Sportsmen to get career safety net

Sailing’s Low plans centre to ease retiring athletes’ path into corporate world

BY MARC LIM
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A ONE-STOP resource centre to help Singapore’s career sportsmen prepare for life after competitive sport will be set up soon.

It will be in the form of a non-profit, non-governmental organisation that enables former sports stars to successfully enter the corporate world, said Singapore Sailing president Low Teo Ping, who plans its launch.

He told The Straits Times: “Many athletes end their sporting careers when they are already quite old. When they are near the end of their careers, panic can set in.

“Suddenly, you’re not winning as much as before and you’re not writing about as often. These may be push factors to find a new career and the role of this organisation is to prepare them to make that change.”

As a former school athlete who has been the president of the sailing association for the last six years, Low, 60, believes that such a move is just one way to help make sports a viable career.

It will complement existing programmes set up by the Singapore Sports Council and the Ministry of Education which also look into continuing the working life of those whose sport careers are over.

Low’s as-yet unnamed organisation will help place sportsmen in jobs, and give them tips on resume-writing and job-interview techniques. It will also help plan enrichment courses for those who want to upgrade their workplace skills.

The organisation is scheduled to begin operating by the first quarter of next year, but it will need the support of the corporate world, he said.

So the former regional head of private banking at Swiss bank UBS has been approaching his private-sector contacts to persuade them to his way of thinking.

He has already received a positive response from the Singapore office of Agilent Technologies, the world’s biggest maker of scientific and technical instruments. International recruitment firm iSearch Worldwide Group also gave encouraging feedback.

The sports council has also offered to help. This could be in the form of funding or providing premises.

Low is confident that he can convince more in the private sector that sportsmen make good employees.

He said: “A survey was conducted among 100 top companies in Europe asking employers what kind of characteristics they look for when they hire someone.

“They came up with 16 characteristics and most of them already exist in sportsmen. Traits like being a team player, adaptability, resilience, the ability to bounce back from a difficult situation, athletes do those all the time, sometimes using all characteristics in the span of one match.”

His view was shared by Richard Hoon, chief executive officer of iSearch, which is based in Singapore but also has offices in major Asian cities such as Shanghai and Tokyo.

He said: “Sports is all about doing the unlikely, proving others wrong when you’re told it can’t be done. That attitude is an asset in the corporate world.”

Although help will be made available to sportsmen of all qualifications and backgrounds, the organisation will focus primarily on helping them make the transition to white-collar jobs.

The attraction rate among athletes with high educational qualifications is greater because of the lure of a higher pay packet and the security of the corporate world. With the setting up of the organisation, Low hopes to persuade more athletes to remain in sports.

World silat champion Muhammad Yusuff Shah is one athlete excited by the prospect of such an organisation being created.

The 23-year-old is pursuing a bachelor of Business Management degree at the Singapore Management University. He is already under the sports council’s Athlete Career and Training Programme, which grants him financial assistance and some support services.

But he has never seen anything as all-encompassing as that proposed by Low.

He said: “If it really fulfills all it sets out to do, then this is really good news. I’ll be 27 when I graduate and if I can get some kind of assurance that I can get a job, I might consider doing silat full-time for a few more years.

“With athletes, having the heart to continue in your sport is never a problem. Rather, it’s the fear of what you’ll be missing out on if you stay in sports for too long.”

LOW TEO PING (right)

PHOTO: BERITA HARIAN

STAYING ON LONGER: World silat champion Muhammad Yusuff Shah, 23, will be 27 when he graduates. If he can get some kind of assurance that he can be employed after that, he will consider staying with silat full-time for a few more years.

A NEW START

“My goal is to have this organisation as a way to help integrate athletes into the working world. Many athletes end their sporting careers when they are already quite old. When they are near the end of their careers, panic can set in.”

LOW TEO PING (right)

Life after sports: Help available

» Athlete Career and Training Programme
Apart from funding an athlete’s training and providing sports science and medical support, the Singapore Sports Council’s Athlete Career and Training Programme gives career guidance and professional counselling to help athletes determine or reaffirm career goals and plans. Also on offer are vocational and life-skills training to prepare for life after competitive sport.

» Career Planning and Development Programme
Another SSC initiative, the programme provides athletes with career, educational and personal development services through regular workshops. Services include personal development and training for resume writing and job interviews. Athletes can also seek help in career counselling, educational guidance and work placement.

» Teaching Scheme for National Athletes
Supported by the National Institute of Education and the Ministry of Education, athletes can be trained as PE teachers with concurrent pursuit of educational goals. They can either pursue a Diploma in Physical Education or a Postgraduate Diploma in Physical Education. A maximum of five years is given to finish programmes.