

By Dr Janet Fung

## What's Boccia?

My first introduction to disabled sports came through an unexpected invitation to accompany our disabled athletes to the recent 4<sup>th</sup> ASEAN paragames, held from 20 to 26 January 2008 in Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand. This is a biannual event that follows every ASEAN Game.

To say that it was a very inspiring learning experience would be an understatement. Although I have been a doctor for more than 2 decades, I am embarrassed to confess that I knew little about the various sporting opportunities for the Disabled in Singapore.

My purpose of sharing my experience is to encourage more of us to volunteer our time and encourage any disabled family members, friends or patients to participate in sports for the Disabled. To do better at these Games, we need many more committed disabled athletes to be encouraged to take up sports whether recreationally or competitively.

As doctors, we all are well aware of the wonderful health benefits of sports. The way

that some of our disabled sports athletes have committed to training and made sacrifices to excel, put ourselves and many of our more able bodied athletes to shame.

Armed with a briefing from a much more experienced Dr Edward Menon, our Rehabilitation Medicine colleague, who has been involved in sports for the disabled for about 2 decades, and a medical bag courtesy of the Singapore Sports Council, I could not begin to imagine the challenges and joys I would be facing over the next 12 days.

I was moved as I watched our more severely disabled wheelchair-bound athletes show tremendous courage and fighting spirit in the game of Boccia. It was wonderful to learn of how much improvement occurred in their physical conditions after some started competitive training. Those with cerebral palsy, spinal muscular atrophy and spina bifida are categorised according to the severity of their disabilities, competing with others in the same



*A game of Boccia at the Jurong East Sports Hall.*

categories from 11 other ASEAN countries.

Boccia is a game which enables those with very little motor control to still participate on a level playing field. Some use just the movement of their heads with a stick out of their helmets to move their coloured balls closest to the white ball. Amazing and inspiring, the smiles from the athletes that came from a good throw or game well played would melt the hardest of cynical hearts!

It was very good and encouraging for all the disabled athletes and officials to get the full support from the then Parliamentary Secretary for Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, Mr Teo Ser Luck, who even took the time to encourage them by coming all the way to Thailand! Sad to say, other than the handful of enthusiastic parents of some athletes from the swim team, our athletes had no supporters other than the team managers and officials.

Setting up my “Medical Clinic” in one of our hostel rooms during the athletes’ visit and visiting the Thai Polyclinic nearby to familiarise myself with what facilities were available, was one of my first priorities. Our medical team consisted of myself (a GP) and 3 very talented physiotherapists. Each day we accompanied the athletes to their training or competitions, and every morning we had clinics to treat their various injuries or health problems ranging from URTIs to dermatitis, sprains, muscle aches and headaches. Some of us multi-tasked as listener, substitute parent or friend, encourager and coach (our multi-talented physiotherapist Max Lim from CGH just happened to be an ex-national table tennis player and was able to give our novice table tennis athlete and our badminton pair some very helpful tips).

There were many lessons learned, including the fact that there were different strategies of treating sports injuries depending on whether the competition was ongoing or over, the Doping guidelines that we needed to scrutinise, and gaining insights into the complexities of classification of medical conditions for each sport, which can be a real challenge at times. I also learnt that our Thai medical colleague regularly uses acupuncture as a means to treat many of his athletes’ problems effectively.

I made it a point to meet with our medical team colleagues from other countries and get to

## ABOUT THE SINGAPORE DISABILITY SPORTS COUNCIL (SDSC)

SDSC is the only organisation in Singapore that caters to sports for persons across all kinds of disabilities. It aims to help the Disabled lead full and independent lives through sports. Besides providing sporting opportunities for them to realise their potential, SDSC trains talents to represent Singapore and pursue excellence at regional and international competitions. For more information, please visit us at <http://www.sdsc.org.sg>.

know them in case we needed to call upon each other for assistance in emergencies. I discovered to my surprise that our Malaysian neighbours had over 300 athletes and officials (we had less than a third) and 3 doctors including one psychiatrist, whose skills were actually needed in a case of acute anxiety where an athlete was unable to complete his sports event.

Watching wheelchair tennis, wheelchair badminton and wheelchair basketball, I was thrilled to see how adept the athletes were at their respective games. Getting to interact with our own Singaporean heroes like Dr William Tan (who had just completed his seven marathons in seven continents despite having Polio, and being paralysed from waist down since age 2!!) and Theresa Goh who despite Spina Bifida broke her own World Paralympic swimming 50m Breaststroke record again, and many more unsung heroes and heroines who despite many obstacles, overcame their disabilities to excel in sport.

The indomitable human spirit was wonderfully demonstrated in Disabled sporting events, when we saw how the competing athletes became fast friends with their competitors, and put aside having won or lost in the spirit of true sportsmanship. Another interesting observation was that many of the people involved, whether officials or the Athletes themselves are very wonderful and caring individuals whose personal stories cannot help but inspire.

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Nothing like a shot of excitement to keep one's adrenaline pumping, when I had to accompany one of our wheelchair bound athletes to the nearby Bangkok Hospital by ambulance. He had fallen backwards twice on his head, sustained momentary loss of consciousness and had a severe head and neckache. Getting an insight into a Thai private hospital was interesting, and we appreciated being assigned a very good translator from the time we stepped into the hospital till we left. The orthopaedic consultant was satisfied that there were no fractures we needed to worry about, but was concerned about possible internal bleeding. The neurologist who just happened to be on duty at the Polyclinic helped provide me with a Glasgow Coma Chart and I spent the night monitoring my one and only "inpatient" back at our Athletes' Village Medical room. Thankfully we both made it through the night but it did remind me of my housemanship period a long, long time ago and days of monitoring my own children's early infant feeding and illnesses.

So, whether you are a Psychiatrist, Paediatrician, Radiologist, Pathologist or a GP like me, there is much support needed, much to learn and many wonderful people to meet in

Disability Sports. You do not need to be a Rehab or Sports Physician although it would be helpful. Do checkout the SDSC website and offer your support. They have ongoing programmes for you to be involved in. ■



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 I enjoy listening to music, nature appreciation, gardening,  
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