



Interview with Dr Vivian Balakrishnan Minister for Community Development, Youth & Sports

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (Photo credit: redsports.sg).

Dr Toh Han Chong: From conception to the final verdict, how did Singapore finally win the bid for the 1st Summer Youth Olympic Games (YOG) in 2010?

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: The Youth Olympic Games started first as an idea by Dr Jacques Rogge, President of the IOC (International Olympic Committee). He wanted a new event focused on youth because he was concerned that young people have too many distractions, and may not be as keen on sports as the older generation. The second objective was to use

sports as a vehicle for transmission of values. The IOC decided only late last year that they would have such an event.

Mr Ng Ser Miang, who is on the IOC Committee, knew this idea was germinating and felt that this was a great opportunity for Singapore to be involved. He approached several Cabinet Ministers and the local sports organisations, to ask if Singapore would be interested in bidding.

Initially, as usual, people thought of all the reasons why we should not do this.

Page 3 ►



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CONTENT

10 President's Forum - Legalising Organ Trading | **13** They Shall Run and Not Be Weary

23 In the Fast Lane | **29** Fitness Trends | **32** Hobbit - The Benefits of Legalising Organ Trade

Number one: IOC was looking to hold the event in 2010. The audacity of our bid was that we knew we would not even have a national stadium in 2010. The other reason was that we are too small, and the Olympic Games are gigantic events requiring huge infrastructures and massive expenditures. Thirdly, are our sportsmen ready? In other words, there was no shortage of reasons not to do it.

When Ser Miang told me about the YOG, a few things struck me. This was a new event focussed on youth. This was an event about values and using sports as a vehicle to transmit values. It was also clear that the IOC wanted something new, and this was not meant to be a second class Olympic event. The other interesting thing was that IOC said that they did not want to see massive expenditure and construction of new infrastructure. That insight was crucial. We could turn the problem of the absence of a National Stadium into a new opportunity because the floating stage at Marina Bay would be a wonderful platform to showcase our city to the world. It offered a wonderful backdrop for the YOG Opening and Closing Ceremonies.

Basically, I felt that we should not be afraid to grab big ideas and overcome big challenges simply because we are small or young, or had never done this before. To me, the most appealing thing was the audacity of daring to do something new, something big, and something significant. This resonates with our belief of what Singapore is and what it stands for despite being a small and young country. Our only way to survive and thrive is to dare to dream big and to make ourselves seen on the global stage. So there was a kind of emotional resonance to why I felt we had to grab this opportunity.

After I decided we could and should do this, it was then a matter of persuading the rest of Cabinet that this was worth doing. I must say, it was not difficult! And the Prime Minister was also quick to see the potential for this.

The second significant thing about our bid was the way it quite spontaneously caught the imagination of ordinary Singaporeans. It became very clear to me, very early on, that this was not just officials making the pitch. This offer to host a world

event came from all Singaporeans. Surprisingly, I did not receive a single email saying: “Don’t do this.” I received lots of emails, phone calls and direct verbal communication, including offers to volunteer time, ideas and energy.

And really, we saw the culmination of all that when the IOC announcement was made – the spontaneous reaction on The Padang. And this was a party we planned at the last minute. We just opened the place, and people came and expressed themselves. What it illustrates is that there is a certain effervescence within Singaporeans which generally, people have not hitherto given us credit for.

Singaporeans, I believe, have arrived. We are proud of ourselves but not arrogant. We are confident and willing to welcome the world and show them what we are about. Also, when we talk about the Olympic values of excellence, friendship and respect, these are values which resonate with our own people because we are a multicultural country with people from all over the world with different ideas and attitudes. So it is not an alien thing for us. This is a young country, and so again, focusing on young people and showing them that it is possible to be diverse, peaceful and successful. We are in a sense, a working example of a future – that yes, the world can be very small, and there are problems and tension. But if we can exercise good sense, goodwill and organise it right, we can still live happily, peacefully and successfully with each other. So we have reached a certain stage where we are confident enough to welcome the world and also show that this is our model. We are not saying that everyone has to do it and organise themselves this way but this is one excellent model of excellence, friendship and respect.

We decided a week before the IOC announcement to hold the party at The Padang, not knowing what the verdict would be. Then about one or two days before, we discussed if we should invite the Prime Minister to join the party, bearing in mind that we did not know the outcome. And PM decided that because this was a community effort, leadership means standing with the people, in success or failure. I think it was a wonderful example of being with your people, your troops, during both good times and bad times.

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Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong speaks to the cheering crowd after the winning announcement. (Photo credit: redsports.sg)

So these three themes got us along: the audacity to think big and just go for it; involve lots of people and make sure it belongs to everyone; and leadership means standing with our people, in good or bad times, success or failure. Those were the key lessons that I learnt.

THC: Russia is a big country and superpower, and they were also bidding to host the YOG. How do you think the results swung in our favour?

VB: Well, it started with 11 countries indicating interest, but only 10 submitted bids. We knew this was going to be tough competition. We also knew that we were the upstart; we had never held anything of this scale before. So we were very clear that we were not going to outbid others in terms of money spent, or infrastructure.

We had to bid in a way which capitalised on our strengths – we are a young people; and since the event is about respect and friendship, to show that we are a diverse society with multiple civilisations represented; and to show that this is a society that thrives on pursuing excellence.

The IOC said they did not want massive investment in infrastructure, and well, we told them that we did not even have a national stadium at that time! But we would invest in community facilities, for example, swimming in the sports schools, diving in Toa Payoh Stadium,

football, and every facility we are going to host the world in. Actually, all this would not be a waste of money because any improvement we make will benefit the community at large.

I must also say that Ser Miang was a fantastic advocate. He was a champion for Singapore on the IOC, and a very effective one. It also reflects his determination, tirelessness, and passion for doing something like this. If you think about it, we were in a sense blessed with such an alignment. We had Ser Miang on the IOC totally dedicated to this. We had a government who quickly saw the potential of this project and was willing to allocate bandwidth and resources. We also had people who were spontaneously enthused by the bid. And it was obvious to the IOC that this was a national effort.

THC: Host nations of the Olympic Games tend to showcase their fantastic sportsmen and aim for high medal tallies. Singapore is a young sporting nation. Do you see this as a disadvantage?

VB: It is a tremendous challenge on multiple levels because we only have two years to 2010. First, to deliver the Games at a level which exceeds IOC's expectations. To give you an example, a normal Olympic Game has seven years to prepare. The other thing is preparing our young sportsmen: identifying, selecting, nurturing and training them. There really is not much time.

◀ Page 4 – Interview with Dr Vivian Balakrishnan

THC: Is there really a necessity to show that we are right up there on the high medal tally? Do you think that is going to be important?

VB: I think the objective for Singapore has always been to punch above our weight, and to show that through intelligent organisation, passion and dedication, we can do better than our natural trajectory.

THC: 20 to 30 years ago, sports in Singapore was considered as something good to do but it is not a key priority for the youth. The signals from the government and the zeitgeist of the youth today indicate that things are changing.

VB: It has changed, you are right. If you go back 30 to 40 years ago, people thought of sports as something you did in your spare time, had some health benefits and maybe some value for community bonding. Sports had a niche but it was not mainstream.

I think over the last decade, or certainly say the last five years, we have successfully transformed the position of sports on the national stage and as a national agenda. We are trying to make sports a part of the Singapore culture. You are not doing it just because you should, but because you enjoy it. It is a part of your life and the way you express yourself.

It truly is something you do, with or without the Olympics. It is about our way of life.

Looking at our sports participation, take for example, marathons, when we first started the Standard Chartered Marathon in 2002, we had slightly over 6,000 runners. Last year in 2007, we had 40,500.

THC: Yes, it was quite amazing to see that.

VB: So the first key change is that sports is becoming embedded in our way of life. The other thing also, in the past decade, we have won medals and going by our performances in the SEA Games, it is clear we are now within striking range, and we do have reasonable success in some sports. We are punching above our weight and being noticed. So in the past, we said: “Oh well, 4 million people, no hope.” Today, there is hope, which exceeds the mathematical probability.

The third aspect of sports which has changed is this realisation that it is also another cylinder of the economy – professional sports as a business; the way countries use sports as way to draw tourists; creation of jobs for people, either as a professional or a coach, or to be involved in production of sports-related equipment and services. So there is a new appreciation of the economic impact of sports.

Photo credit: redsports.sg



◀ Page 5 – Interview with Dr Vivian Balakrishnan

THC: But we are a small country and we do not have sports superstars at the level of Maria Sharapova and Tiger Woods who attract huge endorsements and a global marketplace.

VB: Not yet. But if you go back and ask our current generation of sportsmen, it is a lot better now. We are not at the superstar stage yet, but we have local heroes who are recognised and doing this full-time. We now have a sports school and hotel for young people. It used to be that you were forced to make a choice between sports or your education. But now you know that actually if you organise it, make the necessary arrangements, you can in a sense, have your cake and eat it. You can dedicate a few years of your life to being a professional sportsman, and yet open more opportunities later on when you get back from University. Or, you can continue with sports, as a professional, coaching or something associated with sports.

THC: It is nice to know that a sportsman can feel accepted as part of society even though he or she is not a lawyer or a banker.

VB: Yes, but it is also related overall to the fact that Singapore has matured and we now have a much broader definition of success.

THC: Absolutely, I agree with you.

VB: And that is good because I see this as part of the larger strategy. A broader society is able to provide more opportunities for people with different talents, whether it is in sports or arts – quite apart from all the usual things like medicine and law. [laughs] So that is why I believe in doing all these things.

THC: Beijing has a problem with pollution and the Mexico City Games was felt to be too high altitude. What about Singapore? Are we too hot and humid to be pushing really high-level outdoor competitive sports like the marathon?

VB: Well, we have been conducting marathons for many years. I think as far as our quality of air is concerned, I have no concerns. And that is actually a competitive advantage. Yes, IOC knows that Singapore is highly urbanised but they also know that we are a garden city, or a city in a garden.

The only thing we have to hope and pray for is that there is no haze from fires burning in other countries and winds blowing in the ‘wrong’ directions. That is the only possible spoiler. So we are banking on cooperation within ASEAN. This is not just politics and health in Singapore. But looking at this year, it has been fine.

THC: What is your take on foreign talent representing Singapore in sports?

VB: My take is that Singapore’s competitive advantage has been that we are an open city which has welcomed and assimilated talent from all over the world. That is what built Singapore, from a fishing village called Temasek. So my answer is yes, I believe in this concept.

The key strategic imperative is getting people to don your colours and win medals, and to get our own people to cheer them on too. It requires an emotional connection, and you cannot just have hired guns. There is a need to identify and to say: “I see something Singaporean in you.” So we are pushing for greater interaction, for example, we prefer to house young athletes in the Sports School, and nurture a local bond. If you talk to Tao Li, she now speaks just like us and she uses Singlish. So Singapore has got to be open-hearted. This needs to go both ways and we must treat them like we would treat our own children.

THC: If I may ask, what sports do you do?

VB: I was a very poor sportsman during my schooldays. In school, I swam, I played table tennis and hockey.

THC: But now, you are known to run and do mountain-biking.

VB: Yes, I do all that too. I am probably fitter now than I was, in my younger days. [laughs]

THC: There is this transformation of people of all ages getting into running. I feel totally left out! What has happened to jumpstart this culture in the last few years?

VB: I think it is a combination of things. Culturally, there has been a change. People do not mind being sweaty and seen in shorts and sneakers. I do not think it really damages your image.



Dr Balakrishnan at the 2007 Ultimate DragonTug Showdown. (Photo credit: redsports.sg)

Secondly, if you look around Singapore, not only at the very latest sports facilities, but look at our heartlands and the park connectors, there are so many areas to bike and so many interesting trails. And they are so accessible and they are also free! So there is more infrastructure now.

The thing also is that I find nothing builds friendship and bonding more easily than sports. It is about sweating it out together and challenging something collectively. Of course on the physiological level, we all know about the endorphins and the addiction, but I do not think that is a bad addiction.

THC: Competitive sports today are aggressively pushing the limits of performance with performance-enhancing drugs, often undesirable and illegal. How are we going to ensure that is not going to happen here in terms of the medicalisation of sports?

VB: The IOC has come up very strongly against doping. If you pervert sports into nothing more than a set of physical achievements obtained at great physiological costs, you have lost the plot. This is not what sports is about. So I think we have to continue to take a very hard line against

doping. And this is going to be a never-ending game because both sides are using science. It is a matter of ideological beliefs. If you have to risk someone's future in order to enhance performance, that is not sports.

Now, put all that aside. There is now increasing evidence that you can enhance performance through sound application of science. That is where sports medicine and sports science come in. All these new tools and machines available now allow us to refine technique and performance.

Of course the other big area is sports psychology. When you look at the activity, really, there is a strong overlay of discipline and mental fortitude. So these are other areas which we are now behind and we also realise that we need to build up sports medicine, sports science and sports psychology. That means finding people and sending them for appropriate courses and exposure overseas. And when they come back here, make sure that they can practice and have a list of athletes to work with. So again, you see a virtuous cycle and people can recommend sports engineers, sports psychologists, sports therapists and sports doctors. So this is not just a field for doctors who happen to like sports.

◀ Page 7 – Interview with Dr Vivian Balakrishnan

THC: Medicine has always been and still remains a popular career choice. If you were to advise a nephew or a niece who is 18 years old and asks you if he or she should be a doctor, what kind of advice would you give?

VB: Well, I will tell you what I say to my children. I will never force my children to do medicine. It is a very challenging and tough profession. It requires total dedication and is capable of consuming everything that you have. You must really understand that it is not a bed of roses, and you must be aware that there are easier ways to make a living.

But I also say that it is one of the most fulfilling vocations that is unambiguously good in its own right. You have the opportunity to help people at their point of greatest need – birth, pain and death. So it is really a ringside seat to Life.

THC: As a physician-leader and ophthalmologist, and now politician, what is most provocative about the political journey that you have taken?

VB: It is still early days. At one level, it is not very different from medicine. You are dealing with people with needs or problems, and you do your best. Sometimes, you cure them, but you always try to at least alleviate their symptoms. Politics is also about people's needs and fears and hopes. That part of dealing with people, I do not think I had any difficulties. It is just that instead of being at the clinic, I now meet the people at the void deck and try to help them. So pretty much any good GP can be a MP – that part of the human-social interaction is not very different from having good bedside manners, which most doctors should have.

The part that is different is that in medicine, or certainly in surgery, it is one-on-one. For example, in eye surgery, the feedback loop is immediate and you know whether the operation is a success.

In politics, you do not have that because on a macro scale, you are dealing with things which are sometimes very long in the horizon. You can make your best judgement or a decision, but it cannot be right for just for one person but right for the larger community and country.

That is the part which medicine does not really prepare you for. Medicine is the preparation to work on one person at a time, but we are not really taught to think or manage systems on a larger scale. That is probably more engineering than medicine. So that is where doctors who get into politics have to learn.

THC: We asked this question to Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad when we interviewed him. Does a doctor make a better politician?

VB: I would say a doctor has some advantages, particularly the human interaction part of it, the commitment to improving the lot of human beings either one-on-one or collectively. But like I said just now, that is not enough. That does not automatically make you a successful and good politician. There are many lessons we have to learn.

THC: People remember Vivian Balakrishnan the student leader, the outspoken advocate and critic on important and contentious issues. Has that individual changed because he has become a politician or is he still the same person looking at the world with different eyes?

VB: I do not think my core values, hopes and fears have changed. But I have certainly learnt more, and not just in politics, but also growing up with medicine and medical administration. I now appreciate systems rather than just individual problems. Everything is interconnected.

I think I am now more appreciative that there are no quick and easy solutions to all the challenges in life. While it is very easy to construct an argument or a brilliant speech, when you have actually got to fix the problem or manage the system, you cannot afford to be too dogmatic. I have come to appreciate the complexity of issues and also maintain a healthy skepticism, that things may not always be what they seem. I am wary of people who say: "The answer is obvious and the solution is easy." So in a sense, I have become more cautious.

To use a medical analogy, say surgery, better think long and hard about the implications of any surgical procedure before you actually embark on it. However, once you have decided, during the surgical process itself, you have got to



Dr Balakrishnan was a member of the 40th Council of the Singapore Medical Association (1999-2000). Dr Balakrishnan is in the back row, second from right.

be quick and decisive, and get on with it. Stick to the plan and when circumstances change, make the necessary adjustments. The point is, there is a time for contemplation – that is, before the surgery – and there is a time to be quick with your blade, which is during the surgery itself. So make sure that you have thought through all the facts that are available, and make your best considered guess.

In fact, the job of every single MP, and every single Minister, is to use our heads in being skeptical and critical, but exercise our hearts in caring for our people. And we must care because many lives are dependant on these decisions.

THC: There is growing public sentiment wishing for Singapore to be more open, to encompass many more voices and to be more consultative. Strong leadership is good but not altogether ideal if it is unchallenged. Do you see there being an opening up of more diverse voices and more political space? Is this not more healthy for Singapore's aspirations to become a truly global city?

VB: Yes, I do. The world is becoming more complex in the sense that there are no easy

solutions. Secondly, our people have higher expectations and greater demands. Look at these two factors. You cannot solve them by having one strong man who is omnipotent and omniscient. So I think the solution lies in having a system in which all minds are brought to bear and all facts are considered, to resolve the inevitable differences and generate workable solutions. And yet when the time comes, take quick and decisive actions to maintain a cohesive society. I see this as an evolution that is inevitable. But if we can manage this right, we will have a healthier, stronger and more viable nation.

THC: When your kids grow up to become working adults, what kind of Singapore do you want them to be living in?

VB: Singapore would be a place of great opportunities, a place that would accept people of diverse talents. A place that would give my kids a headstart in life, and also a place where they instinctively feel is theirs. A place where they can make a difference and leave a legacy. That is what this is all about.

THC: Thank you very much. ■