

# Joseph Schooling and how training for Olympics exacts a steep price from young athletes



The critical factor in Joseph Schooling becoming an Olympic champion was his desire, motivation and confidence to embark on a long and arduous journey. At 14, no one except Joseph believed he could do it. ST FILE PHOTO



Financial and public support for athletes to see through their training may have increased since Joseph Schooling's early years, but there is room to do more.

## Kenneth Goh

Following Joseph Schooling's announcement of his retirement from competitive swimming, many wonder: Is Singapore capable of producing another Olympic champion?

Let's consider this objectively. Becoming an Olympic champion is similar to growing a start-up into a billion-dollar company. In both cases, there is a high upfront investment cost with a low probability of success. Both require significant personal commitment upfront, and personal, physical, emotional, social and financial sacrifices along the way, with little guarantee of a successful outcome.

In the start-up world, only 0.4 per cent of venture-funded start-ups reach unicorn status, with 1,525 companies valued at over US\$1 billion (S\$1.35 billion) out of more than 400,000 venture-funded companies since 2000. These odds are comparable to the chances of someone making it to the Olympics.

In the 2020 Olympics, the US swimming contingent comprised 53 athletes. Participation in high school swimming between 2013 and 2019 ranged from 165,779 to 175,594 athletes, putting the odds of a high school swimmer making it to the US Olympic team at around 0.3 per cent.

Similarly, for Singapore, six swimmers and divers in Singapore represented the nation in the 2020 Olympics. Singapore Aquatics reported that participation in all aquatics events numbered around 7,000 (including athletes, coaches, and parents) in 2022, putting the estimated odds of making it to the Olympics at around 0.09 per cent.

This doesn't mean that Singapore should give up on its Olympic aspirations of seeing gold. If there's anything Joseph Schooling has shown us, many factors can still be worked on at the systemic level and the individual athlete's talent, effort,

and determination also improve the odds of success.

Like start-up founders, Singaporean athletes who aspire to Olympic glory should be confident in their abilities to pursue a less conventional path and achieve victory. We have produced successful entrepreneurs like Razer's co-founder and CEO Tan Min Liang. His vision, conviction, dedication and astuteness have played a vital role in growing Razer into a leading global lifestyle brand for gamers – and high-performance sport is little different.

### IMPROVING THE RISK-RETURN PROFILE

A key priority for Singapore, being a small country, is to encourage its young athletes to remain in their respective sports for longer and mitigate the chances of them quitting at a young age before they reach their full potential, both physically and mentally. Coaches have observed that youth participation in competitive sports drops off after secondary school.

Over the past decade, many steps have been taken to create more favourable conditions for youth to participate in high-performance sports and stay the course.

Making the financial equation work is key. Just as agencies like Enterprise Singapore and the Economic Development Board reinforce start-ups to encourage entrepreneurship by improving the risk-return profile, in sports, agencies like SportSG have also improved the conditions for high-performance sports by reducing the upfront investment that athletes need to make. It is well-known that the Schooling family had to mortgage their house to raise more than \$1 million to support their son's Olympic ambitions when he was 14.

Singapore has since made significant efforts to reduce the financial burden on the athletes and their families to pursue their Olympic ambitions. Since 2013, SportSG, through the Singapore Sports Institute (SSI), has introduced initiatives such as the Sports Excellence Scholarship, which supports selected athletes with a monthly stipend of up to around \$8,000, assistance for local and overseas training and competitions, sports science and nutrition, and more. The recent

expansion of the scholarship to athletes serving their national service, and the introduction of the Sports Excellence Potential (spexPotential) programme have also been welcomed.

Besides direct funding, the Government has also significantly invested in infrastructure, facilities, and coaching talent. World-class sports facilities such as the OCBC Aquatic Centre can be used as venues for national athletes to train and for Singapore to host international events such as the upcoming World Aquatics Championships in 2025, where aspiring athletes can be exposed to and benchmark themselves against global standards. Funding also supports National Sports Associations' hiring of high-calibre coaches internationally.

Fast-growing start-ups can stay in business even if they are not profitable as long as they can raise money from investors who believe in their potential. Similarly, reducing the costs of training borne by the athletes will give them a longer runway to pursue their Olympic ambitions and persevere through short-term setbacks.

### CAREER PROSPECTS AFTER SPORTS

Athletes have to bear not only the financial expenses of pursuing their Olympic dreams but also think about their future career prospects after their sports career. Winning a medal and securing a sponsorship deal are not guaranteed. This raises concerns over the economics of dedicating time to sports on their future job prospects and lifetime earnings.

They must consider the educational qualifications and skills necessary for employment, while on their sporting journey. Yet training to become an Olympic champion requires enormous dedication to training, rest, recovery, conditioning, and competition. For high-performance athletes who are also full-time students, balancing both academics and sports in the mainstream educational pathway is like juggling two very demanding jobs.

In adolescence, athletes with Olympic ambitions need customised educational pathways tailored to their unique needs. Such pathways should allow them to study while training at a high level. The Singapore Sports School offers tailored paths for both

secondary and post-secondary athletes. These programmes give them more flexibility in designing their academic schedules around their training and competition schedules. Additionally, athletes are given more options to defer or be exempt from certain academic requirements.

It's important to note that the athletes who choose this path are not academically weaker or less capable than their peers. For example, Claire Tan, captain of Singapore's Artistic Swimming team, recently graduated from the Sports School with a near-perfect score in her IB exams the same year she competed in the Asian Games, where the team placed fourth.

She credits the school for allowing her to achieve her sporting and academic goals. This is not surprising, as a programme catered to helping athletes accomplish both will allow them to excel in academics and sports, more so than another that prioritises academics alone.

Attending university coincides with the age of peak performance for most sports. In the US, college sports play an integral part in the pathway for an elite athlete. Many student-athletes can also train and compete at the highest level while receiving academic support and advice in college. Joseph Schooling won the Olympic gold as a student at the University of Texas in Austin, which he specifically chose to attend to swim under coach Eddie Reese. The announcements of swimmers for the US Olympic team also mention their college affiliation, demonstrating the important role of collegiate sports in developing elite athletes.

Some top Singapore athletes have gone overseas to study and train to continue their sporting careers. But going abroad requires adjustment to a new system, which can also be financially and psychologically demanding, so it should not be the only option for athletes.

In Singapore, this integration between elite sports pathways and higher education is lacking for obvious reasons compared with sporting giants like the US with a collegiate sports ecosystem. Even so, alternative educational pathways for athletes offered by Singapore's world-renowned universities are available. Athletes may take a gap year or longer in university to prepare for major games. Another option is to delay applying to university for a few

years to train full-time and begin university studies only after their competitive career.

Universities like Singapore Management University do not penalise applicants for this time gap between their pre-tertiary exams and university applications. This break may even work in their favour, allowing applicants to develop a unique life story and gain a mature perspective on their chosen course of study.

### THE CRITICAL FACTOR

All these efforts to establish a more favourable system for athletes to achieve their Olympic dreams help to increase our athletes' success in winning the Olympics. But no system is perfect and there is always room for improvement. For example, concerns have been raised if monthly stipends are sufficient. Some also question why athletes must bear the financial cost of delaying graduation from university if they represent the nation.

While sports administrators do their best to address these concerns, athletes should not let these issues dampen their ambition. The path to Olympic glory is a rocky one filled with challenges, and athletes shouldn't allow these challenges to distract them from their goals.

As Joseph Schooling showed, even with the support from the sporting establishment, the critical factor in his becoming an Olympic champion was his desire, motivation and confidence to embark on a long and arduous journey. At 14, no one except Joseph believed he could do it.

Entrepreneurs and athletes with Olympic dreams share a common trait – outsized confidence in their abilities to achieve their goals. However, there is a key difference between the two – while entrepreneurs can potentially earn massive financial rewards, Olympic athletes do not have the same financial incentives. This is all the more reason why we should respect their athletic endeavours and support them as much as we can, both financially and morally.

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Singapore's artistic swimmers (from left) Kiera Lee, Vivien Tai and Claire Tan at the OCBC Aquatic Centre in September 2023. Claire, the captain of Singapore's Artistic Swimming team, recently graduated from the Sports School with a near-perfect score in her IB exams the same year she competed in the Asian Games, where the team placed fourth. ST FILE PHOTO