

On high ground with mum

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Photo: ST

Michelle Sng, who will be competing in high jump at the SEA Games, always had the support of her mother, Madam Tng Kim Kee, when she took part in school sports competitions.

When none of her Secondary 1 classmates wanted to represent the class for high jump at their school's Sports Day, Michelle Sng volunteered.

"I had no experience, but I thought, why not?" recalls Sng, then a student at Singapore Chinese Girls' School.

After researching online on how to execute a high jump, she practised on her own at the school's gym a few times and broke the school's C Division record for lower secondary students with a 1.51m jump.

She went from strength to strength in the sport. In July 2006, after completing her A levels at Raffles Junior College, she set the national record with a 1.8m leap and was seen as a potential South-east Asian Games gold medallist.

But a stress fracture in her left shin in 2007, followed by surgery a year later, forced her to leave the sport in 2010 with "no plans of coming back".

Sng, now 27 and 1.72m tall, says: "Although the doctor gave me a clean bill of health, my left shin still felt painful and I was not able to perform as well as I wanted to."

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Then, during an 18-month backpacking trip in Asia and Europe in 2011 and 2012 soon after graduating from the Singapore Management University with a degree in business management, her pain "suddenly disappeared" and has not returned since.

In December 2013, she took up high jump again and on March 19 this year, she broke her own record at the Philippines Open, where she cleared 1.84m.

A full-time English teacher at an enrichment centre here, she is looking forward to competing in the SEA Games in June under the pressure of a home crowd at the National Stadium.

Sng, an only child, is close to her mother, Madam Tng Kim Kee, 56, an administrator in a bank.

Growing up, she hardly saw her father, who was "always busy with work". He left the family about 10 years ago for undisclosed reasons and has not been in touch since.

What is your parenting style?

Madam Tng: I have always let her do what she wants, largely because I know what it feels like to not be able to do what you want. My late father was very strict. He wouldn't let me do the things I wanted, such as learning to play the guitar or joining my friends for excursions to the beach.

So I told myself I wouldn't do the same to my daughter.

Sng: Yes, my mother lets me make my own decisions. She will stand at the side to support me so that if I were to fall, I won't fall too hard. Thankfully, that has not happened so far.

She signed me up for various enrichment classes when I was young, but allowed me to decide what I wanted.

I ended up choosing rhythmic gymnastics, netball and dance. I gave up dance when I was 18 because I saw that I had the potential to achieve more in high jump.

Incidentally, it was only after I stumbled onto netball, gymnastics and high jump that I found out my mother had taken part in those sports too when she was in school.

How did you discipline Michelle?

Madam Tng: I am very lucky. She was a very obedient child. I never had to cane her or anything like that. Maybe it's also because I don't really have a temper. I don't like to yell.

She would tell me whom she was going out with and even ask me things like whether she could eat the chocolates in the fridge. And she did not need me to remind her to do her homework.

She always tries her best in what she does. Sometimes she tries too hard and I tell her to relax a bit. I remember when she was three years old, I signed her up for a modelling audition just for fun. When she failed to make the cut, she got very upset.

Sng: I always do my best and I want to excel in my chosen field. If I fail, I will be disappointed, but I won't give up easily.

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I am also a disciplined person. When I was in primary and secondary school, I spent about six hours training every day, be it for netball, dance or gymnastics. There were dance and gymnastics classes on weekends too. I always had so much on my plate that I developed time management skills quickly.

I found time to do my homework in between all these training sessions. I slept at around 11pm every night and woke up at about 5.30am.

I didn't find it tough. I saw that I needed to train to get better. Besides, I have always been a rather competitive person.

How close are you to your mother?

Sng: She has always been there for me. She used to be a full-time housewife and would prepare and bring lunch to school every day for me. After lunch, she waited for me while I went for netball training or we took the bus to my gymnastics or dance practice.

She turned up at all my competitions for dance, gymnastics and netball.

After my father left 10 years ago, she went back to full-time work. I started giving part-time tuition. Last year, I rented a place outside.

We have less time for each other, but we remain close. We WhatsApp every other day and meet at least once a week over coffee or a meal. She still turns up to support me at my competitions.

Madam Tng: I respect her decision to move out. I live with my mother and two aunts and she needed her own space. She also wanted to live nearer to Hwa Chong Institution, where she trains.

If the parent-child roles were reversed, what would you do differently?

Madam Tng: I wouldn't have done anything differently. I am very proud of what she has achieved.

Sng: I wouldn't have done anything differently too. In fact, if I were to have kids of my own, I would take cues from how my mother raised me.

There are no barriers between us. I can share my fears with her and tell her anything, including relationship problems. She treats me like a friend.