



Dance Flame

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Visionary

During his presidency, Robert Ong reshaped the Singapore DanceSport Federation...

With insight, compassion, humour, and his gift for guiding others, much has been achieved since the advent of this presidency...

An Interview with the President..

Not many people have had the opportunity to interview Robert Ong, the President of the Singapore DanceSport Federation. As our publicity team sits and waits for him in the confines of his plush office, one cannot help but to wonder about the man and his methods – controversial but effective.

In the past 24 months since stepping into the shoes of the former President Ng Geng Whye, Robert has led the way in improving the Singapore DanceSport Federation (SGDF) when he became the 2nd President in the Federation's entire history.



At the time, the SGDF faced dwindling membership and enrollment challenges. "What appealed to me about the SGDF was, first of all, it's a distinguished National Sports Association (NSA). Secondly, it had a number of political problems with various other bodies that, if ameliorated, could result in even better things happening, and if not dealt with could become a serious problem."

Here is a man, which strikes fear into many with the tenacity of a born-fighter, has a sinister thought pattern that seems to say, "Try Me, But Don't Regret". Yet, he commands the utmost respect when he speaks, for he does not mince his words for the sake of diplomacy. A shrewd tactician, he single-handedly reshaped the SGDF to what it is today.

Two months into his term, he addressed the issue head-on, asking the members to support an ambitious plan to refocus DanceSports in Singapore on a global scale, on its strengths and promote membership drives in new ways.



An Interview with the President Con't..

Melvin Tan, currently Singapore's Number One Latin athlete commends Robert's commitment and says "Most importantly, he understands and communicates the need for financial discipline and planning, and this has been successfully implemented in the past 24 months."

As a result of Robert's leadership and clearly defined goals, SGDF not only recovered from a slump, but also made strides towards its vision of becoming the leading DanceSport faculty in the region. SGDF is the only nationally recognized DanceSport body in South-East Asia to have been given the mandate by the International DanceSport Federation to host the 2003 and 2004 IDSF Grand Slam Latin events in 2 consecutive years.

"Robert has the requisite traits of authentic leadership," says May Ng, the current Treasurer of the SGDF. "He's a visionary, a risk taker, and action oriented, and is guided by purpose, values and integrity". May, who worked with Robert under the previous Presidency, describes him as a strategic thinker who has exceptional analytical skills and an amazing ability to identify and implement solutions. "He has a unique style that commands respect, yet at the same time puts people at ease and allows them to share their ideas and opinions freely".

Today the SGDF is stronger than before – both financially and administrative. The training environment has been revitalized. In a bold move, the SGDF launched a Training Scholarship in 2003, to train 2 local athletes from a Beginner's Level to an International Competitors' Level. Ng Phing Keen, one of the athletes, attributed their instant success at achieving World Youth Ranking in the space of 3 months, to the exceptional 'talent-scout' process of Robert. "He's the best in spotting talent, because he understands what an athlete needs to go through, and what is missing".

SGDF's transformation in the past 24 months has been well-recognised by its peers in sports. The SGDF has been approached by the Singapore National Olympic Council to perform at the 2002 SNOC Sports Award, and at the 2002, 2003 and 2004 Olympic Day Run events. In addition, Netball Singapore has also approached the SGDF to perform at the launch of the NTUC Netball Super-League in 2003.

"Things come about because of the tone and example that Robert sets" says a Professional Dance Teacher, who only got to know Robert recently on a personal level. "Things were very different in the past", he said. "By being confident and approachable, he makes people believe things can get better. So they drew together, and things did get better. He empowers people to think creatively and do their best. He's a very good listener. And he's great at managing the group process so that everybody feels their points are valued."



An Interview with the President Con't..

With the implementation of the IDSF Registration System, the SGDF has come under a lot of flack in the past. But Robert takes it as a challenge – he has convinced many people on the need to have an event internationally sanctioned, based on international rules. “We need to get the sport on a higher international level, to be more visible and transparent to international rules.” Robert was an undefeated National Champion before, and he knows what it means to be judged unfairly, by unlicensed adjudicators.

“The money spent, the time spent, all goes down the drain in that short duration of your performance, if you are unfairly judged”, he says through gritted teeth. “That, I feel, is a crime that deserves a penalty, not to the athlete, but to the Organiser”. Robert himself has set a standard of transparency in the SGDF that has never before been experienced, that athletes who were never part of the SGDF have now come forward to render their help.

He has instructed that all adjudicators marks be made public within 3 days after SGDF’s own championships. “If that is how a judge sees the performance of an athlete, so be it. Be responsible for your decision.” He doesn’t believe that marks given to athletes must be labeled as ‘Private & Confidential’. He explains that DanceSport is a subjective sport, unlike soccer and basketball where the score counts when the ball hits the net.

Before taking over the Presidency, Robert was the Vice-President and also the main choreographer for the performances required for shows. Former Amateur Dance Champions (who declined to be named) said that “Robert has a genuine respect for people that forms a strong foundation for all he does. At heart, he is a humanitarian. So when he talks about topics like “registration’, it isn’t because it’s the popular thing to do. It’s because it’s the right thing to do – the caring thing. That’s a solid platform from which to lead a Federation”.

He’s also known to be a very strict disciplinarian. Tardiness and misbehavior from National Athletes are frowned upon – and they will be ticked-off when away from the spotlight. His sense of loyalty to the general public’s funding is based on one philosophy – “Do not fail them, for without them you will not be where you are”.

Never one to mince his words, some people find it odd that he garners so much respect from his peers despite his strong character. As Robert puts it, “Respect cannot be demanded from, it must be earned.” True to his words, many athletes we spoke to, said that ever since he took over the Presidency of the SGDF, there have been many visible changes. Despite the odds, he has managed to implement them with success. The Championships organized under his tenure have always been one that others are measured



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against. Known for his meticulous methods, his Championships have always run like clock-work, and he makes sure that those working with him think the way he does. He leaves no room for errors. Every possible situation is pre-empted, with a backup solution is on the cards. "It's really stressful keeping up with his thoughts, but eventually he guides us in the proper direction to execute the job. That's the rewarding experience I get from working with him" says David Lim, music director for SGDF events.

2004 sees a more matured and confident President at the helm. So far, he has steered the SGDF through the SARS crisis, convincing the IDSF to allow the 2003 IDSF World Youth Latin Championships to go ahead in August 2003. And recently, he has selected 5 athletes to be carded by the Singapore Sports Council. This can be considered an achievement. His target for his athletes is a South-East Asian (SEA) Games medal in 2005.

He has set very ambitious Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for this Executive Committee. "The KPIs are tough, very tough, but once carefully thought over, it can be achieved", said Connie Tan. The same was echoed by her sister Sharon Tan. "It's amazing where he gets the drive for all these wonderful creative ideas that were never seen before, anywhere in Singapore. But he just sits there, ponders for a moment, and comes up with an idea that works."

Private time finds him at home with his lovely wife, and beloved Welsh Corgi whom a good friend gave to him several years ago. Robert spends most of his time away from the dance floor, engrossed with his extensive vinyl record and CD collection. He listens to all sorts of music, from classical to metal, jazz to new-age. Both Robert and his wife, share the same passion for movies, traveling, and their dog. "It's a therapeutic feeling, coming home after a hard day at the office, to be greeted at the door with a loud and happy 'ARF!'" he says.

Looking at Robert sitting behind his desk, his steely eyes looking directly at you with purpose – sends a chill down our backs. The sense of purpose and commitment is strong.

Yes – with Robert at the helm, we can be assured of a great future for dancesports in Singapore.

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