



RACING TO VICTORY

— INTERVIEW WITH DR MOK YING REN

Dr Mok Ying Ren took home Singapore's first ever men's marathon gold at the 27th Southeast Asian (SEA) Games in Myanmar last year – no mean feat considering he was enlisted into the Medical Officer Cadet Course (MOCC) just two weeks before the race. However, this 26-year-old is no stranger to donning the Team Singapore jersey to compete at international athletic events, and winning gold medals while at it. (He previously contributed a triathlon gold to the Singapore's medal tally at the 2007 SEA Games in Thailand.)

Dr Mok tells SMA News about the pride he felt when the Singapore flag was being raised at the SEA Games award ceremony, the challenges of being a professional athlete in Singapore and the people who keep him going.

Pushing the boundaries

SMA: When and how did you start running competitively on an international level?

Dr Mok Ying Ren – MYR: I started off as a swimmer in primary school, and swam the 1500-metre freestyle and 200-metre butterfly events. I kept up with swimming in Raffles Institution, but tried my legs out at cross-country running and did reasonably well in it. When I entered Raffles Junior College, I got bored of swimming in the pool daily and decided to try out triathlons instead. I trained and competed in triathlon events for a fair number of years before I decided to switch my focus solely to running, which suited my busy

schedule much better. Unlike triathlon training, running practice can be done anytime and almost anywhere. All you need is a pair of shoes.

SMA: What do you think constitutes being a good competitive runner?

MYR: I think there are many aspects to being a good competitive runner and it is very subjective. However, in Singapore, the biggest challenge for athletes is to juggle both their studies and work with sports. Perhaps a good athlete would be able to balance both aspects of their lives to the best of their abilities and strive for better results continuously.



SMA: We understand that the conditions were less than ideal for you during last year's SEA Games in Myanmar. Despite the challenges that were presented prior and during the race, how did you prepare yourself for it?

MYR: I was fortunate to have the support of MOH Holdings to take one month of no-pay leave in November last year, so that I could stay and train in Japan single-mindedly without distractions. While in Japan, I also set the national half marathon record, so in terms of fitness, I was pretty much there.

During the first two weeks of the MOCC, I was fortunate to have the support of my instructors and fellow cadets. Knowing that military training, while different from running training, is still very demanding, they tried their best to allow me to rest when necessary and postponed certain high key events like route marches to after the SEA Games.

SMA: During the 2013 SEA Games marathon, you overtook frontrunners Nikolas Albinus Sila (Indonesia) and Thaug Aye (Myanmar) at the last stretch. What were your thoughts then, and what spurred you on to conquer the last few kilometres?

MYR: I had mixed thoughts during the race. I was hurting on the hills, so I told myself, "It's okay, I'm in the army, I must be tired from the military training, it's okay to lose." However, I knew I needed to fight my heart out and keep being patient. Many times, as long as we are patient and persist at something, we may end up achieving something that we never expected to. I also thought of all my MOCC instructors and course mates who have helped me so much throughout the course, and how I should really put in my best and not give up. And I guess in this instance, everything fell into place.

SMA: What were your thoughts when you received the marathon gold medal, as the Singapore flag was being raised with the national anthem playing in the background?

MYR: I felt really proud to represent Singapore. Firstly, I'm

glad that I am a product of a true Singapore system. I went through the usual education route, did one of the toughest university courses, was enlisted for National Service and am now in the MOCC. I'm proud to say that I'm a Singaporean and I love representing you guys.

SMA: How are your preparations coming along for upcoming races, such as the 2015 SEA Games in Singapore and the 2016 Olympics in Rio?

MYR: Preparations are suboptimal due to my cadet course, mainly because I cannot run as much, since I still want to do my military training well to serve effectively as a medical officer in the Singapore Armed Forces. Once I complete the course and get into the routine of a medical officer, I will start to step up the training again.

SMA: What are your targets for these upcoming races?

MYR: I don't have any targets at the moment. I will be looking out for races that are taking place in the second half of this year, where I want to set more national records.

Achieving the best of both worlds

SMA: You were juggling medical studies and MOCC training on top of your preparations for the SEA Games in 2007 and 2013 respectively, but you eventually won gold medals at both Games. How do you achieve balance in various aspects of your life with the limited time you have?

MYR: I'm very fortunate to have supportive parents who trust my decision making and have always been behind me all the way. My sister is also another source of inspiration – she is a runner as well and the work ethic she adopts for her training is highly commendable. I think time management is very important too, and it is an area that I'm still striving to improve on. Whenever you are sitting down and not doing anything productive, there is a problem because time has to be cut out from somewhere else – be it sleep, training or work – to replace the lost time.



SMA: What are some strategies you have adopted to become the best possible medical doctor and national runner at the same time?

MYR: I try to integrate training sessions with my commute to and from work. This method not only saves time, it gives me more motivation to get through the training session as I have a destination in mind. I also take running as a form of relaxation so that I can focus on my work and studies before and after training.

SMA: How does your involvement in competitive sports affect your medical career, and vice versa?

MYR: Sports instill in us many essential skills that can be brought across to Medicine. Being disciplined and being able to perform under stress are part and parcel of an elite athlete's mindset. We approach races and training systematically with a clear end goal in mind. All these skills are essential to do well in a complex profession such as Medicine.

Personally speaking

SMA: Who is Mok Ying Ren the man, off the racetrack and outside of Medicine?

MYR: I'm a simple person who sometimes gets intimidated by the amount of media attention that I occasionally get. At times, I prefer to spend quiet time by myself and away from the noise.

SMA: What do you do in your free time? What excites you?

MYR: I like spending time with my loved ones, so doing anything with them excites me.

SMA: What are three things people don't know about you?

MYR: I probably run more than you drive in a week. I played the *guzheng* (Chinese zither) when I was in primary school. I also did taekwondo in primary school but eventually quit

because I hated being hit during sparring sessions.

SMA: What is your personal philosophy in life?

MYR: "If you want to do things that everyone does, then forget about doing things that others cannot do." I think this is key, especially so for people pursuing their dreams. We often get distracted by our peers who may not necessarily have the same drive or goals that we have. They may enjoy late nights out and do not understand what it takes to achieve our goals. It's easy to succumb to societal pressures, conform to social norms, and in the end, lose track of our goals.

SMA: Who are the inspirational figures in your life?

MYR: Runners, like Roger Bannister and Yuki Kawauchi, inspire me. The former was the first person in the world who broke the four-minute mile when he was in medical school, while the latter has a full-time job but is still able to clock world-class marathon timings.

Prof Low Cheng Hock is another inspirational figure. Although he has had many students under his tutorage, he still remembers them on a personal basis. Prof Low never fails to ask how my running is going. I enjoy his lectures – not of surgery, but on life. ■

Photos

1. Doing Singapore proud at the 27th SEA Games in Myanmar last year
2. Crossing the finish line at the 17th Guangzhou Asian Triathlon Championships in 2010
3. Racing through one of Australia's beautiful cities for the Gold Coast Airport Marathon
4. Pacing the other marathon runners at last year's SEA Games
5. Embarking on a much-needed holiday to New Zealand with family members
6. Taking a selfie with a llama in New Zealand