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Sporting Heroines: The 1970s

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The 1970s: Swimmers Sweep Successes for Singapore

Singapore gained its independence in 1965, a year after the Tokyo Olympic Games. It was during this period that three young sportswomen were beginning a journey that would turn them into household names. There were no female representatives at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico, but the introduction of the Sportswomen of the Year awards by the Singapore National Olympic Council the year before had highlighted the exploits of young athletes. The culmination of regional successes was to be the appearance of two swimmers and one track-athlete in the Olympiads of the 1970s. Patricia Chan and Tay Chin Joo represented Singapore at the Munich Games in 1972, and four years later Chee Swee Lee appeared in the Montreal Games.

Patricia Chan

Pat Chan was born in 1954 and started swimming when she was 7 years old. She was literally thrown in the pool at the Chinese Swimming Club to sink or swim. A relatively late starter competitively, Pat was 9 years old when she entered a sport still largely dominated by the expatriate population. Her father Chan Ah Kow was a major contributor to the national development of swimming in Singapore and was to provide Pat with almost unparalleled guidance, support and encouragement. He had been always been a sportsman and as a doctor recognised the benefits of swimming to health and well being.

Chan Ah Kow introduced an experimental approach to swimming in Singapore that brought success and growing interest in his coaching methods. He introduced the use of wooden paddles and kick boards, isometric exercises, resistance work with rubber tubes, which basically helped to increase the individual strength of his charges.

Pat devoted long hours to training in the pool under the forthright and often voluble leadership of her father. The pool at the Chinese Swimming Club became an extension of home being used in the early hours of the morning to test the mettle of young swimmers. Pat and her contemporaries not only scaled the wall to train, but as pioneers, scaled new heights of determination, commitment, and endeavour. All the time a sense of satisfaction and enjoyment was instilled. Dr Chan successfully created a family atmosphere and attracted plenty of new blood to the local culture of competitive swimming.

Educated briefly at Raffles Girls' School and later at Methodist Girls' School, Pat found her environment very supportive, but she did not experience a typical education, for she always had to return to the pool by 5.00 p.m. in the evening. Training was rigorous, and Chan Ah Kow capable of berating all and sundry. A hierarchical system of practice evolved based on meritocratic principles. Lane one in the pool was claimed by the fastest swimmers only. All the way down to lane eight there was a struggle for supremacy amongst the younger aspirants. Thus a tradition of merit was established.

To illustrate the pattern of success that emerged for Pat Chan one need look no further than her results in the SEAP Games. In 1965, the eleven year old shattered the existing record time for 100 m freestyle with a time of 68.8 seconds. She successfully defended her title for the next four games including 1973 when the Games were first held in Singapore. At each competition she set a new record.

For five consecutive years Pat Chan was voted the Sportswoman of the Year: 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, and 1971. Her performances have provided a bench-mark against which all subsequent efforts have been compared.

The strain of being a champion began after Pat swept to 8 gold medals in the 1965 SEAP games. Her father said to her - "...understand - this is the easiest part of your swimming career - the toughest part is staying there." For Pat there was a darker side to the success she achieved. It was the public side of life. Being in the limelight - performing for the sake of achievement, your life was not your own - and the expectations were not your own either. Pat asserts that she became more introverted and much less open to people because of the necessity for public appearance. There were many sacrifices to be made. As Pat recalls: "While others were going to parties, I was going to sleep".

As one might expect, Pat Chan has vivid memories of her participation in the Olympics in Munich. Her main objective was to participate and to perform. There was no particular hope of reaching the finals, such was the international competition. Pat was entered in the two backstroke events, but was unable to match her previous best performances. In heat 5 of the 100m Backstroke event she clocked a time of 1 minute 14.24 seconds. In heat 2 of the 200m Backstroke, Pat was timed at 2 minutes 41.27 seconds.

It was, nonetheless, both an awe-inspiring and a taxing experience for the 18 year-old. It was difficult to feel fully prepared because of the limited time to become acclimatised and there no particular enjoyment because of the internal and external pressure to perform. The underlying feeling was one of hoping that everything would somehow fall into place. The event that Pat recalls most was the tragedy of the Israelis and the Palestinian terrorists. She reflects that it had nothing to do with sport. It was mindless, political anarchy. There was no respect for talent athletes nor for the sense of community that characterises the Games.

After the Games Pat took time off from competition but was required in 1973 to make a come back as the SEAP games were being held in Singapore. At the age of nineteen this was to prove her toughest year. The psychological demands were harder to satisfy than the physical demands. She questioned her own ability to be fully mentally prepared. However, she narrowly edged out Elaine Sng (the rising star of the freestyle events) in the final of the 100 metres and claimed individual gold medals in the backstroke events and the 4x50 medley.

Today, Pat Chan is a business executive, who pursues the challenges of the media world. She lives in Singapore and continues to serve as the ultimate reference point and model for aspiring swimmers. Her thirty nine gold medals in the SEAP Games represent an achievement unlikely to be challenged for many years.

Tay Chin Joo

Tay Chin Joo is the younger sister of Tay Chin Say. The Tay family provided four national athletes: brother Winston Tay Boon Tiong (Swimming and Water Polo), Sisters Nora (Springboard Diving) and Molly Chin Say (Swimming). All four represented Singapore at the 5th Asian Games held in Bangkok.

Chin Joo was born in 1955 at Kandang Kerbau Hospital, and she first learned to swim while her family was living, for a period, in Kuala Lumpur. As a six-year old she made her first impact on water sports at the Royal Selangor Golf Club, where she entered diving and swimming competitions with her brother and sisters. A student of Methodist Girls' School between 1962 and 1971, she undertook her pre-university education at Anglo-Chinese School.

Chin Joo swam at both the Chinese Swimming Club and the Singapore Swimming Club. At different times she came under the guidance of illustrious coaches: Neo Chwee Kok, Chan Ah Kow, Fong Hoe Beng, and Kee Soon Bee.

As a ten-year old, Chin Joo created history by becoming the youngest Singaporean to win a SEAP Games gold medal. She achieved this in the 4x100 metres freestyle relay in Kuala Lumpur in 1965. The Asian Games the following year in Bangkok was very much a family affair for Chin Joo and her siblings. Four Tays represented Singapore in aquatic events: Chin Joo won a Bronze together with Patricia Chan, Jovina Tseng, and older sister Molly Tay in the 4x100 metres freestyle. More successes followed with medal placings at each of the next two SEAP Games (Bangkok, 1967, and Rangoon, 1969). Chin Joo also represented Singapore in the Commonwealth Games held in Edinburgh in 1970, and later in the same year in the 6th Asian Games again held in Bangkok. A multiple medallist, Chin Joo, aged 16, won her first individual international Gold medal at the SEAP Games held in Kuala Lumpur in December 1971. She dominated both the Butterfly events and followed this up with a silver medal in the individual medley.

In May 1972, Tay Chin Joo achieved the Olympic qualifying time in the 100 meters butterfly after a fine season which saw her achieve a string of successes in Asian Age Group Championships, and international events against Thailand, Hong Kong and Indonesia.

Chin Joo was selected for the Olympic Games, and her objective was to improve her best time. She was still concerned about combining her school work and finding time to prepare herself mentally and physically for the challenge of Munich. There was no centralised training as the squad for swimming was a small one. Chin Joo, Pat Chan and Roy Chan. Chan Ah Kow was the national coach, Mrs Chan was the unofficial chaperone.

Chin Joo arrived, with the group, a few days early with the reassuring feeling that she was with the best swimmers in the world.

On the day of competition Chin Joo was feeling good, it was a fast pool meaning that the edge of the pool should absorb the backwash created by the swimmers. Chin Joo was entered in Heat 3 of the 100 metres Butterfly. Her intention was to use the other swimmers to help pace her to a new personal best. She was not necessarily concerned with beating

potentially much faster rivals. Chin Joo prepared carefully and was well warmed up, but when she dived in, the cold water enveloped her in a chilling embrace. Fighting off the effects of a devastating shock to her system, she kept her head down initially as she tried to increase her stroke rate. However, when she finally lifted her head to take her first breath, she found herself choking on the water which ironically had swept back from the other swimmers. She nearly stopped swimming altogether as she struggled to inhale some air. That delay effectively ended the challenge on her personal best and she finished with a time of 1 minute 10.92 seconds almost 3 seconds behind her personal best time. Mayumi Aoki from Japan, who swam in the same heat, went on to claim the gold medal in the final with a time of 1 minute 3.34 seconds. This was a race, which saw the eight finalists finishing within 0.91 of a second of each other.

Chin Joo expressed considerable disappointment with what she considered to be a 'rotten time'. However, today she makes no excuses, just voices regrets that she may have let down other her country, the Sports Council, and her family. She freely admits that after her heat she spent some time in tears behind the bathroom door. Such a terrible disappointment was only heightened by the realisation that the opportunity would never come again, that there would be no chance to repeat the Olympic experience.

On her return to Singapore, Chin Joo decided to devote her time to studying for her Pre-University exams at ACS, but she was not out of the news. A panel of judges voted her Sportswoman of the Year in February 1973 for her swimming exploits. Later in the year, Chin Joo withdrew from consideration for the SEAP Games to be held in Singapore. This was a decision that sparked rebuke from a number of quarters, but at the same time generated considerable public support from key figures in the sporting world.

Having successfully passed her exams, it was possible to return to the rigours of competitive swimming. The road back, which is never easy, climaxed with her participation in the Asian Games of 1974 held in Teheran. Chin Joo secured one silver medal (4x100metres Medley) and two bronze medals (4x100 metres Freestyle and 100 metres Butterfly). It was thus, at the age of 19 years that Tay Chin Joo retired officially from competitive swimming to continue her graduate studies overseas. Today she divides her energy between family and office work.

Chee Swee Lee

Chee Swee Lee was born on January 10th 1955. She was the third child in a family of eight children. She started her track career at the age of 10 years in Telok Kurau West Primary School training six days a week. In 1966, she became the school's athletics champion. Subsequently, she became a member of the Flash Athletics Club under the watchful eye of her coach, Patrick Zehnder. Swee Lee ran in the 400 metres and the 800 metres events and was renowned for her commitment, humility, self-belief, and determination.

More successes quickly followed. She represented Singapore at the 1970 Asian Games held in Bangkok. And in 1971, she won a silver medal in the 400 metres in the SEAP Games held in Kuala Lumpur.

After her 1973 Gold medal in the South Korean championships, where she recorded 58 seconds for the 400 metres, her SEAP Games performances were judged by some to be failures. Her coach Patrick Zehnder later stated that she had not been well enough mentally prepared. Her results however would be recognised as remarkable for an eighteen year old Singaporean today. In the 400 metres her time of 56.00 seconds was good enough for a silver medal behind Than Than, the Burmese runner. Her time for the 800 metres (2:12.8) also won the silver, this time behind Mar Mar Min of Burma.

Long-term plans were set for Swee Lee by Patrick Zehnder, who envisaged her specialising only at the age of 22. No one could foresee that future events would wreck these plans.

In 1974, Swee Lee won a gold medal in the 400 m at the Philippines Track and Field Championships. At about this time Swee Lee received an invitation to train at Redlands University with Vince Reel, the husband and coach of the famous Taiwanese athlete Chi Cheng. The invitation was to help her prepare for the Montreal Olympics was declined, but would be restated later.

In September 1974, Chee Swee Lee was to achieve her greatest success and one which was to grant her national immortality and entry to the Hall of Fame. At the 7th Asian Games held in Teheran, she won the gold medal and set a new Games record in the 400 metres with a time of 55.08. This victory was the first achieved by a Singaporean in the history of the Games. Later in the year the progress of the nineteen-year-old was consolidated in the Commonwealth Games, where she recording times of 55.1 seconds in the 400 metres and 2.08.1 in the 800metres. As a just reward Swee Lee was selected as the Sportswoman of the Year for 1974.

Sadly, the athletic career, of arguably the leading track athlete in Singapore's history, was to suffer a blow. There was controversy over her withdrawal from a competition in Japan. It was suggested at the time that she did not wish to participate unless her coach was present. Furthermore there was a conflict between the competition and the trials for the Asian Track and Field championships.

On a brighter note, the regional dominance of Swee Lee was confirmed at the SEAP Games in Bangkok, where she took both gold medals in her favoured events.

In February 1976 started a six month training stint under the guidance of Vince Reel in the USA. This signalled a temporary suspension of an 11-year partnership with Patrick Zehnder. The aim was to train and then attempt the qualifying time for her Olympic events, with the added incentive of higher class opposition in the States. It appeared that the initial invitation from Reel, eighteen months earlier, had proved irresistible. The new environment clearly suited Swee Lee, once she had acclimatised. However, there was bad news for home support in July, just a couple of weeks before the Games were due to start. An injury to the Achilles tendon of her right leg occurred during the National Amateur Athletic Union meet. The damage had been done and the participation of Chee Swee Lee in the Olympic Games was to be a tragedy both for her and for Singapore.

In her 800 metres heat in Montreal, Swee Lee broke down after about 150 metres. She was forced to pull out because the injury had not fully recovered. The ultimate winner of the 800 metres was Tatyana Kazankina (USSR) who broke the world record with a time of 1:54.94.

Tragically, Swee Lee was never to regain her full form. The injury did not fully recover. Wracked with pain after short training periods, she sought relief from a number of different treatments, and ultimately surgery was required. Unwilling to retire and showing the utmost determination, Chee Swee Lee fought to make a comeback. She reappeared after two years, but was unable to regain her form. A spell in West Germany raised hopes of a full recovery, and the courageous runner vowed to race within the region for Singapore. She ran in the SEA Games in Manila in 1981, but unfortunately without success.

Today, Chee Swee Lee lives and works in California.