Every Sunday in the Singapore at Large column, The New Paper profiles the Singapore sports scene with a national or grassroots perspective. For the last two weeks, we have been featuring athletes and less well-off sports associations who are proactive in finding sponsors. In the last instalment of a three-part series, LIM HAN MING talks to a group of national athletes on how they can be more proactive in carving out a better life for themselves.

HAN MING: Thank you for joining this round-table discussion. Perhaps high jumper Michelle Sng can start the ball rolling by telling us how she bucked the trend by securing the Akira sponsorship on her own.

MICHELLE: I think you never know what will happen if you don’t try. For me, I came up with a list of potential sponsors and Akira was on top of that list. My coach and the Akira boss were former team-mates, so I thought I should capitalise on their relationship. If I had failed with Akira, I would have moved on to the next one.

Sometimes, it’s about meeting the right people at the right time.

HAN MING: I think the other athletes can follow Michelle’s example. Instead of griping about the lack of support, the onus is on athletes to take the initiative to make a better life for themselves.

JI WEN: I totally agree, but I feel that it’s a Catch-22 situation for most of us who belong to the lesser sports. Sponsors are always looking for successful athletes. For up-and-coming athletes like me, we don’t have any significant results to show for.

It’s a never-ending cycle if you ask me. The Singapore Sports Council (SSC) demand results before they give out funding, but to get results, we need funding in the first place. I’m one of the more fortunate ones to have a few sponsors such as Nike and Power Bar.

But I do agree with Michelle that the timing is very important. Companies usually allocate their sponsorship budget at the start of the year. If you go to them in the middle of the year, chances are they will ask you to wait till next year.

HAN MING: It is not wrong to say that disabled athletes have not received the same level of support as able-bodied athletes. But Theresa Goh provides a silver lining for all the disabled athletes in Singapore. Perhaps she can share her experiences with us.

THERESA: I think I’m very lucky to be part of the Standard Chartered Bank’s Programme for Elite Athletes Career (PEAC).

Under the programme, I can work and train at the same time. In the past, disabled athletes have not received the due recognition. But the situation is better now. Instead of complaining, we can channel our energies into our training to achieve better results.

Once you are successful, people will sit up and take notice of you. Support will also come naturally.

HAN MING: Besides Theresa, national bowler Rena Teng and netballer Zhang Tingjun also have the best of both worlds as they are also under PEAC. What do they have to say?

RENA: I think you have to seize the opportunity that comes your way. I was at the crossroads of my career when the PEAC offer came along. When I took on the job of a corporate affairs officer with Standchart, I was able to apply some of the skills such as mental attitude and...
perseverance I learnt in my sporting career to my job. I think more athletes can come forward and latch on to opportunities such as this. TINGJUN: Netball is a team sport, so I think it’s very difficult to find sponsors on my own. Instead of waiting for opportunities to fall on your lap, athletes must be pro-active to source for opportunities themselves. There is always this fear that employers would not be willing to hire sportspersons and give them time off for training and competitions. But if you’re honest and forthcoming, you never know what the outcome will be.

HAM MING: Compared to the other sports, badminton receives a lot of support from the SSC. Do they face the same problems like others? VANESSA: I think the support for local-born athletes can be better. It was a big decision for me to drop out of Raffles Junior College to train full-time three years ago. It is good if every athlete can follow Michelle’s example, but it’s easier said than done. Full-time athletes like me have to train twice a day. By the time I get home at night, I’m too tired to do anything. We seem to be cut off from the outside world. All we know is to play badminton.

That is why I hope the SSC can come up with some developmental or enrichment courses which can improve our overall well-being. In that case, we won’t be too handicapped when we go out to work in the future.

ASHTON: Support or no support, I think it all boils down to hard work. My coach once told me that an athlete who is not very talented, but is willing to work hard can go far. On the other hand, it will be a waste if someone is very talented but does not work hard.

Nobody is born a champion. You have to work hard for everything in life.