

# The Marathon Man *Rises!*

By Dr William Tan



Photo: Boston Athletic Association

**AS THE** ATR 42, a chartered twin-turboprop aircraft, took off for Yangon on the morning of 20 January this year, I whispered goodbye to Nay Pyi Taw, host city for the biennial 7th ASEAN Para Games (as well as the 27th Southeast Asian Games, held just prior to the former).

Nay Pyi Taw (which means “abode of kings” in Burmese), also spelled Nay Pyi Daw or Naypyidaw, is the capital city of Myanmar (previously known as Burma). In 2004, construction of Nay Pyi Taw began on an isolated site near the city of Pyinmana, some 320 kilometres north of Yangon (formerly Rangoon), then the capital. The capital has since been relocated to facilitate accessibility to the government for people from all parts of the country. I had assumed that the roads would be dangerously narrow, wickedly potholed, overcrowded and miserable to drive on. On the contrary, Nay Pyi Taw seemed new and quiet with lack of traffic on its long stretches of multi-lane carriageways, besides the occasional construction vehicle, the odd Yangon-bound coach, and the water buffaloes.

Once in the air, I reflected on the past six days in Nay Pyi Taw. It had been a very competitive period for our national para table tennis team and me as the captain. As I looked at the bronze medal that Mr Eugene Soh and I had won, I felt discontented. I had wanted a gold medal. After all, I have come a long way in my sporting career.

## **Building a legacy**

Diagnosed with stage 4 chronic lymphocytic leukaemia in 2009, I was told that I had only nine to 12 months left to live. I was saddened that the wheelchair athletics and marathon racing that I had undertaken and brought glory to Singapore for 35 years had to come to an end.

It dawned on me that I needed to seriously build a legacy beyond just fond memories. My passion for sports drove me to reinvent myself. While I was undergoing chemotherapy, I took up table tennis. It was a steep learning curve to acquire the skills for a new sport. With the support from my wife, I purchased a table tennis table, so that I could play with her within our little two-bedroom apartment. To hone my skills and sharpen my reflexes, I acquired a robotic machine that spits out balls with various spins towards me, allowing me to perfect my serves and both backhand and forehand strokes.

Realising that there was no organisation for table tennis for the disabled in Singapore, I established the Table Tennis Association for the Disabled (Singapore) in 2010, a year after my diagnosis, and recruited the physically challenged to take up table tennis like me. I enlisted my very capable friend, Mr Kevin Pang to be the first President. With the support of the Singapore Disability Sports Council, Mr Chia Chong Boon, a former national champion, was engaged to coach the disabled in table tennis. With eight hours of training a day (I was away from medical practice), my world ranking jumped from 123 to 48 within six months.

During the selection trials for the 6th ASEAN Para Games in Solo, Indonesia in 2011, Eugene and I were the only two who survived the stringent qualification trials. Unfortunately, the two of us came home empty-handed from that ASEAN Para Games. I was very embarrassed, as I had always brought home medals in wheelchair athletics. Coach Chia awakened me to the fact that I was too junior and inexperienced to be pitched against the more experienced players from the other ten neighbouring nations, who were state-sponsored full-time athletes.

Due to the destruction of motor neurons in the anterior horn cells in my spinal cord by the human enterovirus from the *Picornaviridae* family, I have been paralysed from the waist down since the age of two. I have thus learnt from young to be patient, to be brave to pursue BIG dreams, and to persevere in the face of setbacks.

Determined to do better, I became more disciplined and focused on turning my weaknesses into strengths. Although the long hours of training have strained my body, leading to injuries including lateral epicondylitis, rotator cuff tendonitis and lower back pain, table tennis has reduced the effects of graft-versus-host disease, known to cause severe joint contractures, following my allogeneic bone marrow transplantation.

Aspiring to build a legacy in Singapore sports, I decided that I must cultivate a bigger and stronger team that will do Singapore proud in the international sporting arena. All of our hard work paid off as nine of us qualified in the selection trials, who went on to clinch five team bronze medals at the 7th ASEAN Para Games.

One of our most heart-warming stories is helping Mr Jason Chee, former Republic of Singapore (RSS) Navy serviceman in his rehabilitation through table tennis, after he lost his left arm and both legs in an accident on board the RSS *Endeavour* in December 2012.

My thoughts went off the track as our propeller aircraft approached the runway at Yangon International Airport, where my return flight to Singapore was scheduled to take off before the Para Games' closing ceremony. While my fellow athletes were still immersed in celebrations in Nay Pyi Taw, I galloped ahead to continue realising my dream of creating a sporting legacy.

Now in my fifth year of remission, I have to maximise my time and live each day to the fullest. Moving forward, there is much to be done: the patients under my care whom I miss at the National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS); the junior players to train in preparation for the 2015 ASEAN Para Games that Singapore will play host to; the continued advocacy for a fairer reward system for challenged athletes (for example, a Paralympic athlete receives \$200,000 for a gold medal compared to \$1,000,000 for their able-bodied Olympic counterparts) under the Multi-Million Dollar Awards Programme; and the June 2014 London to Paris Ultramarathon to raise funds for lymphoma and leukaemia research at NCCS and the National Cancer Institute of Singapore (where I was treated). ■



Photo: Singapore Press Holdings



Photo: Table Tennis Association for the Disabled (Singapore)



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**Facing** Zooming to the finish line at the 2013 Boston Marathon

**Top** Participating in wheelchair racing

**Middle** A fruitful experience at the 2013 Korea Para Table Tennis Open

**Bottom** All smiles at the 7th ASEAN Para Games award ceremony earlier this year



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