

**PRIMER**

# Is a career as a full-time athlete feasible?


 By **MAY CHEN**

**A**S A sporting nation, Singapore has made considerable strides in the past decade.

Despite its small population of about five million, the Republic has managed to produce world-beaters and regional champions across a variety of sports.

Sailors alone have accounted for at least 19 world titles since 2004. Other sports, such as bowling and shooting, have also produced winners on the global stage.

The nation's sporting triumphs peaked at the Beijing Olympics in 2008, when Feng Tianwei and Co clinched a table tennis team silver to end Singapore's 48-year medal drought at the Games.

The same team then toppled powerhouse China in the final of the World Team Championships in Moscow two years later.

Yet, one aspect of Singapore sport is largely unchanged: The vast majority of local athletes remain amateurs, with few willing to commit to a full-time career.

Out of some 1,000 athletes carded by the Singapore Sports Council (SSC) yearly, only a handful are full-time sportsmen. The bulk are students and working adults who split their time between studies or work, and training.

This, despite the slew of initiatives that the Government has introduced over 20 years – the most recent being the revised High

Performance Sports (HPS) system – in a bid to encourage more athletes to consider sport as a full-time career.

But why are so few willing to take a leap of faith?

Money is arguably the most significant factor.

Too often, many national sports associations, which are funded by the SSC, find themselves incapable of offering their biggest talents an attractive enough salary in exchange for their total commitment.

Major sports such as netball, football and shooting have typically been placed on the highest tiers of funding and have traditionally received more than \$1.5 million in grants annually.

But with the bulk of this amount going to paying staff salaries, coaching fees and running tournaments and community programmes, there is usually hardly any surplus to go around.

Those in sports such as badminton, golf and table tennis are more fortunate because they can compete in professional tournaments around the world and are able to supplement their income through prize money if they do well.

Singapore's No. 1 golfer Mardan Mamat, for instance, took

home more than \$700,000 in tournament earnings in 2010.

But athletes in sports like gymnastics and swimming do not have such opportunities to earn regular incomes. Instead, their only "earnings" in sport come from the Singapore National Olympic Council's Multi-million Dollar Award Programme (MAP).

Sponsored by the Tote Board and Singapore Pools, it gives medalists at major Games cash prizes, ranging from \$10,000 for an individual SEA Games gold to \$1 million for top honours at the Olympics.

Gymnast Lim Heem Wei, for example, was rewarded with \$40,000 when she won Singapore's first gymnastics silver at the 2010 Commonwealth Games.

There are, of course, schemes put in place by the SSC to support athletes financially. These include the Sports Excellence (Spex) training assistance grant, the Athletes Career and Training programme (ACT) and the Spex grant for loss of wages (Glow).

Under these schemes, a top carded athlete can receive up to \$7,200 a year in training assistance grants, as well as up to \$50,000 a year under the ACT.

Should an athlete take time off work to train in preparation for a sporting event, he or she also qualifies for up to \$2,000 a month (up to \$12,000 a year) in compensation for the loss of salary under spexGlow.

But it is unrealistic for athletes to rely only on bonuses such as the MAP awards, since these events are not held yearly. The SEA Games are biennial, whereas the other three – the Asian Games, the Commonwealth Games and the Olympics – are quadrennial.

Furthermore, the majority of athletes do not fall into the select group of elites who excel on the international stage. They therefore get a smaller share when it is time to divide the pie.

Unlike their counterparts in countries like the United States, Singapore athletes also do not have the luxury of earning lots from personal endorsement deals.

America's all-around champion gymnast Gabby Douglas, for instance, is estimated to pull in between US\$1 million (\$1.2 million) and US\$3 million a year in endorsements leading up to the 2016 Rio Olympics.

Athletes also know their careers have a limited lifespan and can be cut short by injury at any time. Most want something more stable for the long term. If they are adults, that means a job. If the athletes are still young, they, or their parents, are likely to plump for the paper chase over the prospect of sporting glory.

But for all these hurdles, the tide is turning – slowly but surely. The SSC piloted the Programme for Elite Athletes' Career in 2006, a scheme designed to pair top athletes with companies where they can enjoy a flexible work environment, allowing them to continue their elite sports training and participation in competitions.



Athletes are now bolder in taking the road less travelled. Gymnast Lim Heem Wei (above) dropped modules in university to better focus on training. ST FILE PHOTO

THE STRAITS TIMES  
Ministry of Education  
**NATIONAL CURRENT AFFAIRS QUIZ**

**ABOUT THE BIG QUIZ**

■ **Co-organisers:** The Straits Times and the Ministry of Education

■ **Presenting sponsor:** Singapore Press Holdings Foundation

■ **Innovation partner:** Shell

■ **The run-up to The Big Quiz comprises:**

1. A series of 12 primers on current affairs topics
2. Talks given by editors and correspondents of The Straits Times
3. A sponsored segment on students' say to set questions

**THE BIG QUIZ CONTEST**

Four quiz rounds in which teams from participating schools will vie for the top prize: a championship trophy and \$5,000 cash

■ **Open to:** First-year pre-university students and Year 5 Integrated Programme students from 24 participating schools

For more information, go to [www.straitstimes.com/thebigquiz](http://www.straitstimes.com/thebigquiz)

Swimmer Sng Ju Wei and bowler Rena Teng, for instance, were linked up with Standard Chartered Bank.

The scheme has since evolved into the Athlete Friendly Workplace Scheme.

While these examples remain the minority and most corporations in Singapore have yet to warm to the idea of supporting athletes in this regard, more are jumping on the bandwagon.

More recently, Canon Singa-

pore partnered Singapore Bowling to provide internship and job opportunities for both current and former national bowlers.

Athletes today are more willing to contemplate a full-time career, even though they still maintain the same concerns about their futures and livelihoods.

It is partly a result of greater overall holistic support – even in areas such as sports science, nutrition and sports medicine.

With examples of success stories before them, athletes are now also bolder in taking the road less travelled.

Last year, sailors Colin Cheng and Elizabeth Yin and shooter Jasmine Ser all deferred their studies to the Olympics had not been assured. Gymnast Lim dropped modules in university to better focus on training.

This year, the national men's 4x100m relay team has been training full-time since January in pursuit of a starting berth at the World Championships in Athletics in August and a gold at December's SEA Games.

It involved Singapore Management University's Gary Yeo, 26, and Nanyang Technological University's Lee Cheng Wei, 26, and

Calvin Kang, 22, deferring their studies.

The Singapore Tennis Association's pioneer full-time programme for juniors started with four players last year, and added three more to its stable this year. They are aged from 13 to 16.

The introduction of the HPS scheme by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth has also been touted as a potential game-changer.

Under it, scholarships worth \$40 million over five years will be offered to about 60 athletes from this year, giving them more comprehensive support in the form of stipends, on top of covering the costs of coaching, equipment and competitions.

But as then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said when he launched the ACT initiative in 2002: "The Government alone cannot transform Singapore into a sporting nation."

Indeed. A vibrant sporting scene, where athletes plunge unreservedly into sport, is not one that can be built overnight.

It will take time, as well as ample support from stakeholders such as parents, sports administrators, corporate sponsors and employers.

✉ [maychen@sph.com.sg](mailto:maychen@sph.com.sg)