



## ***“The goal of being the first to produce a Malaysian world champion” Background and ambitions of Squash Academy of Penang (SAP)***

*By Lao Meng*



In 1985, 5 squash enthusiasts started the evolution of squash in Penang by building the first public squash courts known as Pepsi Squash Centre. Later, the name was changed to Penang Squash Centre and then finally to Penang International Squash Centre (PISC).

Based inside the Penang International Squash Centre, equipped with 10 singles and 2 doubles courts (all air conditioned to host official tournaments), Penang Squash Academy was established in 2003 with the support of Penang State Sport Council and the long term sponsor HEAD. The Academy inherited the mission of running the Players Development Program, which have been further strengthen in the following years and which is the main contributor to the discovery and development of Malaysian squash talents from Penang, the most famous one Nicol David, present Women World Champion, and some of the most talented among the new generation of Malaysian players, like Elvinn Keo, Low Wee Wern and Low Wee Nee.

But top coaches in SAP have a very ambitious vision for their long term objectives: “The goal of being the first to produce a Malaysian world champion made by the expertise of Malaysians with the facilities of Malaysia is our long term goal! ”



Allan Soyza, one of the 3 senior full time coaches of the Academy, is the Chief Operation Officer of SAP. After a starting as professional Junior at National level, he started dedicating his energies and studies to sport science and squash coaching since the early 90s. With a solid theoretical basis (he is among the very few who got Asian Level 3 Certificate) and a long experience in Squash professional coaching, he has been in charge of the Players Development Program in SAP since 2003. Following is our exclusive interview to Allan.

(Allan's Blog: <http://my-boring-life-and-thoughts.blogspot.com>)



SC: Penang is already recognized as a Malaysian squash center of national importance, contributing objectively to the recent successes of your country in Squash. Could you tell us when and how Penang squash started to develop and what has been the role of the Squash Academy of Penang in the growth of squash in Penang and Malaysia ?

Allan: Penang squash started in the late 80's on a small scale in conjunction with Squash Rackets Association of Malaysia's (SRAM) Junior Development program. The Junior Development program then never had more than 30 players at a time and more of part time basis training due to the lack of a full time coach.

When I returned to Penang in 1998 and started coaching, we managed to increase the number to 40 kids and it increased year to year till it reached 150 in 2002. Then in 2003, with the help of our sponsor HEAD, we embarked on a long term plan of becoming a High Performance training centre and the Squash Academy of Penang (SAP) became the 1<sup>st</sup> squash academy in Malaysia.

Today we have about 300 junior training with 3 full time coaches and 15 part time coaches assisting in the development of the players in a very systematic program. From the early years of the program in the 90's till today, we have had many players becoming National Juniors but it is only recently that we managed to get our players to be at par with the world standards or junior players.



SC: After the David sisters, among whom Nicol now is dominating world women squash, now you have the junior Low sisters, also from Penang, who are the best promises for the next generation of Malaysian women squash. In the development of the last generation of juniors you and your brother have invested a lot. Can we say that the results of the Low sisters, besides of course their natural talent, is also the fruit of a long term systematic program of development in Penang Squash Academy ?

Allan: Yes, the systematic program contributed a big part in their development. But having said that, they are very talented girls which we saw as world class from the early days of them learning the



game which made it much easier for them to achieve the success they are getting at the moment. The system has also allowed us to develop other players regularly to try to attain the standards that Nicol and the Low sisters have set provided the talent is available.



SC: Wee Warn has just won British Open and Asian Championship, concluding so in the best way her junior career. She is now ready for attacking the high positions in world ranking, but can you tell us in your opinion how high could be the next target of Wee Warn, let's say in one or two years ?

Allan: It has always been our aim to get our players to win the British Junior Open or World Junior title. We have been trying it since she was 11 or 12 years old and finally we did it. Even if she had not, reaching the quarterfinals and above in the British Juniors means that a player is world class for the junior event and thus, fulfills our objectives.

Professional squash is a totally different league from junior squash. Players earn a living from the sport and dedicate their life to training and improving.

Wee Wern has the next 2 years to learn the ropes of professional squash. How fast she learns will determine where she will be then. If she manages to break into the top 30 by then, it will be a great achievement.

SC: Somebody noticed that Penang produced many positive results in women squash, but not the same for men. What do you think about this consideration and do you have projects or talents in the pocket which could let this opinion be changed in the next future ?

Allan: Hahaha... Firstly, women's squash is not as competitive as men's squash. Then we also know that girls mature in thinking faster than boys. This is why our girls get us the results earlier than our boys. Not to say our boys are bad, it is just that they need more time to be able to fully comprehend the needs to be able to structure a winning game and apply it, meaning that they have to be complete in all.

Our boys are competitive in Malaysia but not in the world due to the fact that they need to balance up



with studies and train once a day compared to the national junior boys who train 2 times daily. It will be more satisfying to have world class boys and men as the competitions is more intense and we have always been and will continue to work towards that goal.



SC: Beside Malaysian juniors, Penang is also becoming more and more an international base for squash training. Japanese, Koreans, Indonesians, Australians and finally also China National team players are often going to Penang Squash Academy for clinics and intensive training programs. Becoming a squash training center of international level is one of the objectives of Penang Squash Academy ?

What do you think are the main "strengths" of your offer which can attract players for abroad going to Penang to improve their performances ?

Allan: It has always been the SAP's plan to expand internationally and finally we are getting there. Firstly, we have to understand that when we say international, it would mean Asia and maybe Australia and New Zealand.

Our strength is that we offer very competitive rates with the possibility of having a longer stint compared to other places like England or Australia. The other strength is the environment of the country meaning the culture and food. It suits the Asians very well and they are very comfortable here. Malaysia also has about 10-12 professional tournaments in a year which means it is a good base for someone to start their professional career and later move to Europe.

SC: Chinese best potentials like Jiang Li, Wu Zhenzhen, Xiu Chen, Meng Xiaomin, Wang Junjie, etc. have all attended trainings in Penang in the last couple of years. You have also been China National Team Supervisor Coach in 2008. I think you probably know now better than any other strengths and weakness of our players. What do you think we should do in the next 1 to 3 years to let them reach their best possible level and performances ?

Allan: Firstly, all the players need to train regularly. Training here means physical conditioning, running, gym and so besides their squash. Too many times the players just neglect this area and just



go to the courts and hit the ball and think they have trained. Secondly, they need to play more tournaments outside of China. They need to see how squash is played at a higher level more often. This will give them a picture of how squash should be played and they can follow or copy. The players also need to have training stints outside of China because of the quality of sparring that is not available in China.



SC: In my opinion, China toughest bottle neck in developing competitive professional players is the absolute lack of coaches. Considering the very low starting point we are now in this aspect, what do you suggest to accelerate the development of a decent base of local coaches ?

Allan: This is a classic chicken or egg case.. Hahaha.. All professional coaches would firstly need to be well educated in squash. They should attend all the coaching courses by the Asian Squash Federation and also sports science courses. And just like the players, coaches also need to be exposed to squash and the different levels of competition. Then they also need to follow the players for the training stints and observe and analyze different coaching experiences and methods of other coaches.

However, I know that again language will be a barrier because all the courses are in English. Hopefully under the guidance of CSA this problem will be solved in future. At the same time you could try to compile some material in Chinese, and to find or develop some teachers and coaches able to speak Chinese. But until you solve the language barrier, it is really difficult to develop many coaches.

SC: Penang is a beautiful island with four season warm weather, good infrastructures, various and tasteful food, and very relaxing atmosphere which is ideal for both intense training and vacation. Beside high level training programs, don't you think that it would be possible to develop some kind of more structured squash-tourism offers, and/or opening more options for amateur players who want to play squash, improve technique and have "squash fun" during their vacation ? Is the Squash Academy also thinking about this market ?



Allan: Squash tourism has been in our minds for a few years already and have had numerous inquiries but we are not ready to go aggressively in this area due to the lack of coaches to cover the demand. As such, we only focus our energy on the high performance professional or junior players. Hopefully in the near future we can do it in a well organized manner.

*(2009.2 – Squash Corner – Lao Meng)*

