

From Sportsman to Sports Physician

By Dr Ben Tan

I recall an extended training stint in Auckland somewhere around 1995, when I was chronically fatigued from the daily ritual of gym-sailing-lunch-sailing-cycling, and was struggling to keep up with my Kiwi training partners. I attributed it to my weak Asian constitution and physique. But my sparring partner, Rod Dawson, felt it was because my nutrition was inadequate. How could that be? Me, a doctor, committing a simple training error like not eating enough? We needed a sports nutritionist to be the arbitrator, but there was no such person in Singapore (at that time). Rod then called his sports nutritionist (assigned to him by Yachting New Zealand) over the phone and described my symptoms and training programme to her, pretending that it was him who was the client. She told him exactly what, how much, and when to eat. I promptly followed the dietary prescription and a few days later, I was re-energised and racing up there with the top guys. I was lifting heavier weights in the gym, pushing the boat much harder on the water, and cycling up the slopes of Auckland with ease. Ever since then, I was no longer a pushover whenever the breeze picked up.

Singaporean athletes today enjoy substantial funding and excellent support services like Sports Medicine and Sports Science. In the "old days", when I was still competing, I had to teach myself all about strength and conditioning, exercise physiology, sports nutrition, biomechanics, and sports psychology – the five essential components of Sports



About the author:

Dr Ben Tan is the Head and Consultant Sports Physician at the Changi Sports Medicine Centre (CSMC), and the President of the Sports Medicine Association of Singapore. He was ranked among the top 50 in the world and won Gold Medals in Sailing at the 1994 Asian Games and the 1989, 1991, 1993, and 1995 SEA Games.



Training partners in New Zealand.



Training in the warmer waters of Singapore.

Science. Training hard gets you somewhere, but training hard and smart gets you to the top. I could not put in as many hours as the full-time sailors, so I had to make the most of my training hours, and Sports Medicine and Science was the key to this.

My medical training made it easier to understand and apply the principles of Sports Medicine and Science, and that gave me an edge over my rivals. I systematically divided the sport into several "departments", namely straight-line speed, boat-handling, tactics and strategy, equipment, fitness, and mental skills. I identified areas of weakness and rectified them. For example, I was underweight and lacked muscular power when I first started sailing the Laser, the Olympic class of boat that was designed for the Caucasian build. With the appropriate exercise prescription and diet, I bulked up from 64 to 78 kg at my peak, and with that, I was competitive against an international field up to a wind strength of 18 knots (in Singapore, we call it a "storm" when it hits 15 knots).

I retired from competitive sailing in 1996, and was then asked to join the Singapore Sports Council to do Sports Medicine. I had a hard time deciding – should I give up a reserve traineeship in Ophthalmology to take the less trodden path? I guess my exposure to Sports Medicine and Science while training overseas made the discipline seem less foreign to me and gave me the courage to take the plunge.

I was sent to the Australian Institute of Sports in Canberra, Australia, to do my Masters in Sports Medicine in 1997. There, training under the who's who in Sports Medicine and leading sports scientists, amidst world class athletes and sports facilities, I wished I had not given up competitive sailing so that I could apply all that I learnt on myself. This is the place where race bikes are not bought off the shelf, but are custom-designed and built from scratch.

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This is also the place where Ian Thorpe's swimming strokes are analysed frame by frame with purpose-built equipment.

Ever since I came back from Canberra, I have enjoyed practising Sports Medicine. It is a very broad medical discipline that encompasses the Sports Sciences. Its scope includes managing sports injuries (especially the non-surgical ones, which constitute 90% of all sports injuries), clinical exercise testing, exercise prescription (especially in clinical populations), sports event medical coverage, anti-doping, pre-participation screening, and performance enhancement through the Sports Sciences. Sports Medicine deals with both competitive and recreational athletes, and also looks at the needs of women, children, the elderly, disabled, performing artists, military personnel, and medical populations in relation to exercise. As diet and exercise are the mainstays of a proper weight loss programme, weight management also falls within the realm of Sports Medicine. The broad scope and varied patients prevent one from getting bored with work. There is also much interaction with sports orthopaedic surgeons, sports physiotherapists, sports trainers, podiatrists, dietitians, coaches, sports administrators, and sports scientists in the course of work, as the approach to managing athletes is a highly integrated one.

The sports industry is an expanding one – participation rates in major events like the Standard Chartered Singapore Marathon and OSIM Triathlon are increasing at a furious pace, extreme sports like wakeboarding and mountain biking are becoming more popular, while gym memberships have also increased with a number of mega gyms in Singapore. The Ministry of Health and the Singapore Sports Council are also reinforcing this trend with its efforts to encourage active lifestyles. Competition standards are rising at all levels, from the Olympics where athletes are now within striking distance of Olympic medals, to school sports where the Singapore Sports School students are dominating at age group events. With more Singaporeans becoming active and the standard of competition rising, it is inevitable that the demand for support services like Sports Medicine will also increase. This has been the case in the developed countries like Australia, America, Canada, and Europe. In Italy alone, there are around 2,000 registered Sports Physicians! Even in China, there are countless Sports Physicians – the national badminton team alone has four full-time Sports Physicians to attend to them and only them, while the Chengdu Sports Hospital has 50 Sports Physicians.

In Singapore, Sports Medicine and Science has made some progress in recent years – there are now Sports Medicine centres apart from the Singapore Sports Council and the Singapore Armed Forces, and our athletes now enjoy the full spectrum of Sports Science Services. Of course,

there is still much catching up to do, not only with the West, but also with our closer neighbours like Japan, South Korea, and China. ■



Trainers at CSMC.



"Showing the ropes" to Madam Poong at the Cable Cross exercise machine.



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