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PRINCIPLES OF TRAINING & LESSONS IN LIFE

Every Tuesdays and Thursdays, the Kampung Pandan Sports Complex come alive with heaving and puffing runners being put to the sword by a 60-ish stocky looking man shouting instructions to his suffering brood. The bespectacled man in track pants has a weather-beaten face, his skin tanned and seasoned. In short he has a presence that suggests that he is no pushover. That's Chan Chee Seng for you. At least that was my impression of him.



Coach with his charges: From left: His son Eugene and Azwar
Picture courtesy of [Azwar](#)

I'm not one of the speedy athletes fortunate enough to be under his care and guidance but I have many friends who train under his tutelage to know that his program is tough - the sort of toughness that will bring out the best in you. That's to be expected if you wish to improve. The only times I've seen Coach, as he is fondly called, are from afar and that's usually with him behind the wheel of his van driving past, accompanying his athletes on their Sunday biking/running.



So it was with some surprise when he started turning up at the KLCC track one Wednesday evening while I was finishing my workout. Ronnie introduced him to the Wednesday gang and most of the conversations were on non-running related matters with Ronnie handing out his wedding invitations. The second time I met Coach was yesterday and this time we had more than an opportunity to talk - one on one.

When you meet a learned person, besides harvesting his knowledge and experience, you'd want to know as much as possible about that him. To me, a good way of doing that is by being humble and shoot him plenty of questions. Of course your timing has got to be good as interjections can be seen as rudeness. There's also the challenge of getting a word in when you talk to Coach - he just has plenty of advice. I was, however, very clear on what I wanted to glean from him. Firstly I was interested in his training philosophy and secondly, on how elite athletes manage their training and family lives.

Lesson No. 1

So after some pleasantries, Coach started to talk about running - without my prompting, which was perfectly fine. The discourse had started! He mentioned that the basis of endurance sports is to build a rock solid base. Much like the construction of a high rise building, if the foundation is strong, the structure will be able to withstand many many floors built on it. Coach said that the body needs to adapt to the stress of running. In marathon training, one has to gear up to run the full distance at least twice to gain physical toughness and mental confidence. He said that there are actually 2 proverbial walls to overcome in a marathon, one at the 30K mark and another at the 35K mark. Beyond 30K, no

matter what level of endurance you may have, if your legs are not trained to take the pounding, you will succumb to an average walking pace of 8 mins/Km for the last 12K of the race. This translates to more than 1.5 hours for the final 12K. As he pointed out this point, I knew then that my own mileage had not been sufficient as I suffered the exact late miles malaise he just mentioned.

1st lesson learnt: For beginner marathoners, clock up the mileage and minimize the fast runs.

Lesson No. 2

At this point, Coach's son Eugene arrived and promptly got his training instructions to hit 7 laps. After Eugene set off, I spotted an opening and promptly shot Coach the question that's been bugging me of late: "How do the elite athletes handle their training and family commitments?" To which he replied, "Always communicate. Always discuss things with your spouse. The supportive wife is the strength behind every successful athlete. Who looks after the family? Who cooks and cleans at home while you train? For most times, it's the wife." Coach kept stressing that family is for life while sports are fleeting. Families stay for a person's entire life. The spouse may not openly object her husband's intense training schedule but this doesn't mean that she's happy. She may be afraid to voice her discontent or may harbour suspicion on her husband's frequent absence.

He has seen couples breaking up because they don't talk and discuss enough besides keeping things to themselves. "Don't keep issues in your heart. Bring it out, talk it out. Don't run with a heavy heart, worrying about missed calls and other stresses. Run free!" Coach pointed out. This is something we all know but at times need reminding, especially from someone out there who has gone through it all.

2nd lesson learnt: Always maintain an open communication channel with your spouse

Lesson No. 3

Things become more complicated when there are children involved. There's a need to scale down and lower the race expectations as there are now more responsibilities at hand. Discuss with the family and bring them along to your workouts. Perhaps even devote some "outdoor sessions" with them and they'll understand your passion for this healthy activity. Coach attributes his happy family to his concept of getting everyone in his family involved in the activities. Citing an example of his 2 sons' and daughter's active lifestyle to the way he brings them up. His wife too is fully supportive of his passion and would often tag along during the long Sunday workouts. I think Coach have done a splendid job looking at the bantering between Eugene and him. Those 2 were talking like friends.

3rd lesson learnt: Involve your family if possible, else learn to compromise

Lesson No. 4

Justin and Newton who had both just concluded their runs, then joined us. Coach pointed out that the KLCC track offers a good opportunity to train on a consistent pace. With the measured distance, one can even do long runs there. He suggested that for the first few marathons, we should concentrate on nothing else but mileage run at our own pace. "Beat yourself up in training but not on race day! Enjoy your race and come back for more. You should enjoy your marathons." he said. Below is how he suggested our training programs to be:

Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays: 10 - 13Ks

Tuesdays and Thursdays: 15 - 16Ks

Saturdays: Rest

Sundays: 30 building up to 45K

Total: 88 - 116Ks

Justin made a quick remark that Coach is the late Arthur Lydiard (who advocated mega mileage) incarnated. In truth, Lydiard's mileage is even higher, sometimes topping off at 180 to 200K weeks! While I agree that Coach is the closest Malaysian version of Lydiard, his advice on skipping the hills (Lydiard stresses hills as part of his program) and intervals at this point is not like Lydiard. Perhaps one should bother about hills and speedwork only when one belongs in the realms of the elite marathoners. He confidently declared that just on mileage alone, anyone can do a sub-4 marathon.

Coach further emphasized that one should not get into the habit of conjuring excuses to skip training. "Training will always be hard. There's no way for the body to fully recover after each training. You're always operating between 70 to 75 percent physical readiness in training. That's the purpose of tapering - for recovery. Yes, you'll need to drink plenty of water the 2 days before your race." he said. "Raining? Wear a rain jacket! Lightning? Bike or run in the gym! Tired? Go slow! You'll feel better after you're warmed up. Don't give yourself excuses." he added.

Coach felt that it's important to know why one runs. Is it for health reasons or to be competitive? Knowing this will allow you to know how much you need to sacrifice and compromise.

4th lesson learnt: Get your priorities right and be consistent in your training!

Lesson No. 5

Proper diet and nutrition should be accorded their place in a runner's training program. Not only carbs are important, so is protein and the minerals. He singled out Vitamins B Complex and C as the most important vitamins a runner can take. If a runner can afford it, it's also beneficial to take sports supplements.

5th lesson learnt: Eat right

The evening has drawn late and we've got to return home. We've lost track of time, totally absorbed in Coach's discourse. For me it had been a treat to listen to Coach as I don't attend any of Coach's training sessions. I don't know if I'll get the chance to train as seriously as what's required of a serious athlete but at least this conversation with Coach has put certain things in perspective for me, as a person who wears many hats. One thing's for certain, whichever path I choose - be it of a serious athlete or one of compromise, my passion for the sport will not be diminished just as my will to give it all I have in races.

The journey continues...

Jamie Pang
Dec 23rd, 2004