

WHAT NEXT FOR TEAM SINGAPORE?

# The audacity of Schooling's faith

EUGENE K B TAN



For a young country starved of sporting success on the world stage, Singapore has lionised and feted its Rio Olympics hero, Joseph Schooling, since his sensational victory in the 100m butterfly event — and rightfully so.

His superlative achievement deserves due recognition, including yesterday's rare parliamentary motion to recognise his achievements. More importantly, his success demonstrates not only the audacity of self-belief and faith, but also the courage to work towards attaining Olympic glory.

Schooling's Olympic record of 50.39 seconds is the fifth-fastest time recorded in the event. But the top four timings were clocked in 2009 by swimmers donning full-body polyurethane and neoprene suits which help reduce fatigue and provide more buoyancy and speed. The suits have been banned since January 2010.

His success has taken a lot of sacrifice, hard work and belief. His parents, Colin and May, have been instrumental in their son's pursuit of his dream. They personally funded his move to the United States seven years ago, de-

termined to provide him with the best environment to nurture his talent. But this entailed Colin and May taking turns to be with their son, then barely 14 years old, in Florida until he commenced his university studies.

Colin and May are exemplary swimming parents. They keep pace with the demands of the sport and the needs of the athlete while providing the conducive and loving home environment for the development of a champion. They are also persistent in opening pathways for athletes who excel and have the potential to go on to bigger things.

For example, it was their doggedness in pushing institutional reticence and caution that enabled Schooling (and Quah Zheng Wen) to secure a deferment from National Service to pursue their sporting dreams.

The bottom line of Joseph Schooling's success is not merely about taking bold risks. It is also about the audacity of self-belief and vision, and putting in the hard work to reach one's goal. As sports spectators, we are often taken in by the trappings of achievements. But the hard work and a craftsman-like approach to training and success are often not given due attention even as they enable the harnessing of one's talent to surpass the previous best.

To be sure, he is blessed with tal-



ent. Not just physiological advantages that are well suited to swimming success, but the steadfast belief and determination to pursue what seemed like an impossible pinnacle of sporting success in the local context.

Does his Olympic triumph mark a new era for swimming and sports in Singapore? One Olympic gold does not mean we have arrived, although it is a tremendous boost and encouragement to the sports scene here. How can the sports eco-system ride on Schooling's success?

First, it is vital to be open to new ideas and look beyond self-interests. When I was heavily involved in the local swimming scene in the early 2000s, the Singapore Swimming Association (SSA) tasked me to prepare

Joseph Schooling had the steadfast belief and determination to pursue what seemed like an impossible pinnacle of sporting success in the local context.  
PHOTO: REUTERS

the concept paper for the national Centre of Excellence (COE).

The COE, which opened in 2003, sought to spearhead a new approach to swimming excellence in Singapore. Top swimmers were invited to train at the COE under the tutelage of a team of foreign and local coaches. It was inclusive in that Singapore-based swimmers could also seek international success. It aimed to debunk the myth that the only way to combine swimming and studies was to go overseas.

Unfortunately, the COE did not garner support from the SSA affiliates, who felt it would undermine their business and reputation should their top swimmers train at the COE. This was despite the requirement that swimmers must belong to a club and represent them, and not the COE, in local competitions. The COE closed in 2008, a victim of its success.

But in its short existence, the COE trained Joseph Schooling, Quah Ting Wen, Quah Zheng Wen — who all represented Singapore at the Rio Olympics — and other swimmers who set many age-group and national marks.

They formed the core of the national team in major competitions in subsequent years. Before his move to the US in 2009, 13-year-old Joseph Schooling's best time in the 200m butterfly had broken the US age-group mark by some three seconds.

The COE's closure derailed a bold attempt to generate a perceptual shift in thinking of swimming excellence,

● CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

## *The audacity of Schooling's faith*

● CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

which included the need for more sports science, more international competitions and customised training programmes. There are salutary lessons we should draw from swimming's COE setback.

We now have a good base of emerging swimming and sports talents. We will have to better identify the athletes

who have the audacity to dream and the gumption and exemplary work ethic to succeed. Too often, our sports community is easily sated with success at the SEA Games. I have seen athletes and teams in the past decade being content with personal bests at the Asian and Olympic Games, rather than aiming for and working towards a podium finish.

To enable our athletes to reach for

the stars, we have to develop pathways that can sustain their competitive sporting careers into their 20s and 30s. It takes a community to produce a steady stream of Olympic success stories. For this, we need to grow a sporting ecosystem and culture that emphasises sports for all as a foundational principle given our limited talent pool. We have to enjoy sports in its own

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right rather than as an expedient and strategic instrument to engender nationalistic feelings. Taking care of the former will naturally result in the latter.

For the amount that Singapore has invested in sports and the infrastructure, the returns could be much higher in both quality and quantity. What the Singapore sports fraternity makes of and learns from Schooling's path to success is crucial if we are to have more athletes in the years ahead who not only follow the trail blazed by him, but also chart new and bold ones of their own. For now, let's savour his audacious Rio achievement.

