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Windsurfing in Hong Kong

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In

Secrets of Asian Sport Psychology

Edited by: Peter C. Terry, Zhang Li-Wei, Kim YoungHo,
Tony Morris, and Stephanie Hanrahan





Introduction

The Hong Kong government has supported the sport of windsurfing, via services provided by the Hong Kong Sports Institute (HKSI), ever since it was introduced to the island in the early 1970s. The HKSI is the only elite training centre in Hong Kong, and is dedicated to identifying, nurturing, and developing promising juniors and elite athletes from 16 focused sports, including windsurfing.



Credit: Courtesy of Windsurfing Association of Hong Kong/Facebook



view video:
*This is
Windsurfing*

Hong Kong windsurfers have achieved success in major games and various international competitions since the early 1990s. Windsurfer Lee Lai-Shan is Hong Kong's first and, to date, only Olympic champion. The moment she captured the Olympic crown in Atlanta in 1996 is vividly entrenched in the memories of most Hong Kong people. Since her iconic achievement, windsurfing in Hong Kong has flourished as a competitive sport.

flourished as
a competitive
sport





Sport Psychology Services

The Sport Psychology and Monitoring Centre (SPM) operates under the Elite Training Science & Technology Division of the HKSI. Following referral by a coach, the sport psychology consultants will work with athletes from their emergence as talented juniors through to the senior international level. SPM personnel also provide support to the elite coaches, to coaches working in the community, and also conduct applied research as part of their role.

effective utilisation of sport science

Rene Appel has served as the Head Coach of Hong Kong windsurfing for more than two decades. Appel is well known for getting the best out of his athletes, as well as for his effective utilisation of sport science services, including sport psychology. Due to ongoing demand for sport psychology services by Appel and the windsurfing athletes, the sport has always been one of the highest priority clients for SPM consultants.

Psychological services include regular individual consultation and on-site support at both local and overseas regattas. Individual consultations might include issues such as decision-making and self-regulation, motivation for training, toleration of extreme physical conditions, as well as life planning and retirement. Windsurfing-specific mental skills training programs are also provided.



Credit: Courtesy of Windsurfing Association of Hong Kong/Facebook

Case Study #1: Lee Lai-Shan



view video:
The Story of
San San's
Olympic Victory
(In Chinese)

As its one and only Olympic champion, Lee Lai-Shan is the undisputed queen of sport in Hong Kong. Born into a humble family of 12 children and losing her father when she was just seven years old, her story is one of a person who grew accustomed to overcoming adversity. Introduced to windsurfing by her uncle at the age of 12, she conquered the disadvantages of lack of finance and an absence of successful role models in Hong Kong sport before going on to conquer the world of international windsurfing, winning three World Championships (1993, 1997, 2001) and two Asian Games gold medals (1998, 2002) in addition to the 1996 Olympic title. Her sense of disadvantage was so acute in the early days of her career that she considered quitting the sport, but a small incident fed her determination to succeed. “I thought of giving up, but once a tiny shrimp bounced up on my board and kept struggling to get back to the sea. If a little shrimp had such willpower, I decided that I had too” (Young, 2005).



Credit: Tksteven/Wikimedia Commons/CC-BY-SA-3.0

San San, as she is affectionately known, has written more than once about her psychological experiences during an athletic career that spanned four Olympic Games (Lee & Lee, 2008). She greatly valued the sport science support she received from HKSI and emphasised her positive working relationship with the sport psychology consultants. Lee Lai-Shan experienced severe anxiety herself and also witnessed it among her teammates at the Barcelona Olympic Games of 1992. She came to dread speaking to the media in Barcelona. “Many people thought I stood a good chance of winning, but I knew I wasn’t ready” she recalled (Tong, 2011). From that point on she worked closely with HKSI sport psychology consultants to develop her competition skills.

greatly valued
the sport
science support

Specifically, this involved a program of mental skills training, psychological monitoring, and competition planning. Having secured the silver medal at the 1996 World Championships, San San was regarded by the coaching and sport science team as being well prepared before the Atlanta Olympic Games, “For the Atlanta Olympics, my preparation work was nearly perfect. Days before departure, my dentist noticed the growth of my wisdom teeth. I instantly decided to ask him to remove them. I didn’t want any lingering worries later on. Two days before the competition, I met Trisha (sport psychologist) for a final ‘check-up’. During the session, I vividly visualized the whole competition environment. We both agreed that my mental condition was ‘fit and perfect’” (Lee & Lee, 2008; p.128)



Credit: Windsurfing Association of Hong Kong/Facebook

On the first day of competition at the Atlanta Olympics, San San was seriously hurt when stung by a jellyfish. She recalled how the psychological skills she had learned came to the fore at that moment to help manage the pain, to cope with the adversity of the situation, and ultimately to win the Olympic gold medal, “I couldn’t feel anything in my left leg for a while ... the toxin caused me so much pain. More importantly, it made me very angry. I couldn’t believe such a thing could happen to me at that moment. I nearly couldn’t control myself at all. I hit the board to release my pain and anger. I wanted to calm myself ... I sought help from the medical boat ... I couldn’t hesitate any longer. At that moment, those mental skills that Trisha (sport psychologist) had taught me came into play. I asked myself to contain the anger and focus my attention somewhere else. I tried not to feel the numbness or pain in my left leg. After a minute’s practice, it worked well. I could then stay calm and focus on the race. I got third place in the first race” (Lee & Lee, 2008, p.129).

cope with the adversity

San San acknowledges that the management of emotions begins with an understanding of oneself and an appreciation of the challenges that lie ahead.

She developed the habit of using a particular psychological strategy to cope with issues that had the potential to upset her equilibrium and to generate negative emotions, “Try to visualise a treasure box in the mind. Put the problem in it, close the lid, and focus on the more urgent task. When, after finishing the task, you look at the problem in the box again, you’ll likely find that it isn’t a big deal after all” (Tong, 2011).



Credit: Windsurfing Association of Hong Kong/Facebook





Psychological Challenges in Windsurfing



view video:
2013 AWC & HKO:
Introductory
Video (Taste of
HK windsurfing)

Researchers and applied practitioners have written extensively on the subject of psychological skills for windsurfing and sailing. Based on his longstanding experiences of working with the Royal Yachting Association in the UK, Maynard (2006) identified various psychological interventions suitable for competitive sailors and windsurfers. He described professional attitude development, performance profiling and goal-setting, concentration skills, anxiety management and mental rehearsal, as well as performance planning for windsurfing.

Sport psychology consultants from SPM cover all of these mental skills during their work with the windsurfers. The following sections address some of the common psychological issues experienced among Hong Kong windsurfers and the specific interventions provided by SPM. Both sport-specific and culturally-specific issues are discussed.



Credit: Windsurfing Association of Hong Kong / Facebook

Exhaustion Management

a combination of sailing and rowing

Since pumping became permissible in the sport in 1994, windsurfing has been regarded as a combination of sailing and rowing. Pumping involves pushing a heavy rig back and forth in order to accelerate faster in light winds. This technique is often required to be maintained for extended periods of time, testing the stamina of windsurfers to the limit. One of the toughest aspects of intensive training sessions and competition is coping with muscle pain and tiredness. Hence, tolerability of physical pain and exhaustion is one of the most important psychological requirements for windsurfers.

Through their extensive on-site work with the windsurfing team, the sport psychology consultants have identified several factors that can prevent athletes from sustaining high-intensity pumping for extended periods.

- *Lack of determination to tolerate substantial muscle pain and tiredness.*
- *Poor awareness of pain and tiredness tolerability.*
- *Poor understanding of the physiological mechanisms underlying pain and tiredness.*
- *Lack of commitment to improve.*
- *Lack of effective mental skills to cope with sensations of pain and tiredness.*



Sport psychology consultants from SPM have established a four-pronged training program to improve the capacity of the windsurfers to tolerate exhaustion.

1. *Systematic assessment of the technical and psychological characteristics of individual windsurfers is conducted to inform the process of tailoring pain awareness and tiredness tolerability strategies to personal characteristics.*
2. *Psycho-education of pain and tiredness mechanisms, as well as human potential, is provided to the windsurfers. They are taught that mental skills training can enhance tolerability of exhaustion. Human potential can be explored and unlocked, so that the tendency for self-protection can be altered and personal limits can be challenged (Si & So, 2011).*
3. *Windsurfers need excellent concentration to perform well. Extreme fatigue combined with distractions triggered by irrelevant internal or external cues represents a common threat to concentration. Windsurfers are often alone on their boards in open seas, and many irrelevant sights and sounds can distract them. Well-practiced re-focusing routines help them to attend to the important performance cues and to cope more effectively with the physiological signals of fatigue. With input from the sport psychology consultants, the windsurfers are encouraged to identify and implement effective coping strategies. This might involve attenuating sensations of pain and tiredness by monitoring pumping rhythm, using controlled breathing, muscle relaxation, imagery, positive self-talk, or music.*
4. *Another key strategy is to make good use of the on-site support by trialling various psychological strategies. The windsurfers and their coaches evaluate pumping quality after each round of competition. These data are recorded systematically for follow-up analysis, during which time the athlete, coach, and sport psychology consultant identify when and how pumping was affected and collectively develop technical and psychological strategies to address pumping-related issues.*

technical and psychological strategies



Credit: Windsurfing Association of Hong Kong / Facebook

Decision-making



Credit: Windsurfing Association of Hong Kong/Facebook

a crucial aspect of the sport

Effective decision-making is a crucial aspect of the sport of windsurfing. Decision-making by a windsurfer in competition involves the collection and analysis of race information, followed by a decision about which course of action is consistent with the competition goal. In different stages of a race – start, rounding marks, final spurt – windsurfers are constantly making decisions (e.g., whether to keep pumping, whether to change direction) in accordance with environmental variations (i.e., wind, waves), the position of opponents, and their own bodily condition. The effectiveness of these decisions can directly influence the race result. The quality of decision-making, as a cognitive skill, is relatively independent of other windsurfing-specific skills (e.g., maximizing speed in a strong wind, pumping technique). A windsurfing athlete who is strong in all technical aspects, but relatively weak in the quality of decision-making would find it difficult to succeed at the elite level.

Several common errors occur during the process of decision-making. Firstly, a windsurfer may rush into making a decision before gathering enough information. This type of error is often associated with inefficient or incorrect attentional shifts (e.g., a premature switch from an external, information-gathering attentional style to an internal, analytical style). Secondly, windsurfers often fail to learn from previous decision-making errors. Some windsurfers do not comprehensively analyze problems they have experienced in the past, so when similar situations arise again (e.g., should I tack under this circumstance?) they may repeat the same error. Thirdly, a windsurfer may become confused in stressful situations (e.g., confronting rivals at the start of a race), which may increase arousal above an optimal level and attenuate information processing efficiency.



SPM consultants have developed specific training techniques for improving decision-making effectiveness:

- 1. General concentration assessment, education and training, and anxiety-management training (Modrono & Guillen, 2011) can help windsurfers to understand the relationship between arousal level and concentration, and to acquire the proper skills for self-adjustment for competition. Windsurfers should understand the difference between performance on the one hand, and whether they win or lose on the other hand. Whereas performance is more controllable, winning and losing are less so. The aim of the training is to help the athletes identify and focus on the controllable factors associated with performance. Common controllable factors include rig settings, discipline, fitness level, and reaction to daily hassles. Such training can help windsurfers to stay alert and clear-minded, so they can perform at their best via improved anticipation and decision-making.*
- 2. On-site race evaluation, conducted in cooperation with the windsurfers and their coaches, is a valuable way to identify issues that need to be addressed to enhance future performance. The Goal Attainment Scale (GAS; Kiresuk & Sherman 1968; Martin, Thompson, & McKnight, 1998) is used to facilitate windsurfers' evaluation of their competition performance. The GAS was designed to assist performance review based on five levels of goal attainment, ranging from the best possible outcome (+2, fully in control and good confidence) to the worst possible outcome (-2, total loss of control), and the middle levels of +1 (staying relaxed and calm most of the time), 0 (acceptable behaviors, showing no visible loss of control), and -1 (reacting negatively to the difficult situation; see Table 1). With reference to the goal of correct decision-making the windsurfers respond to the question, "How many difficult or crisis situations did you encounter in the competition today?" They then rate their decision-making and the extent to which they felt in control. Each decision-making situation is discussed, so that windsurfers come to understand the process better and the factors that affect performance in various situations.*
- 3. Comparison of strategic decisions made by the windsurfers with those made by other elite windsurfers can also help to develop more effective approaches to anticipation and decision-making. These latter two strategies are used in conjunction with reviewing the race information downloaded from the event organiser's GPS system.*

identify and focus on the controllable factors



Credit: Windsurfing Association of Hong Kong/Facebook

Table 1. Self-Evaluation of Goal Attainment

How many difficult or crisis situations did you encounter in the competition today?

0	2	4	6	8	10	12	14	16	18	20
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Your handling of those difficult or crisis situations:

Scale	Degree of control	Frequency
(+2) Best possible outcome	Fully in control and good confidence	
(+1) Better than acceptable	Staying relaxed and calm most of the time	
(0) Acceptable	Acceptable behaviors, showing no visible loss of control	
(-1) Less than acceptable	Reacting negatively to the situation	
(-2) Worst possible outcome	Total loss of control	

Weight management

communication and mutual understanding

Weight management in windsurfing is orientated towards achieving a perceived ideal body mass for racing (Allen & De Jong, 2006). Unlike sports such as rowing, there is no specific weight class event for windsurfing. Shephard (1990) advised against a strategy of trying to identify a single optimal weight for athletes, proposing instead that an individual's physiological profile is more important, including body fat percentage, maximal oxygen uptake, and muscle strength. There is, however, continuing speculation about ideal size or body weight range within the windsurfing community. Some windsurfers think that being heavier will help them to stabilize under strong wind conditions, whereas others hold the view that losing weight makes pumping easier when the wind is lighter. Coaches and windsurfers may have differing views of the optimal weight of individual windsurfers, so sport psychology consultants sometimes need to facilitate communication and mutual understanding between the two parties.

Lee and Lee (2008) described a time when Lee Lai-Shan was "obsessed" with losing weight, because she thought it would be good for her performance at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. She strictly monitored and controlled her diet and lost 1.5 kg, but was then found to have iron deficiency. With the assistance of colleagues, including a sport biochemist and sport nutritionist, her sport psychology consultant helped San San to reduce her concern about weight and to get back on track towards her successful Olympic campaign. Goal-setting, including exploration of possible obstacles and available resources, followed by action planning, are commonly-used strategies during individual consultation for weight management. Also regular psycho-education has been conducted with Hong Kong athletes in general, including those from windsurfing. Disordered eating behaviour is not a common issue among Hong Kong athletes, but it is always on a sport psychology consultant's radar.



Overseas Coaches

Apart from general psychological issues, including psychological tolerability and decision-making, some culture-specific issues are experienced among Hong Kong windsurfers. Many coaches who work with the team, the elite athletes in particular, are from overseas and do not speak Chinese. Some may not even reside in Hong Kong and only meet the windsurfers during overseas trips. Such circumstances bring inherent communication challenges for both the windsurfers and their coaches. Unless the athletes are proficient in English, high in self-awareness, and willing to express themselves, they find it difficult to discuss their performance and training goals with coaches.



Credit: Courtesy of Stephen Law Photography/Windsurfing Association of Hong Kong/sportsoho.com

Due to international competition schedules and limited availability of high-quality training partners in Hong Kong, many windsurfers spend a large proportion of their time training and competing overseas. Elite Hong Kong windsurfers may remain overseas for more than 100 days a year. Some travel on their own and train with windsurfers from other countries for most of the year, sometimes without coaches. They are required to set clear, specific, but flexible training goals and maintain a detailed training record. Such circumstances place considerable demands on the windsurfers' self-discipline and self-management skills and hence regular, long-distance contact with coaches and sport science staff is advantageous for the windsurfers.

flexible
training goals

The sport psychology consultants take the initiative to stay in touch with the windsurfers when they are overseas and even become something of a bridge between the coaches in Hong Kong and the windsurfers abroad. Also, due to the relative independence of the consultants, windsurfers are sometimes more willing to discuss their goal-setting or overseas training plan with SPM personnel. Thanks to advancements in communication technology, the windsurfers can easily stay in touch with sport psychology consultants through email and online media, including Skype™ and WhatsApp™.

Sport psychology consultants sometimes travel with the team to provide on-site support. During these trips, the typical support provided for the windsurfers would be to help develop a detailed race plan, an anxiety-management plan, post-race review, collection and recording of race information for evaluation at a later date, and occasionally crisis management. It is not uncommon for the athletes and sport psychology consultants to meet daily during a competition lasting for a week or two to reflect on performance and related thoughts and feelings. It is quite common for the team to hold an overseas training camp between competitions, so sport psychology consultants may have opportunities to provide on-site support during training as well as competition. Since the pressure is minimal during training, it can be a good opportunity to work on issues such as exhaustion tolerance.

Parental Involvement and Study Issues

Windsurfers generally start their involvement in the sport by joining a local club or an interest class organised by the Windsurfing Association of Hong Kong. They may then compete in local races and be selected into district teams and, ultimately, the Hong Kong team. In contrast to the top-down selection system that operates in places such as mainland China, the bottom-up sport system in Hong Kong windsurfing allows parents to become involved in their children's sports development from an early stage. Although parental support is vital in terms of financial, lifestyle, and academic considerations, over-involvement by parents can exert extra pressure on young windsurfers and their coaches. Sport psychology consultants conduct meetings between parents, coaches, and windsurfers to facilitate mutual understanding of the roles of each and the boundaries that need to be observed.



In 2012 there were about 40 windsurfers supported by scholarships from the Hong Kong government. Only five were full time, whereas the remainder were studying full time in tertiary or secondary education. As in other Asian countries, the educational culture in Hong Kong is focused on ranking individuals and institutions, and it is highly exam-oriented. Public examinations during secondary education are stressful for Hong Kong students, especially student-athletes. It is widely believed that students' futures, in particular securing a university place, are rigorously filtered by their ranking in these examinations. The educational assessment process has been reduced to just a single public examination (i.e., Diploma of Secondary Education, DSE) since 2012, and academic competition among students remains fierce. In collaboration with the Athlete Affairs Department at the HKSI, sport psychology consultants educate young windsurfers about time management and goal-setting once they start to train full-time. Some junior windsurfers may reluctantly put windsurfing on hold for a year, when they reach the year of public examinations. Such an arrangement inevitably causes disruption to their development as neophyte windsurfing professionals. Sport psychology consultants or colleagues from the Athlete Affairs Department conduct meetings with coaches, parents, and the windsurfers in order to ensure that the possible conflict between professional sport and the educational transition from secondary to tertiary education is handled as effectively as possible.



Team Culture and Tradition



view video:
2013 11 30
AWC:
Day 3 + HKO

Since the late 1990s, Hong Kong windsurfers have won many medals in the Youth World Championship prior to moving up to the senior national squad. Over time, a medal-winning performance in the Youth World Championship has become perceived as a standard to which all young Hong Kong windsurfers should aspire before the end of their junior careers, particularly for those who seek to transfer to the senior level of competition. Although the former youth world champions act as positive role models for junior windsurfers, the downside of this tradition of international success is that it encourages some junior windsurfers to set unrealistic goals for the Youth World Championship and burden themselves with unnecessary pressure. The self-confidence of those transitioning from the junior to the senior ranks may be deflated if they do not perform to their own expectations or the expectations imposed on them by others.

The message from the sport psychology consultants to young windsurfers is that, although the historical legacy of international success provides a validation of the Hong Kong training system, it does not represent a required benchmark nor a “graduation examination” for their junior years in windsurfing. The windsurfers are encouraged to aim high and not to fear opponents, but also not to focus too much on comparisons between themselves and Hong Kong windsurfers from previous years.



Support for Coaches

fun is one
of the key
elements

Coaches and sport psychology consultants collaborate to promote a positive team culture in Hong Kong windsurfing and to improve training effectiveness. The sport psychology consultants have conducted surveys and interviews with the athletes about training motivation. The information gathered from athletes included how they got started in windsurfing, things they don’t like about the sport or about training, as well as their preferred coaching and training elements. The windsurfers, especially the younger ones, have reported how much they enjoyed playing with their coach on the beach. This feedback confirmed to the coaches that fun is one of the key elements for encouraging young windsurfers to commit and devote themselves to the sport.

It is not uncommon for elite windsurfers to move into coaching after their retirement from international competition. SPM works closely with the HKSI windsurfing department (elite level coaches) and the Windsurfing Association of Hong Kong (grassroot and community level coaches) in the area of coach development. Sport psychology workshops and training courses are delivered to community coaches as part of coach registration courses or continuing professional development. Topics covered include goal-setting, motivation, relaxation, imagery, self-talk, adolescent psychological development, and parental engagement.





Credit: Windsurfing Association of Hong Kong/Facebook

Case Study #2: Psychological Skills Workshop for Junior Windsurfers

In 2011, SPM provided a series of psychological workshops for junior athletes. Eleven junior windsurfers joined the 12-week program, which addressed arousal control, concentration, goal-setting, self-talk, and imagery. Related theory and application were discussed in alternate weeks. Video demonstrations, homework exercises, and story sharing were used to enhance learning.

- **Arousal control.** *The inverted-U relationship between arousal and performance was introduced (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yerkes-Dodson_law). Windsurfers were guided to explore their optimal arousal level.*
- **Concentration.** *Attention style (Nideffer, 1976) and common sources of distraction were discussed. A concentration grid test (Bull, Albinson, & Shambrook, 1999) was conducted to demonstrate concentration issues. The concepts of attentional cues, pre-performance routines, and here-and-now focus were introduced.*
- **Goal-setting.** *A SWOT analysis (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SWOT_analysis) was conducted, and task and ego orientation were assessed to increase the windsurfers' self-awareness. SMART goal-setting was emphasised, incorporating both process and performance goals (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SMART_criteria).*
- **Imagery.** *Imagery using various senses (visual, audio, olfactory, kinesthetic, emotional) was introduced. Internal and external imagery were explained and discussed.*
- **Self-talk.** *Exercises were introduced to assist the athletes to identify their own self-talk and make it as positive as possible.*

SMART goal-setting was emphasised



Twenty items from the Mental Skills Questionnaire (MSQ; Bull et al., 1999) were translated into Chinese and administered before and after the program. Post-program scores were significantly higher than the pre-program scores across all sub-scales (i.e., arousal control, self-talk, goal-setting, concentration, imagery) with large effect sizes evident. Follow-up interviews were conducted with the coaches and junior windsurfers in attendance. Feedback from the windsurfers showed the positive impact of the program:

post-program scores were significantly higher

“I used to set goals that were unrealistic, too difficult. Now I’ve learnt to set more reasonable goals which can drive me to put in all my effort. I will also design an action plan and put it into my training” (Athlete A).



Credit: Courtesy of Stephen Law Photography/
Windsurfing Association of Hong Kong/sportsoho.com

“I learned that I have good teammates who are willing to support me. More importantly, when I lose, I will try to analyze and find out what I’ve done wrong. I might still be unhappy about losing, but not for too long. I wouldn’t let the negative experience affect my next race” (Athlete B).

“I’ve changed a bit after the workshop. I won’t drill into the negative feeling when I lose. Instead, I would encourage myself to focus on the next race” (Athlete C).

These benefits were reinforced by the coaches. One commented that:

“(Name of athlete) no longer complains that the program doesn’t work for him or that other people can’t help him. He has started to realize that he doesn’t focus on his personal goals enough ... He used to follow what others, especially his coach, asked him to do and let the responsibility fall on them. He now understands that he can do better and take charge of his own goals” (Coach A).

Another coach reported that the workshop had helped one of his female windsurfers to be more open, self-aware, and willing to express and reflect on her emotions. Although the long-term effect of the program is yet to be revealed, the junior windsurfers seemed to improve in mental skill proficiency as a result of the workshop.



Summary

excellent
coaching and
a holistic sport
science team



view video:
Asian
Windsurfing
Championships
(AWC): Day 4

In the Hong Kong windsurfing community, the coaches and professional support staff encourage the athletes to think broadly and aim high. Building on Lee Lai-Shan's legacy, most Hong Kong windsurfers, in particular those who train full-time, dare to commit themselves to the attainment of an Olympic or World Championship medal. Such commitment cannot be maintained without excellent coaching and a holistic sport science team. Sport psychology as part of the sport science team has established effective cooperation with the coaches and windsurfers from grassroots level to junior and senior national squads. The sport psychology consultants endeavour to work on windsurfing-specific issues, such as exhaustion management and decision-making, and to continuously facilitate the young athletes' capacity to handle challenges in sport and in life.

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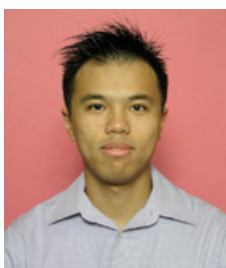
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