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# HIS UTMOST

Singapore's best-known criminal lawyer **SUBHAS ANANDAN** has a secret weapon for fighting complex cases in court – snooker. He shares his penchant for it and reveals how the sport has guided him in law and life.

**T**he court broke for lunch. Subhas Anandan stepped out of the Supreme Court, but his mind was still preoccupied with the murder trial of Nadasan Chandra Secharan, a mechanic accused of brutally killing his ex-mistress. The man was a prime suspect but insisted on innocence.

Subhas says: "Everyone deserves a fair trial, and I wanted to give him that." For him to have a chance of acquittal, the criminal lawyer knew he had to discount the laboratory reports of the prosecutor's DNA experts before the judge. The all-important cross-examination was scheduled that afternoon in 1995. As he crossed the road to the Singapore Cricket Club, Subhas carefully considered his strategy.

It had become Subhas' habit to play a game of snooker whenever the court broke for lunch. "Whenever I'm handling a big case, I will mull over it over a game of snooker," the 64-year-old says. "It helps me to relax and rethink what has happened in court that morning. As I play, it clears my mind and allows me to focus on what I'm going to do next in the trial."

Back in court, Subhas cross-examined both the prosecutor's forensic expert from Scotland Yard and the tyre expert from New Zealand. He got the forensic expert's admission that her laboratory had failed to follow established protocol. The tyre expert also admitted that his preliminary opinion was mere speculation. *The Straits Times* called Subhas' expertly executed cross-examination of forensic experts the best they had ever seen.

"The judge still convicted Nadasan and sentenced him to death," remembers Subhas. "But we had grounds for appeal because the judgment was weak and did not accurately reflect what had gone on in the trial. Later, the Court of Appeal unanimously allowed the appeal. That made headlines because such an outcome was rare." Nadasan finally escaped death.

"So, yes, playing snooker helps," Subhas quips, his eyes twinkling. Comfortably seated in the boardroom at RHTLaw Taylor Wessing, where he is a senior partner, Subhas looks every bit like the bearded and fearsome criminal lawyer that the media has portrayed him to be. But as it turns out, his signature scowl is reserved for the courtroom. On a one-on-one basis, he smiles often, answering every interview question the best he can.

**“YOU CANNOT BECOME A CHAMPION OVERNIGHT. EVERY SPORT REQUIRES DEDICATION AND DISCIPLINE.”**

### TAKING UP THE CUE

Years ago, friends introduced Subhas to snooker. "Call it peer pressure, but I gradually grew to enjoy the game," he says. "If you take snooker seriously, it is just like fighting a case. With snooker, you've got to think fast and anticipate your opponent's moves. In the courtroom, you have to analyse quickly why the prosecutor is asking a certain question – is he laying the foundation to prove a point?"

Over time, he even participated in inter-club tournaments. "But it was never about winning. I merely relish the fun and comradeship that snooker brings." Later, at his friends' insistence, he ran for presidency at Cuesports Singapore, the national sports association for billiards, snooker and pool.

When Subhas took over in 2006, Cuesports was \$700,000 in the red. Within four years, its account was back in the black. Under his five-year tenure, Singapore's snooker, pool and billiard players went on to win two gold, three silver and four bronze medals at the 2007 and 2008 Southeast Asian (SEA) Games.

At Cuesports, Subhas was tough with the national players. He had no patience for prima donnas. "We would rather concentrate on raising the standards of our local-born players," states Subhas. And that was precisely what he did. "Snooker – or pool and billiards – is a game where not only the tall and strong have an edge. The smaller-built Taiwanese and Filipinos excel in the sport because they are very disciplined and train hard. If they can reach world standards, so can we."

Subhas worked hard to raise the profile of the sport. He held exhibition tournaments, organised inter-pub competitions, and even brought the billiard championships into Singapore. He spurred the players on, telling them, "You cannot become a champion overnight. Every sport – be it snooker, cricket, hockey or football – requires dedication and discipline."

Subhas didn't neglect the crucial step of ensuring continuity in the sport. He focused on working with secondary schools to get youths curious about cue sports, planning free demonstrations and organising inter-school games. He was gratified to see teenagers who played with passion.

"But the fact that cue sports are often played in pubs and associated with betting worked against us," says Subhas. "I spoke to parents who didn't want their kids to play snooker because of its unsavoury reputation, and tried to convince them otherwise." Though mindsets couldn't be changed overnight, the foundation for the future was well-laid.

### STAYING LOYAL TO THE TEAM

Subhas' father was a recorder for the British Royal Navy ("a glorified term for a clerk", he says), and the family of seven lived in a two-bedroom unit on the British Naval Base. As a child growing up in the base, Subhas remembers running along sloping fields and winding roads. "With my friends, we played in parks, cycled on trails and watched people swim in the Straits of Johor."

Later, at Naval Base School, he would discover a natural aptitude for sports, especially athletics, hockey and football. "I participated in all these sports at Combined Schools events. I wore school colours for all three," Subhas says, remembering his youth with a proud smile.

He remembers how he was the only one from school selected to play

cricket for Bukit Timah District. It was the first time a Naval Base School student had been selected. "The rest of the cricket team comprised players from Anglo-Chinese School," he writes in his part autobiography, part criminal log, *The Best I Could*. He was the wicketkeeper. Although he felt out of place among his richer teammates, his Eurasian cricket master, Mr. Van Schoenbeck, pushed him to play in every game. "I was reluctant to continue playing as I didn't enjoy watching my teammates driving up or being driven up in fancy cars. But I persevered as I didn't want to disappoint Mr. Van Schoenbeck."

And persevered he did. Once, an inter-district cricket game was being held at Monk's Hill Secondary School. It was an hour-long bus ride away from Naval Base. With the dollar that Mr. Van Schoenbeck gave him, Subhas spent 60 cents on the bus rides and used 20 cents to buy a drink. He kept the remaining 20-cent change safely to return to his kind-hearted teacher.

**“ IN SPORTS, YOU LEARN TO BE PART OF A TEAM. IN LAW, YOU DON'T FIGHT A CASE ALONE . . . THAT'S WHY I ALWAYS MAKE IT A POINT TO ACKNOWLEDGE MY ASSISTANTS' HARD WORK TO REPORTERS. ”**

The experience spurred him to work hard so he would be able to afford a car one day. He has fulfilled this dream. But beyond the material, Subhas realised the importance of being loyal. He writes: "... the uniform you wear – a school uniform, a sports kit or whatever – you must always be loyal to it. It doesn't matter whether your teammate is in the wrong or not. You should stand by him against the world."

The notion of teamwork comes across strongly in Subhas' work ethic. "In sports, you learn to be part of a team. In law, you never fight a case alone," he says. "It may be my photo that is splashed across the newspapers whenever I am handling a major case. But my assistants do the extensive research – and they deserve credit too. I always make it a point to acknowledge their hard work to reporters."

### GIVING HIS ALL

If Subhas' mother had had her way, he would have been a doctor – not a lawyer. "It was my mother's dream and I wanted so much to please her," he says. "So, I enrolled in a pre-university medicine course at Loyola College in Madras (now Chennai), India."

But he quickly realised that he was not cut out for medicine. "As I did



sports regularly, I knew my own limits – and how hard I could push myself. To have to write to my mother to say I wanted to return to Singapore was immensely difficult.” His father, however, was on his side. So, Subhas returned and started attending Raffles Institution (RI) before going on to the University of Singapore.

Sports remained a major part of his life. At RI, he played football and ran cross-country for the Hullett House. In 1965, his second year at RI, the football team was due to play against the Johor English College in an annual friendly match. RI was always “slaughtered by the Johor English College,” but that year, the football standard was higher and there was a good chance of winning. There was just one glitch. Being a competent athlete, Subhas was also selected to run cross-country in an inter-district race the same day.

It was demanding on his physique, but Subhas wanted to give his best shot – for both. The teachers quickly made arrangements so he could run the race at MacRitchie Reservoir at 3 p.m. before rushing to the RI field for the football match at 4 p.m. He won the race for City District – but did not stay to receive the trophy. Instead, he threw on his RI jersey and dashed off for the match, which ended in a draw.

“Johor English College did not find us easy meat like they usually did. We played a very good game.”

For Subhas, it was never about the result anyway. “In sports, there is always someone with a better physique, better skills. In my youth, I quickly realised that I cannot always win in life. This taught me how to accept defeat very gracefully. Even now, when I lose a case in court, I will not be sore about it. Instead of letting defeat pull me down, I do my best to bounce back.”

In any case, doing his best is all that matters to Subhas. He adds: “What you learn in sport can always be translated to law. If you lose in sport, you try to improve so you can beat your opponent at the next game. In law, it’s the same thing.” Perhaps that’s why the mere mention of his name strikes fear in the court.

Known for his sharp, stinging courtroom attacks, Subhas has been called “The Basher”. He has handled over 1,000 criminal cases, representing clients from the late opposition leader J. B. Jeyaretnam to underworld figures like “Bookie Pal” Rajendran and notorious murderers like Anthony Ler.

Just like how he has always pushed himself in sports, Subhas believes in doing everything within his power for his client. “In capital cases, you are burdened with a very heavy responsibility because the life of the accused

is at stake. You simply cannot afford to make mistakes. If you do, there is a possibility that your client will hang.” Subhas writes in the preface to his book. “You have to do the best you can to keep your client away from the gallows.”

With his deteriorating health, Subhas is no longer active in sports. He has had three heart attacks – the first happened on his 31st birthday – and has also gone through a heart bypass and an angioplasty. He has lost one kidney to cancer and is also diabetic. “At last count, I am taking 21 different kinds of medication daily,” says Subhas with a laugh, adding that his wife, Vimala Kesavan – or “Vimi”, as he affectionately calls her – dispenses them to him. “I told her that it’s a good number.”

Even so, the years Subhas spent in sports continue to influence and inspire him. Looking back at his former sporting achievements, he says wistfully: “Winning the Junior Championship Cup for athletics in the first year the award was put forward in 1962, leading RI into the inter-school finals for football . . . these are all the sporting moments I am proud of and deeply cherish.”

“WHAT YOU LEARN IN SPORT CAN ALWAYS BE TRANSLATED TO LAW.”

## VALUES

Teamwork • Loyalty • Discipline • Dedication

## REFLECTION

1. Playing snooker taught Subhas to think ahead to stay ahead of his opponent. This strategy of improvement through planning ahead has been useful in court as well. When you are faced with obstacles in life, do you see opportunities or challenges? Describe some goals that you have achieved through problem-solving and strategy.
2. Subhas emphasises teamwork in both his sports and professional life. He ensures that the team members work in synergy and he shares credit for the team’s success. As a leader, how do you develop all the members of your team? How do you resolve conflict within your team?