

Plain Sailing

It sounds simple enough: Adopt sound business principles and practices to turn a sport into a national commitment. And win lots of medals in the process. ANDREW DUFFY steps onto the deck with Low Teo Ping, the president of Singapore Sailing Federation.

Low Teo Ping smiles when he says he should have been six foot two. But he was hit a few times on the head while working the foredeck in various offshore races. He jokes that the accidents robbed him of those vital inches.

Although the president of Singapore Sailing Federation (SingaporeSailing) never broke the six-foot barrier, he still easily fills a room with his outsized personality and, especially, sound business practices for the sport.

Whether or not his early seafaring mishaps actually altered his height, they certainly never dampened his sailing spirit. Now 61, he has presided over SingaporeSailing, a National Sports Association, since 1998. In the last 18 months alone, Singapore has won six world titles. The crowning glory was the five gold medals the team brought home from the Asian Games in Doha last December.

Singapore was surprised. One man wasn't.

In the world according to Low Teo Ping, the fair winds of good business principles and self belief helped Singapore's sailors to victory.

"We believe in the Singaporeans who are involved in it. The sailors believed in what they were doing and in the organisation which was helping them."

Of course, belief will only get an athlete so far, or else the Singaporean sailors would all have come home with gold medals. Mr Low has brought something more to SingaporeSailing. When he retired from UBS five years ago and turned his attention to sports, he carried



over "the best practices, good corporate governance, interpersonal skills, all the good things of the corporate world."

One of the first things he did was to establish a mission statement. It is very specific in terms of leadership in sailing in Asia, and focuses on Singaporeans taking to sailing as a national sport and doing it for fun as well as for medals. Very importantly, it gives a clear direction.

"But is that rocket science?" he asks. "Every good organisation would have it, because that is your compass pointing towards how you are going to work."

In particular, he highlights teamwork as crucial.

"If you succeed, it isn't about you or your coach. It's also about many others like your parents, your school principal, your teachers, the people you have been sparring with have all brought you to your level."

Mr Low certainly walks the talk, and the SingaporeSailing website even has a section called The Engine Room that is devoted to interviews with the coaches, the

administration staff and the supervisors.

"You must be aware of the people around you who have helped you," Mr Low adds.

Like tennis or swimming, sailing is an individual sport; but a sense of teamwork permeates all levels of the sport.

"We have inculcated such strong team spirit in sailing that everybody helps each other," he says.

Mr Low's transplanted business attitudes go even deeper. Sailors who want to represent Singapore at a major sporting event must submit a letter of intent to indicate their interest. SingaporeSailing will then involve sailors in intensive training sessions to bring them up to a level at which, later on in the selection process, they are all race-ready.

That means there's a bigger talent pool to choose from, and it also changes the psyche from one of just wanting to sail to one of wanting to perform and do much better.

"And when you get selected, you sign an athlete agreement to say 'I abide by the following...' It becomes very prescriptive," says Mr Low. "We are the only ones who do that. But it's no different from the business world where you're given a manual of responsibilities for your job." Now SingaporeSailing is condensing its standard practices into a booklet called Sailor First.

It all sounds time-consuming and expensive, but with the \$3 million-plus funding from the Sports Council as well as income from sponsors and concessions at its centres, SingaporeSailing is prepared to pay up.

"We are one of the most highly funded sports in Singapore," agrees Mr Low. "But then, we sent 20 sailors to the Asian Games, and all but one came back with a medal. And there were five golds – so what's the return on investment there?"

This business language runs through his conversation, and it may be no surprise that the volunteers who give so much support are equally at home in the business community.

"Most of them are parents, all professionals, and come from the business world," says Mr Low. "So there is a common language. That helps a lot because you become convergent in your tasks, your goals and that counts for a lot."

Sailing attracts parent volunteers from the professional world partly because the clubs are off the beaten track and need a car to get to. That alone suggests volunteers need a certain income level, a certain professional status.

And since it is not a spectator sport, with the action taking place out at sea, parent volunteers have to do more than shout encouragement from the touchline. They help transport the boats and the equipment, and get involved with the maintenance and the fundraising. As Mr Low puts it, sailing requires "good home support".

On top of that, sailing is expensive, with membership of a club costing far more than a soccer ball. It all adds up to the sailing world being peopled by committed, professional types.

It also helps explain why, when some are calling for professional managers to run sports NPOs, Mr Low simply wants them to be run professionally.

"There have been a lot of cries saying sports associations must have [paid] professional management. I totally disagree.

"You've got to be managed professionally first, and that may sometimes include professional managers. And it may not."

So, commitment is fundamental. Mr Low's own commitment to sport began

early. He grew up near the Singapore General Hospital, and sport was what the neighbourhood did, be it soccer, badminton, cricket or cycling, as well as rugby – he played scrum half for the country.

But the sea has always called to him. "I used to water-ski, so it was quite natural in that sense. The wind on your face, the taste of salt water – I think it's therapeutic."



The sailors celebrating their achievement of 5 Golds, 3 Silvers and 2 Bronzes at the 2006 Asian Games in Doha. SingaporeSailing President Low Teo Ping leaps into the sea to celebrate.

"I see myself as being involved with a mission, using sports so that the people who go through it come out being better people and better citizens. That's all. It's not about winning medals."

Then, 30 years ago, Mr Low went out on a friend's Hobie Cat, a lightweight twin-hulled racing boat. He progressed to racing yachts, competing in the Hong Kong-Manila and other offshore races, taking the demanding job of working the foredeck, putting up and taking down the sails.

He still sails, but now more of his time is spent volunteering for sport than playing it: he is also the vice-president of the Singapore National Olympic Committee; president of the Singapore Rugby Union; council member of the Singapore Sports Council; and vice-president of the International Sailing Federation.

One unusual facet of NSAs – unlike VWOs – is that they work with those who are already fortunate. That can put

some volunteers off, "because in many people's minds, volunteerism is about benefiting the less fortunate.

So, in tune with this spirit of volunteerism, SingaporeSailing has started working with the less fortunate, too. Among other things, they have "adopted" the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association.

Kids at risk who leave school early can fall prey to all kinds of influences that are not good, so SingaporeSailing adopts 15 to 20 of them and teaches them windsurfing. Why not sailing? "Because windsurfing is a lot more attractive. You get to wear cool shorts and sunglasses," says Mr Low.

The Singapore Sea Scouts also have a facility at the National Sailing Centre. "We felt they were getting disjointed in Singapore because they don't have a sailing facility. So we have adopted them," says Mr Low.

"These are the add-ons we've done, so we're not just a sports association catering for the fortunate and steering a path of just sailing excellence," says Mr Low. "But we'd like to do a lot more."

That may ultimately involve every schoolchild in Singapore, and make sailing a life skill to be learned. Like riding a bike.

"We want to embark on a programme where all kids in the first six years of their primary education do four days' sailing, plus learning oceanography, weather, tide, wind, currents and everything else."

This last part is a sweetener to parents who he knows are more likely to support (and contribute to) the four-day sailing experience if it has an educational side.

It's self-interest at some level: to "populate the sport" and have all future Singaporeans understanding sailing and supporting it. And it hints at the bigger picture Mr Low sees.

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