



Photo courtesy of South West Community Development Council, BRIDGE

SPORT MADE ME

As a teen, Deputy Prime Minister **THARMAN SHANMUGARATNAM**'s life revolved around sports. Now, as a national leader, the 56-year-old discusses how sports develop skills for life and make life more enjoyable and fulfilling.

When Singapore's only Olympic-size ice rink opened in August 2012 in JCube shopping centre, Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Tharman Shanmugaratnam spoke passionately about sports and how more sporting facilities created in our neighbourhoods would make it easy for everyone to take part in them.

To prove the point, he took to the ice a few minutes later as the goalie. DPM's willingness to step into the rink was not surprising, given his background as a hockey player in his school days. As a youth, DPM Tharman and his sports were inseparable. Today, he believes strongly in the role of sports in building character and a resilient society.

At a lunchtime interview at The Treasury on High Street, DPM Tharman

shares candidly about his love for sports, as well as how it can shape community life. He observes: "We live better through sports, even in the busy lives we lead. They help us keep up friendships, bring families together through something enjoyable and, of course, keep us fit."

DPM Tharman adds: "Sports are also a huge deal for character. Children learn the value of teams. They learn the discipline of repeated practice, and how there is no other way to develop expertise. Plus, the ability to fall or lose in competition and pick oneself up, and to win with humility."

Citing developments in Jurong, he says: "The Jurong Lake Run is now an annual fixture in the West. And in the next 10 years, Jurong Lake Park will see the creation of more trails and spaces for the public to get closer to nature. And that will be part of the Round Island Route, a seamless green corridor for cyclists, inline skaters, brisk walkers, joggers and serious runners."

TEAM CAMARADERIE

In his youth, DPM Tharman was involved in "anything that had to do with running and a ball." He says: "I was more of an all-rounder, rather than an exceptional talent in any particular sport." Still, he was good enough to represent his school, Anglo-Chinese School (ACS), in athletics, football, cricket and hockey, and to play for Combined Schools in hockey.

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He also played rugby, volleyball and sepak takraw in inter-house games in school. "If you want to go further back, I was actually a serious exponent of hantam bola in my primary school years, with some reputation for accuracy!" he laughs.

He relates how sports made school "just so enjoyable". "I looked forward to going to school every day, because of what we did after school."

Hockey turned out to be the core amongst DPM Tharman's sports. Even when there were exams, his hockey stick would be lined up at the front of the exam hall with his schoolbag. He laughs: "Sport was the only discipline for my friends and me. We would train as long as we could, until nightfall, when we couldn't see the ball anymore." Although these training sessions were tough, DPM Tharman loved the social aspects of the sport.

"When you win and lose together as a team, year in and year out, it's

only natural that you build a special rapport with each other," says DPM Tharman.

For him, the strengths of a team made all the difference on the field. "In football and hockey, some are good on the wings, others make extremely good strikers. There are some who don't have that killer instinct but are good at strategising, while others are solid in defence," he says. "That's the interesting thing about sports – every team has people with distinct strengths, and no one is without weaknesses. You don't have to be outstanding by yourself, but you can be outstanding as a team. So we learned to rely on one another to improve. And without realising it at the time, it helps you appreciate the strengths in everyone – at work and in life."

At the end of his Secondary Four year, he looked through a small diary, where he had conscientiously recorded all his sports activities, from athletics trials to football friendlies to hockey training and competitive matches. "I found that, except for three days, I had managed to do some form of sport every day for that year," he says.

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"There is something exhilarating about sports, both on the field and as a spectator ... it's complex, it's uncertain and you never know what will happen next. And above all, there is beauty in sports, whether it's dribbling well, scoring from an unlikely angle or diving to save a goal."

LEARNING SPORTSMANSHIP

"Hockey is an interesting sport," says DPM Tharman. "As the players are armed with a stick and contact is close, it is not difficult to play dirty without the umpire noticing." But as school captain of the ACS team, DPM Tharman simply could not understand why players would want to do that.

He explains: "The best players never resorted to dirty tricks to win the ball." Once, when he was playing for Combined Schools, DPM Tharman had the opportunity to play against the Singapore Prisons team. Knowing little about their opponents, the youth players were understandably apprehensive. "I remember that game very well. The match was so enjoyable, and even the weather was beautiful. Everyone played seriously but fairly. The Singapore Prisons team turned out to be the most sportsmanlike team we played against that year."

DPM Tharman recognises that in sports, losing is as common as winning.

"You could spend the entire season training really hard, yet lose to a better opponent, or sometimes because of plain bad luck." That developed in him the ability to take setbacks. "Setbacks happen all the time, sometimes big setbacks. I can get despondent, or I can pick myself up and prepare for the next season. It's never about one game."

Sport also brought DPM Tharman into contact with many people. "It attracts people from all backgrounds. The field sports were also multiracial, probably more so in those days than they are now," he observes. "Growing up with sports meant that we all got to interact with others from schools around the island, and from very different backgrounds. It doesn't mean that if kids grow up without sports, they can't acquire these values and perspectives. But sports give them an advantage."

BECOMING A LEADER

In the days when DPM Tharman was in school, a lot of the coaching was done by the students themselves. "We would go through our own drills and coach one another, passing on the skills and techniques we had learned from the previous batch of players. The captain and vice-captain would plan the training schedule and make everyone do the toughest exercises – like doing a duck walk up a hill," he says.

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It meant that the boys had to lead at a young age. He says: "Again, we didn't realise it at the time, but it was how we picked up leadership skills. As a boy, I looked up to my hockey captain, Norman Wong. He was a strong leader in our practices and at matches. I learned a fair bit under him, which came in handy when I later became captain."

After ACS, DPM Tharman went to the London School of Economics where he earned a Bachelor's degree in economics while representing the university in squash. Later, he obtained a Master of Economics from the University of Cambridge and a Master in Public Administration from Harvard University. At the latter, he also received the Lucius N. Littauer Fellow Citation for outstanding performance and leadership potential.

Before his entry into politics in 2001, DPM Tharman was the Managing Director of the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), Singapore's central bank and integrated financial regulator. Today, besides his duties as the

DPM and the MP for Taman Jurong, he is also the Minister for Finance, a responsibility that he has performed since December 2007. In March 2011, he was appointed Chairman of the International Monetary and Financial Committee (IMFC), the ministerial policy steering committee of the IMF. He was admitted to the Group of Thirty, also known as "The Consultative Group on International Economic and Monetary Affairs", in June 2008.

In his role as an MP, DPM Tharman sees sport as an opportunity for volunteers to take leadership. He explains: "Last night, I had a meeting with a group of volunteers who are ex-inmates who call themselves Beacon of Life. They are now running a football and mentorship programme for youth-at-risk, especially those still in school, so as to help them devote their energies to something that is not only enjoyable but builds character. So, that's now called Beacon of Life (Football) Academy, or 'BOLA'. Singapore Sports Council, through its SportCares arm, has helped them by providing skilled coaches for the boys and tickets to matches. It is wonderful to see how sport brings forward new leaders and mentors, like this group of ex-inmates made good."

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He sees plenty of potential for sport in Jurong Lake Park. "The volunteer-led Jurong Lake Run is now a major event.

There were about 5,000 runners at the beginning, but the number has grown to 15,000. We also plan to do many other things with the lake, like starting water activities for families with paddle-wheel boats."

SPORT STAYS FOR LIFE

Now, with a busy schedule at work and in the community, DPM Tharman takes an evening brisk walk whenever possible with his wife, Jane Ittogi, who is also actively involved in community work and the non-profit arts sector.

"I'm much taller and walk faster, so I tend to walk around her while she walks straight," says DPM Tharman. "That way, we can talk while we walk." The couple has three sons and a daughter, in their mid-teens to early 20s. As a father, he takes a keen interest in their lives. He says: "When they were in school, we would usually chat about their sports, but everything about their lives is so interesting."

When his children were younger, DPM Tharman used to take the family for regular sprint relays at a running track late at night, in the dark. "Eventually, I

found it impossible to keep up with them, including my daughter!" he laughs. "We would play street soccer late at night too, until two years ago."

DPM Tharman is an avid follower of local sports. He says: "There is still a lot more potential in our young, in the field sports and athletics, besides traditional strengths like swimming and table tennis. Standards are rising again". He is also an avid follower of the Olympic Games and World Cup. "With my children, we will replay the videos over and over, because it's amazing how men and women are capable of such speed or power, or sheer artistry."

For DPM Tharman, sport made him what he is today. "I didn't play sports because I thought it was a way to imbibe values. I did it because it was challenging, we pushed each other and we enjoyed being together, practising, playing matches and talking about it after. But although I didn't know it at the time, there was a quiet way in which sports actually made me," he says. "It was the only serious thing I did when I was young and, hand on heart, I know it made me."

VALUES

Leadership • Teamwork • Sportsmanship • Mental Toughness

REFLECTION

1. DPM Tharman grew up in a world where sport was an integral part of life, and it shaped his sense of community and principles. What values have you carried from your youth into your adult life? How do you deploy these values in your profession, family or community life?
2. Even as he matured into a family man and government leader, DPM Tharman made a point of staying active in sport. How successful have you been at blending sport into your personal life? Is sport something you do with absolute regularity as part of quality time with the family? Or are you hard-pressed to find the time to play sports with family or friends?

LEAVING A LEGACY

Legacy is not on an athlete's mind when he or she first muscles up the courage and commitment to begin the long journey towards a podium. Legacy is built race by race and game by game. It is found in an athlete's tears of disappointment – and in the gritty determination to carry on. The 11 individuals in this segment once carried the sporting dreams of our nation. Now they encourage, equip and inspire our next generation of athletes to reach for greatness.