

As official and a gentler man...



Mark Liew
Sports Correspondent

It is a lazy Saturday morning and the first time in a long while that Ng Ser Miang finally has time to himself.

It has been just over a week since the 60-year-old became the first Singaporean to be elected as one of the International Olympic Committee's four vice-presidents. The congratulatory messages have yet to cease.

Yesterday's breakfast interview with The Sunday Times is held up as he takes a call on his mobile phone. The caller — like the many in the past week — is offering his congratulations.

A 1.8m-tall flower stand sits in the hallway of Ng's sprawling, three-story Camden Park bungalow — where Bentley convertible, three Mercedes Benzes and a Honda SUV sit in a driveway — as he beckons us in.

The news is all from Olympic sponsors Samsung and, again, a tribute to his historic appointment. "Wah, non-stop," he says minutes before the phone calls — and probably of his schedule, as he motions for us to join him for chives



Ng Ser Miang

knish from his favourite Tiong Bahru stall.

He came back from the IOC session in Copenhagen only last Wednesday and hosted former IOC vice-president Kevan Gosper on Thursday.

Exhausted and jet-lagged, perhaps the significance of his appointment has yet to sink in.

But he discloses that there were tense moments in Copenhagen. There was the fact that he was the first member from ASEAN to stand for the position. What was this man from Singapore thinking, going up against seasoned sports officials from Europe and the world?

It did not help that Ng failed to come through in the first round of voting for the two available slots; the vote went to Italy's Mario Pescante. Did he bite off more than he could chew?

But his mind went back to a presentation he saw just a few days earlier when Madrid, vying to host the 2016 Olympic Games, handed the stage to a group of young athletes.

It calmed his nerves and restored his self-belief.

Says Ng, who eventually won the second slot comfortably: "The young athletes presented a narrative about how, despite their different backgrounds, sport is something that makes us all human." "That made a lot of sense. That

Ng Ser Miang: Through the years



Ng's Camden Park home is his sanctuary, away from the hustle and bustle of life as an IOC member, among his many hats. The 1.2-acre-old bungalow is tastefully decorated in a Balinese style, but also peppered with Chinese art to reflect his Shantou roots.

"There is a Chinese proverb that says whenever you have a drink of water, never forget where it comes from. It's something I live by, something I've been taught from young, to respect and be kind to others and always contribute back to society."



Ng was introduced to sailing as a student in the United States. He went on to win a Soap Games silver medal and compete in his own yacht Magic Dragon, before becoming a sports administrator.

From taking over the troubled Singapore Shuttle Bus company in the 1970s, Ng founded Trans-Island Bus Services in 1982, a business he grew into a multi-million dollar enterprise.



Family also comes first. For Ng, from the time he was growing up with eight siblings when he started his own family of three children — Xuan Hu, now 32, Chiong Gue, 25, and Xuan Ming, 23 — With his late wife Ro Ai Choo.

regardless of who I was in the IOC, regardless of stature, title, everyone was equal, all of us colleagues in the work of bettering sport."

Among the IOC members who voted for Ng in Copenhagen was Thailand's Sit Indrajana.

The IOC member of 19 years tells The Sunday Times why Ng, who was first voted into the IOC in 1998, was a shoo-in for the role. "He stands out for his dedication to the Olympic movement and to Singapore. He is well-liked, a gentle

man with integrity. When he says he will deliver, you have his word."

Ng has also delivered beyond the sports arena, a shrewd businessman who built a bus empire from zero.

He knew nothing about the bus business when he took over the floundering Singapore Shuttle Bus (SSB) company in 1976, before starting the successful Trans-Island Bus Services (TIBS) in 1982. In 2004, when SMT Corp took over TIBS, he sold his stake for \$80 million.

As chairman of the Singapore Sports Council from 1991 to 2002, his tenure was highlighted by a \$500-million government injection to help athletes aim for international glory.

He attributes his childhood for helping instil in him the confidence to take on challenges. "I came from a very strict Chinese family of seven brothers and one sister," says Ng, whose family moved from Shantou, China, where they were landowners, to Singapore when he was one.

"Strict Chinese values like respecting your elders were instilled in us. Yet my father was not afraid to let us try things other than traditional Chinese families may not, like travelling to the West."

His two oldest brothers took over the family business while the academia and their careers. His goal was to be a banker.

He grew up first in a Rochor Road shophouse and then in the Telok Ayer Sthammar Road shophouse and then in the Telok Ayer Sthammar Road shophouse and then in the Telok Ayer Sthammar Road shophouse.

area, and studied at Serangoon Garden Government High school where he had a prefect and a boy scout troop leader.

It was only after his father, who ran a textile business, to give him a few hours a week to make his first overseas trip to Melbourne to attend a school for boys.

In 1966, in his second year at Durham Government High, he again sought his father's approval to head west.

This time, it was to the US, under an American High School scholarship, to attend Blackford High School in Santa Clara, California. He thought that he would also discover sailing and might like it.

He returned home, graduated from the then-university of Singapore with an honours degree in business administration, and started work as a bank officer at Citibank in 1967. It was there that he also won a sailing silver at the 1969 Sea Games.

He married university sweet-heart Ro Ai Choo, through her family that he got involved in the bus business.

Recalling how he took over SSB, independently ran the business with his wife, he said it was tough, at times, it was tough to get along with them. They saw me as a young guy who did not know anything.

"At one meeting, I almost got so mad that he banged on the table, banged the table with his pencil in two. From then on, they knew I was in a mood."

Indeed, although Ng has a reputation for being a "militaristic M. Nee Guy," he can be strict too. "But I've mellowed over the years," he says with a laugh.

Now, still decisive, the matter first. But at the end of day, if a decision has to be made, even I won't hesitate to making one.

His tough stance was needed last year when, before the Beijing Olympic Games, the women's table tennis team threatened to self-destruct amid talk of its fighting.

Ng, chairman of The Project 012 programme, is invited to help Singapore win medals at the 2008 and 2012 Olympics. He stepped down and laid down the law for them to put country before self.

The team would go on to win a silver at the 2008 Olympic Games, a first Olympic medal in 48 years. He also coached Singapore's first Olympic medal in 48 years.

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But he fought the sceptics over meetings before he finally won over enough people over.

While his business and sporting exploits have made many headlines, he is fiercely protective of his family, preferring to let his kids have a "normal" life out of the limelight.

He has three children — Xuan Hu, 32, Chiong Gue, 25, and Xuan Ming, 23 — with the late Ro Ai Choo, a former teacher, who died of cancer in 1999.

Xuan Hu, a former SEA Games sailing champion, works overseas and will soon be joined by his brother Chiong Gue, who is still working in Singapore.

Says Ng: "All of them are very independent, but we're still a very close family. They always try to call me to thank for bringing them up well. They are the disciplinarian. He was the one who spoilt them."

But let's not just congratulate Ser Miang on his appointment, let's also put him under pressure. Let's tell him, you're entrusted with this continent making a mark, with raising Singapore's sporting profile, with bringing the sporting world to Asia, with showing that Asians can see sport globally, not just parochially.

It's a long list, but Ser Miang doesn't look the nervous type. This is sport, after all, nothing matters but performance. Even when wearing a suit.

rohitb@sph.com.sg

marclim@sph.com.sg

Pressure's on but he'll be up to the task

Ng's position as IOC vice-president will give region greater clout at global sporting table

He loves foreign trips but returns having learnt little. He throws his weight around like a bullying sumo wrestler.

But that's all bearable. It's the whining that gets me. Bloody Westerners, they moan. Make up rules to suit themselves. Have double standards. Patronise us.

You know what? Some of it is true. But you don't fight it by sulking in private, but by out-arguing them, out-idea-ing them. You fight it by getting into the arena and carrying a mind sharper than a mugger's razor.

For 30 years, Indian officials insisted Europe altered hockey to their advantage. This is not entirely false. Yet, on the International Hockey Federation website, I find not a single Indian on the 24-member Executive Board.

If you're not there, if you don't

edge your way in armed with a plan, if you don't learn how to influence opinion, how do you ensure change?

It's why I like Ng Ser Miang. The former sailor has a heart rate lower than Bjorn Borg's, he doesn't over-talk, he's well-prepared, and he's there. In the International Olympic Committee (IOC). One of four vice-presidents, one of two Asians on the 15-member Executive Board.

To borrow a phrase from Low Teo Ping (the never-tiresome VP of the International Sailing Federation), he has "got out of his comfort zone, he's prepared to go out into the global scene."

Ser Miang is good for Singapore, an international player who just happens to perform in a suit in air-conditioned rooms. If he wasn't there, wasn't effective, would the

Youth Olympic Games have come here? Actually, says Singapore's An-nabel Pennefather, an international hockey VP, it's more than that: if it wasn't for him, we might not have even thought of it.

Till late into the last century, sport was run and ruled by Europe and North America. Asia has since grown up, it has yanked the colonial grip from its collar, claimed independence and is discovering prosperity. Now a continent's confidence is only slowly percolating down into sport.

In cricket, the control of a small, but vital game has shifted from England and Australia to India. It has been a testy transition, but an Asian nation has found its cricketing voice, even if it must now show it is capable of running the global game responsibly.

Asia must do this. Get on panels,

boards, committees and not just sit there but show off a sporting intelligence, a humility, a resolve, a world view. As Kevan Gosper, Australia's IOC member, speaking of his own country's sporting growing up decades ago, said: "If you don't put your own people there, how can you explain you can hold major events?"

International sport is also a "language," said Gosper, it is a way to do business, it is about deals, big pictures, politics, vision, turf, ideas (of course it can be seedy and dubious, as the IOC has sometimes been, but let's not go there today).

It means Ser Miang is both our spokesman at this global table and our interpreter, he knows this language, he is a fine representative of Asia's ideas, its credibility, its seriousness.

Asia will matter more in sport.



Rohit Brijnath

There is no nice way to say this. The Asian sports official (well, not all, but many) can be more tiresome than a cheek-pinching aunt at a family gathering.

He likes his picture in the paper too much. He holds on to his position till his dentures are wobbling.