

Presentation Transcript

Topic: Giving to others, what does it mean to volunteer Unified Football Program with Special Olympics Singapore

Speaker: Huang Yuchi, Volunteer of Special Olympics Singapore

Hi, I'm Yuchi, from the Special Olympics Singapore Programme, and I'm here to share about the Unified Football programme with us.

A little bit of myself, I'm a section head with ITE College West, and I've been volunteering with Special Olympics Singapore for the past nine years. Also, I spent some time with the Football Association of Singapore, in the medical committee. In my football preferences, I much prefer natural grass to artificial turf. And lastly, I do love my Kopi-O Kosong. So how it got started for me.

It all started in 2011. As part of my NTU sports science and management programme, in university. I did this Adaptive Physical Activity module, which is about learning to create programmes for people with different situations and different needs. So, it was a one-off observation, that we went down to join the training. I think that was in, ITE Bishan. We played a friendly game as the athletes were preparing for the World Games that year. So, in a picture that you see on the bottom left, this is me and five other classmates, with the boys who were in the squad for the competition. Okay, I didn't get too much out of that whole experience. Perhaps, it was just a good way to spend the afternoon doing something meaningful and worthwhile. But at the same time, maybe it did plant a little bit of something inside me. that it was something I want to do for a bit longer.

So, moving on to the next year. Well, coincidence or not, I did the second adapted Physical Activity module. And this time round, we have to do one-month observation of training programmes. So, I spent four Saturdays to observe the boys in training, as well as take part in their training programme. So, I had a little bit of a chance to coach certain portion, like the warm-up portion, and perhaps a drill or two. At the end of the whole thing, I wrote a short report of this attachment. After which, I had the opportunity to coach one of the two boys' teams. And with that, perhaps it was the first foray into my coaching with the team. The team did pretty well for a competition, we were champions for our division. And with that, perhaps, I was thinking whether I can do this for the longer term or not. But at that moment, I wasn't really committed yet. At that moment, I was just still figuring out, well, can I still do this? Or should I do something else? You can see from the picture, we had two teams that were training for it. There was the A-team and a B-team and I took the B team. And both of them did pretty well for that competition held in Singapore.

Moving on to 2013. That's when we did the National Games as an outreach team, on the picture on the left, that was at NUS. We actually had our first taste of 11 a side football. With nine athletes and seven partners, two coaches. Coach Dave, which is the head coach and myself as assistant, we travelled to Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand. That was in June 2013. And, what happened was that we played something like a World Cup qualifier for our Special Olympics competition, and this was the Asia Pacific portion. It was a real learning experience for us. We figured out that there's actually a huge gap between the playing abilities of our boys against the other teams in the region. We played SO Bharat, which is India. We played Indonesia, as well as in Malaysia. We did not win any of the games. However, we did feel like we were still a very young team, and it wasn't the best preparations heading up to it. Whatever happened, I think it was just a whole new learning experience for us as a whole team. And a lot of the boys, after that whole experience came back, highly motivated and really invested and know that their football journey has just begun.

It was also the first time we had a physio travelling with us, which was an interesting experience. Some of the boys actually had the first time to be immersed in ice bath, just to cope with the competition.

After the competition, Dave had to step aside. And Gabriel, who was also the coach at that period of time had to embark on a new career. So, I took over as Head Coach and had to figure how to do it.

So, for me, at that moment, I didn't have a coaching licence. It was quite tough, trying to convince myself how to coach the team. I just started with my job as a lecturer at ITE College West, and it was not so easy to balance both. We also had to deal with this whole idea that, at that moment of time, we had a lot of athletes and partners, but they are moving on to the next stage of their life. The older athlete had to now work full time, and they can't train as often as they want. We also had partners that dropped off and do other things. We did not have the healthiest of numbers at that period of time. Another challenge that we faced, was that we had changing training grounds. We were training at (Academy of Singapore Teachers) Malan, subsequently at Tanglin School, Chao Yang School. And finally, we had a more permanent space at Bendemeer Secondary School. So, those are some of the challenges that I faced as a new Head Coach.

But I think, we did manage to emerge from that. So, what happened was that I used my training sessions as an instrument for myself, in which my ITE student can come and play football on a Saturday. Because I was doing fitness training, these allowed my students to develop some understanding about sports coaching, about strength and conditioning and exercise science, etc.

We really had a chance to play in competition. So, on the top left, you see one of the competition photos that took place at HDB hub. And at the top middle, here you will see some coaches from the region, as well as our athletes taking part in a coaching workshop. We also had a chance to do some CSR and we had a chance to meet Finn Bálor, WWE superstars that came to Singapore a few years back.

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As you can see from the bottom center, a photo where many of my students are inside during one of the training sessions or competition at Malan Road. In 2017, we also had National Games. That's where we played once again, as the outreach team in the competition in NUS. Throughout this whole period, it was really learning to become a better coach, a lot of learning, a lot of YouTube videos at night, a lot of web resources, and attending different workshops, just to know a little bit better about how to become a better coach.

With that, we move on to what's happening right now.

Right now, we really try to ensure that training programme is consistent. Every Saturday morning, we make sure that we train as often or as regularly as we can. We probably only take some breaks during the Chinese New Year period, as well as Christmas period, and the major holidays, if not, we train every Saturday. It is important to maintain the fitness level of all players. So, sometimes the players go to the gym or does their own regular runs on their own to keep up their fitness level. On the right, you will see that we also share our knowledge with our fellow educators in the different special schools, for example. So that is one of the sessions when myself and Seng Poh (SOSG staff) after completing our AFC "C" License, we had a chance to conduct this workshop for our teachers in the different special schools. So, it's really about sharing the training programmes, coaching pointers, and how the boys and girls from the different schools can level up. I think that was, in fact, one of the preparations for the Inclusive Sports programme, I think that was for, 2018.

We were really fortunate to have a chance to meet legends. Athletes and partners alike, we got the chance to meet our football idols like Bobby Robson, Denis Irwin, Ledley King, Julius Caesar from the top clubs when they came here for those exhibition competitions. The boys also get a chance to travel for competition. So, this photo was taken, in 2018, when the boys prepared and left for KL for competition. A lot of these are motivations for both our athletes and partners to continue to train. And for our younger athletes and partners a chance to play against other countries, be it locally or overseas.

Like I said, in the past, for some of our trainings, previously, it was a lot of five a side. But we eventually evolved into more of a seven-a-side to eleven-a-side team. Having a lot of athletes and partners around, we can play, we can train in an eleven-a-side setting. And how do we continue to motivate everybody is to play friendly games. So, the picture that you see is taken at St Wilfred on the evening, where we play a friendly game with staffs from SportSG. It is really about this integration of athletes and partners in our training and our matches. The only problem is, is a problem for me as a coach. It is a headache, to have maybe 20, over 30 players turning up at a game. How to manage and how to give everybody enough game time for the game. One of the ways I go about doing it, is to have three separate sessions of 30 minutes, so that I can field up three different teams, and everybody gets some game time at the end of the day. For us, of course, moving forward, we hope to be a little more competitive, we hope to have a chance to, perhaps, play in a regular tournament, and in due time, to play in competitions as well.

Of course, we know that COVID-19 struck us last year. And yes, like every other training progress out there we adapted. So, we did Zoom training. Of course, that came along with its own challenges. Just to make sure that all athletes and partners have got a working smartphone, or working Wi Fi connection at home. And as well as an adequate and big enough space, just to be able to train and exercise, was not so easy. But we still managed to adapt and deal with it. So, you can see in the screen grabs. We had push up sessions, we had a very strength-based training because we can't quite do aerobic stuff. We celebrated one of the National Day with everybody wearing our patriotic colours and waving the flag. Some of us have very creative backgrounds like the football stadiums, or the dressing room of certain clubs.

Now that we are in phase three, we are able to go back to the football field to train. Earlier, we had one course to five players, after which, currently we do have one coach to eight players to train. Yes, it is not as ideal as we would like but we adapted to it. And I think we are regaining a bit more normalcy at this time.

So, what is ahead?

It is really about developing our women's programme, moving forward. Currently, the boys' team or the men's team is doing pretty well. So, I think it's time to put our focus on the ladies and women. We do hope to attract and find volunteers to come in to help us with the women's programme, if we can. Another emphasis of ours is to really grow our youth and young athletes programme. This involves the whole idea of unified sports again, where we hope to reach out to young partners, as well as young athletes to come in and play football. We hope to get that going, perhaps this year, and see how we can create this pipeline of athletes moving into the senior programme, eventually. For the men's team, we hope to represent Singapore in the 2023 World Games, in Germany. So, that is in two and a half, maybe three years' time. We really hope to play at either the seven-a-side or the eleven-a-side platform.

Lastly, it is really about this love of the sport, and we really hope that the wider community can enjoy what we do. Of course, my current unified football programme is for athletes with higher abilities but we again don't want to discriminate and we hope that people with all abilities can come and play.

So, in all essence, volunteering with the programme has given me the chance to learn a lot. To learn more about myself, to learn more about others. This photo was taken at another of our eleven-a-side friendly games. And, you can really see how this football family had grown.

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The two of us in yellow, is Seng Poh, Seng Poh is my Sports Officer. Myself, also in yellow on the bottom left. You can see a whole group of athletes and partners in the photo. We have educators, Ardi, in white. Here we have partners from all over the place. We have athletes, who have been with us for eight years, nine years. Some of the athletes that you can see in the first picture in 2011 are still in this picture. You also have people like Nazirul, which is a student of mine, and he continues to come and train as often as he can. I think the football training provides us a platform to have some awareness about what's really happening out there. Because everybody comes from different backgrounds, different situations, but football is like the equalizer, where we can all come together, play and train on a Saturday morning. At different points of life, we do have different commitment levels, and different priority may take place. So sometimes, for example, Dennis, which is one of our coaches. He was a new dad a few months back, so he couldn't train and coach the boys. So, now he takes some time off. Once he is available, he will come back. Things like that does happen. So, we just have this revolving door where everybody comes in and comes out. For me, I find a lot of joy in sharing my football knowledge with the boys. And it's just really something that I can look forward to every Saturday morning. For me, it is really to continue to do this journey with the boys. And I think I will still be in for the longer haul. I don't think I will stop anytime soon. And maybe perhaps now it serves as an invitation to everybody here. That if you are free on a Saturday morning, you still have a pair of football boots that is in the shoe cabinet and you haven't use it okay, perhaps, once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted further, please come and join us for a football session. And with that, I come to the end of today's session.