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Once an Olympian, Always an Inspiration



Supporting careers can fulfil fantasies and broaden horizons. Jeffrey Ong Kuan Seng did not just live the dream; his biography might be called the *Ballad of East and West*. Like Rudyard Kipling, one of Malaysia's most celebrated swimmers knows that "the twain" can not only meet, but also enjoy the best of both worlds.

"With a dad from Penang and a mum from England," he says, "I always aimed to have the best of East and West. And it's not East versus West, it's about balance, and I think I've achieved a good balance." The way he's kept his equilibrium, he's the living embodiment – both in and out of the water.

GROWING UP IN PENANG

Maintaining equilibrium is a crucial part of swimming, which is a tough gig. Distance swimming is even tougher, and he did it the hard way. At 13, he went to an overseas boarding school; university was on yet another continent. But his horizon was already

broad, his balance worthy of a tightrope walker.

"A lot of things happened due to synchronicity or serendipity," he says, reflecting on his career in the café at his Kuala Lumpur condo. And he dives straight in with tales of the many back-and-forth journeys, a couple of which owed more to the heart than anything else.

"The first such trip happened before I was born when my mum, Rosemary, accepted a one-way ticket from my dad, Ong Eng Kooi, to visit Malaysia in the late 1950s.

"They had met in London, where my dad was studying accountancy, and when he came home, they kept writing to each other until he bought her a one-way ticket."

The inference being," he chuckles, "that if she didn't like it, she could buy the ticket to go back!"

Whether it was confidence or prudence – dad was an accountant

after all – didn't matter because his intrepid future mum "took the leap," as he puts it, into what was then a backward, third-world country – and stayed."

They duly married, and by the time Jeffrey, the third of four children, was born in 1972, the family was ensconced on Penang Island, and so he began an idyllic childhood. "My dad was a swimmer," he says, "as were my older siblings, Steven and Katerina. They used to go to the Chinese Swimming Club in Tanjung Bungah, and I would tag along.

"By 11, I knew I had talent, and "Rina", who won medals at the SEA Games and was Sportswoman of the Year in 1980, was my inspiration. The swimming coach, Lin Boon Lee, was a legend and helped me build the foundation for swimming success.

"I went to Wellesley Primary and had one year at St Xavier's Institution. Growing up in Penang then was amazing. It was all very harmonious. I had Malay, Indian, Chinese and



Jeff with Coach Daland and Ed Bartsch, 1992

Eurasian friends, and it was very *muhibbah*. I remember a beautiful island with hills and trees, and it being a lot less developed than it is now." But it wasn't development that would spoil the idyll.

BOARDING SCHOOL IN THE UK

He explains: "Boon Lee told my parents that to realise my full potential, I would have to go overseas - Malaysia just didn't have the facilities. So, they asked me, at the age of 12, if I'd like to go to a boarding school in England. They just asked without putting any pressure on me.

"Kelly College was a renowned swimming school in Devon, and Rina was doing her 'A' Levels there. I had never really spent much time overseas and, even though I would be leaving so much behind, the weird thing was that I said 'yes'. I don't know what made me, but I did, and so, when I was 13, I was shipped off to England. It was a big culture shock."

Back then, it would have been "off the Richter" for many reasons. Besides the bullying, the discipline and the weather, "Britain," as he puts it, "was not as tolerant as it is today." *'Muhibbah'*, it wasn't.

"It was tough, yeah," he says. "But the good thing for me was training under another terrific swimming coach. Archie Brew had coached British swimmers Sharron Davies, Andrew Jameson and Mark Foster, as well as his sons Robin and Paul, all the way to Olympic level, and he took me under his wing.

"You could say the hardships of boarding school helped me channel my energies into swimming. I pushed myself and improved tremendously. Helped by Archie, I developed a real competitive spirit and I even managed to become one of the top five 1500m freestyle swimmers in Britain."

This meant he was always on the move, amassing air miles and 'water miles' - his events were the 400m and 1500m - the latter a mind-numbing 30 lengths of a 50m pool. In his prime, he trained five hours a day, six days a week, 50 weeks a year.

ON A WINNING STREAK

"In early 1987, I qualified for the SEA Games in Jakarta later that year. I was just 15 and in Category B. In Category A, everything was paid for, but in Category B, you had to pay your own



way. Only if you won a medal did they reimburse you - it was extra motivation.

"The Senayan pool was green and murky, like a pond. I was in an outside lane and swam the 400m freestyle as fast as I could. When I touched the wall, I looked up and I saw my name in first place! I couldn't believe it. My parents were there, and it was a rare gold medal from Category B, so I saved them money!

"It gave me the confidence to win the 1500m as well, and by breaking the SEA Games and Malaysian records, I was suddenly on everyone's radar. A year later, I felt chills run down my spine as I marched with the Malaysian contingent in front of 72,000 people



Winning a silver medal at the Asian Games in 1990

at the Seoul Olympics Opening Ceremony. I was 16 and will never forget that moment.”

He swam in both the 400m and 1500m but was “disappointed not to make the final.” He’d still done enough to be Malaysia’s 1988 Sportsman of the Year thanks to two silver medals he won at the Asian Swimming Championships earlier that year. In 1989, he won another two golds at the SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur, before winning a 1500m silver at the Asian Games a year later.

Next up was uni – and another good choice. The University of Southern California (USC) is a top swimming college, where Peter Daland, a Hall of Famer, made it a hat-trick of “fantastic” coaches. “Peter was another great influence,” he says. With that trio and his parents, who, he says, “were my biggest supporters,” he had more than the wind behind him.

While at USC, he won a silver at the World Student Games in Sheffield, where Rina was living after she finished university. With her and the rest of the family in attendance, he set a Malaysian record in the 1500m, which stood for 32 years. Of his aquatic family, he says, “We all swam. My elder brother Steven was also a good swimmer, while my younger

sister Angelia also swam in the SEA Games.”

Jeffrey made it to the top 20 at the 1992 Olympics but again missed out on the final. In 1994, he graduated with a BA in broadcast journalism and a minor in psychology and decided to retire from competitive swimming.

A CAREER IN BROADCAST JOURNALISM

“I felt like I had achieved pretty much everything I’d wanted to in my career. You know, eight SEA Games gold medals, silver in the Asian Games, two silvers in the Asian Swimming Championships, breaking the Asian record. I couldn’t even imagine competing in the Olympics as a young boy growing up in Penang.”

It was a serendipitous time to come home. “I returned to Malaysia when the media was booming and joined TV3. I was a news reporter, producer and anchor, and I co-hosted Malaysia’s first information technology television programme, Cyberwave.”

“I went freelance for a while and ended up in the commentary box at the KL 1998 Commonwealth Games. A few years later, I met Carolyn, who would eventually become my wife. We were just getting to know each other when she was offered a

scholarship to do a PhD at Imperial College in London.” And then came another decision of the heart.

“After about six months of a long-distance relationship, I knew she was the one for me, so I made what I thought was a reckless decision to move to the UK. While I have a Malaysian passport, I also have the right of abode in England through my mother, and thus didn’t need a work permit.

“That was 2002 and I got a job in the events industry, managing sponsorship of various conferences and business events, which I did for 14 years. Carolyn and I ended up getting married and our daughter, Olivia, was born in London.”

BACK TO MALAYSIA UNDER TALENTCORP

However, in 2016, the pendulum swung again after he was offered a sports marketing job in KL and, came back under the TalentCorp Malaysia Returning Expert Programme. “And I’ve been here ever since.”

“I think everything that I’ve gone through in my life has helped shape who I am. So my time in Penang, my time in England, my time in America, back here, then back in England again. I always believe everything happens for a reason.”

Despite the horrors of a British boarding school, he still talks fondly of the countryside, and, despite the weather, he loves London and thinks it can be a great place to live and work. He developed a British sense of humour, and became a fan of Monty Python, The Two Ronnies, Alas Smith and Jones and Black Adder.

Having worked in the media and event industries as well as in sports marketing, he’s been involved with Human Capital Development as a facilitator for the past five years. His vast breadth of experience helps him keep a level head across two hemispheres, which is quite an asset in any walk of life. ■