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SHOOTING

# A crack shot at nurturing talents

Former principal Tan's foresight has turned Ahmad Ibrahim into a niche shooting school

By Jeanette Wang

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**TOP PLAN:** Former Ahmad Ibrahim Secondary principal Tan Keng Joo's (left) training programme has produced national shooters like Vanessa Yong (right). -- ALBERT SIM

HE may not be a sharp shooter, but his far-sighted vision hit the bull's-eye.

Former Ahmad Ibrahim Secondary School (AISS) principal Tan Keng Joo was right on target in his plans to develop the neighbourhood school into a shooting powerhouse.

Since the mid-1990s, the Yishun-based school has hardly gone off the mark winning shooting trophies.

But, Tan, 48, who joined the AISS in 2000, transformed its 10-metre air-rifle programme in his six years there.

The result: The school has produced Commonwealth Games double-bronze medallist Vanessa Yong and Asian Games women's team runners-up Vanessa Jasmine Ser and Adrienne Ser.

Since 2001, the school has consistently finished in the top two in the C and girls' team events. It also features within the top four of the boys' events frequently.

Tan, now Canberra Secondary's principal, said: 'Shooting already had some track record at Ahmad Ibrahim. I just strengthened it and took it to a higher level.'

His philosophy was 'to always be one step ahead of our competitors' - and was.

In 2000, he decided the school's focus would be on the 0.177 event, which was introduced in 1997 to replace the 0.22 event.

The 0.22 event was discontinued in 2001.

The numbers refer to the internal diameter of the rifle's barrel in inches, with the 0.177 using a lighter pellet that travels faster.

He then acquired Olympic-standard rifles from Germany costing about \$2,000 each and high-quality Korean-made canvas jackets for about \$600 a piece for each of his 16 shooters.

'I tried to provide the best for my students,' he said, 'so I bought the best equipment money could buy.'

In 2002, when the school embarked on a two-year upgrading of its campus and the shooting range could not be used, he went in search of an alternate training venue.

He approached the Safra Shooting Club's chairman Brigadier-General Lim K Lye to use the Safra Yishun air-weapons range.

But the range, meant only for members and the national team, costs thousands to rent for a day.

Lim, 56, the vice-president of the Singapore Shooting Association, recalled. 'Tan explained that his neighbourhood school did not have the resources of independent school.

'But his students were interested in shooting, and he wanted to give them something that would propel them and make the school proud.

'When I saw that he was so passionate about shooting, I decided to help hi

An arrangement to use the range for a nominal fee was made. The student have since been training at Safra.

In 2004, Tan invested in a \$3,000 shooting-simulation programme that tra a shooter's rifle movement to help improve technique.

He also replaced the spring-piston air rifles with compressed air rifles, which were much easier to use.

The following year, the AISS was designated a 'niche school' by the Ministry of Education.

With shooting as its niche, the school was able to admit a number of students through the Direct School Admission exercise - via its own selection criteria

A process was started to identify potential shooters. All Secondary 1 students are now screened to find those with hands and hearts steady enough to crack a good shot.

Measurements of the students' upper and lower arm, index finger, weight and height are also taken.

The AISS has since produced a string of national shooters, including Vanessa Jasmine, Adrienne, Zhou Peixuan, Lim Siew Mei and Julie Ang.

So what drove Tan?

'There was potential,' he said. 'The students were talented and had been doing well. So I thought, why not capitalise on it and push them further. Why limit them to just inter-school competitions?

'I cast the vision further and said, 'Let's go for the Olympics'.'

It did not matter that he was not a shooter himself.

He said: 'In football teams, the managers or coaches may not be the best footballers. It's about the ability to invest in the footballers that counts.'

With Vanessa, 19, now shooting full-time under Project 0812, his Olympic dream could be realised soon.

The scheme aims to land Singapore's first Olympic medal since 1960 at next year's Beijing Games or the 2012 London Games.

Vanessa was grateful to her former principal for the opportunities he provided for her and her teammates.

She said: 'He really supported our air-rifle club. He gave a lot of funds to help us buy guns to improve our training.'

'Compared to my seniors, we had more privileges.'

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