines of the staff office, Melanie has worked methodically to change the school's vibe for the better. When she first arrived in 2007, she wanted her students and staff to enjoy coming to school. "I knew then that

I wanted to make the school a happy place that students would enjoy coming to in the morning."

With that, she decided to focus on the students' emotional well-being instead of pushing them to achieve stellar results for the school's benefit – just like how she trained for that 1993 SEA Games match in her youth. She started treating her students as individuals, listening to them and sharing sporting anecdotes to motivate and inspire.

Under her charge, the school's physical education (PE) programme has also seen the addition of fun sports like windsurfing, floorball, lacrosse and gymnastics. During weekdays, it is not uncommon to see Melanie dropping in on students' PE lessons. "The sports field is right behind my office, so sometimes, I join in the fun," laughs Melanie.

"I want the students to be participants, not spectators. And it's been great. We've seen the teens doing gymnastic routines from the Olympics based on YouTube videos, even though they have never trained in the sport before! We should never underestimate teenagers and what they can do." She believes in letting her students know how good they are, as well as encouraging them to learn and grow. Melanie, who no longer plays hockey because of a knee injury, says: "Six years on, I'm proud to say that St. Anthony's is a happier place. Now, even if there is graffiti, the doodles are of smiley faces!"

In parting, Melanie reveals what her greatest wish as an educator is. "Like what I've learned from hockey, I've taken my mind off the goal of being a successful principal. What matters more to me is that my students realise just how good they can be if they work really hard."

### VALUES

Respect • Diligence • Mental Toughness • Teamwork • Leadership

### REFLECTION

1. Melanie faced one of her greatest challenges during the game between Singapore and Malaysia at the 1993 SEA Games. For Melanie, several factors came together to help Singapore win Singapore's first gold medal in hockey that year. She worked hard personally, relied on the strength of the team and leveraged off the coach and sport psychologist. How have you, as a leader, expressed your faith and confidence in your team members? What kind of impact did you leave when you reinforced the capabilities of your team members to contribute to the success of the team?
2. Melanie pays tribute to her parents for encouraging their children to be active in sport. Her parents were early adopters of sport as a means of developing character and life skills in children. What kind of role model have you been for your child? Have you been active in sport to stimulate your child's participation? What values do you demonstrate to your child through your daily behaviour?