



Spotlight on Squash

SRAM: Growing a Game

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From humble beginnings, the Squash Racquets Association of Malaysia (SRAM) popularized a little known club-based sport played by a few enthusiasts and put a nation on the world sporting map with a series of international champions.

December 2014. The home crowd at the Wadi Degla club in Cairo was in a frenzy. Two squash nemeses raced across the court, challenging one another with powerful strokes.

Sixty-six minutes. Five games. Four match balls. One epic match. Suspense, guts, sweat, and tears.

At the end, Nicol David – the superstar of squash in Malaysia – crumbled onto the court, exhausted and disbelieving. *Could this have actually happened? Lost the opening game. Came back to draw level. Lost the third. Down 6-2 in the fourth and saved four match balls. Sealed the deal in the fifth, a tiebreaker for my 8th world title. A record.*

When she stepped foot on the court that day in Cairo, David had the weight of the nation on her shoulders. She was expected to win. After all, she was the seven-time world champion. And just a month earlier, she had become the first player in the world to rank



Nicol David, world's top-ranked player for 9 years, competes at China Open in 2015.

first for 100 consecutive months. A few months before that, she had been named Malaysia's National Sportswoman of the Year for the 9th time.

In an interview several months later, David had a simple explanation for what happened on the court. "I didn't want to let it go," she said. "I didn't want to leave that last point."

David is one notable result of a commitment a group of squash enthusiasts made 41 years ago: to popularize the sport in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur and in clubs around the country. Today, thanks to the Squash Racquets Association of Malaysia (SRAM), more than 4,000 young people play squash in Malaysia, including many inspired by David's unprecedented success.

Liz Irving, David's current coach, said that in addition to her athletic ability, David's accomplishments are due to her country's support. The government of Malaysia, through the National Sports Council (NSC), is the biggest sponsor of SRAM's programs and its athletes. It is through NCS's sponsorship that SRAM continues to pursue its founders' vision: transform a sport and develop world-class players.

The NSC's sponsorship of a program to prepare athletes for the Commonwealth Games in 1998 was a key turning point. The Jaya (success) 98 program, introduced in 1994, kick-started SRAM's ambitions. Nicol David and several other top players, including Mohd Azlan Iskandar, Ong Beng Hee, Sharon Wee, and Tricia Chuah, are all products of Jaya 98.

In 2000, the NSC introduced the Gemilang (victory) program for the new millennium. The main goal was to prepare Malaysian athletes for the 2001 Southeast Asian Games, better known as SEA Games, in Kuala Lumpur. The preparations paid off. Malaysia's SRAM-trained squash competitors contributed four gold medals as Malaysia emerged the overall winner with 111 gold medals.

After the 2001 SEA Games, the NSC continued the Gemilang program. The goal this time was to prepare Malaysian athletes for competitions, including the Asian Games 2006 in Qatar. Once

again, SRAM proved that it could deliver the goods. At the Asian Games, Malaysia's squash team won four medals – two gold, one silver, and one bronze. The performance was evidence that Malaysia was now one piece of the world sporting map.

GROWING A GAME

Squash teaches you commitment, determination, and dedication. It also teaches you to think.

— Y.A.M Tunku Tan Sri Imran

Squash was introduced in Malaysia in the 1930s by British educators and planters. In 1939, the first recorded squash tournament in Malaysia was held at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK), an all-boys and all-Malay premier residential school in the state of Perak. The first squash court in Malaysia had been built there the year before. But it would take three decades before the sport gained a substantial foothold in the country.

In the early 70s, young Malays and expatriates who had learned to play squash while attending prestigious universities in England started to play the game at exclusive clubs in Kuala Lumpur. In June of 1972, a group of them, meeting at the inaugural annual meeting of the Lake Club, formed the Squash Racquets Association of Malaysia (SRAM). Its main purpose was to "popularize the game of squash in the country," said YBhg Dato' Hisham Al-Bakri, who was elected the first president.

In the beginning, squash was very much a club-based sport. The challenge was to make it popular in the Klang Valley and in clubs in selected states. To accomplish that, SRAM tried to make squash seem a sport everyone could play and so it focused on construction of squash courts and complexes, and encouraged entrepreneurs to back the sport's development.

Y.A.M. Tunku Tan Sri Imran, a SRAM past president, was one of the entrepreneurs who invested in new complexes and squash centers. He recalled that in 1972, there were fewer than 25 squash courts in the country; by 1980, the number stood at 400. But he knew that a sport's growth required more than infrastructure. It needed people

to organize and run competitions and coaching clinics. “You cannot just put the facility down and expect it to be utilized,” he said.

As SRAM began taking the sport beyond the clubs of Kuala Lumpur, the reaction was encouraging, especially in the northern state of Penang. One of Tunku Imran’s companies funded the Bukit Dambar Squash Centre, but it was built and run by local residents. The facility, now known as the Pepsi Squash Centre, has since become the learning ground for many national and international players.

In the 1970s, SRAM regularly introduced new events on the sports calendar, including a national championship tournament and the Malaysian Open, Malaysian Close, and Malaysian Junior. In the 1990s, to recruit more players, SRAM began working with what it called “affiliates” – the 14 states, the Royal Malaysia Police, and the Armed Forces. In time, the majority of SRAM’s development programs would be run by affiliates – partnerships that continue to this day. When he became SRAM president, only four states (Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Penang and Sarawak) were par-

ticipating, recalled another past president, Datuk A. Sani Karim. He and others visited all 14 states to expand participation.

Financially, SRAM started from nothing. “I started as the secretary so I knew exactly. It was zero,” Tunku Imran recalled. After he was elected SRAM’s second president, it was still scrambling for money. “We always managed to raise our funds, but were never rich.”

A lot of money was contributed by SRAM members. For instance, all the teams that went overseas in the early days paid for their own travel. But slowly, sponsors came on board. At the time, a lot of corporate executives, including many in advertising, played squash socially, mostly in clubs. “They facilitated a lot of our introductions to corporate figures,” Tunku Imran said.

SRAM’s major sponsors today, now including the National Sports Council, didn’t come along until the 1990s. The catalyst was Malaysia’s winning bid for the 1998 Commonwealth Games. The government threw its support behind SRAM and other sports groups to help the nation’s athletes



Sanjay Singh Chai won Gold Medal for SRAM at 2015 SEA Games in Singapore.

win prestige for Malaysia. It spent more than US\$468 million to organize the games and develop elite competitors. The government's support marked a turning point in funding for squash, which made its debut at the Games that year.

In addition to Tunku Imran, SRAM's third president, the late Tan Sri Alex Lee, played a key role. He was a banker, a deputy minister, a philanthropist, and the youngest son of the country's first finance minister. His stature among the Commonwealth nations was a key reason Malaysia won its bid to host the games. "That was a watershed year for Malaysian sport," Tunku Imran said.

In 1995, the Ministry of Youth and Sports introduced a corporate partnership program known as Rakan Sukan (sports partner) to encourage Malaysian corporations to adopt a sport and provide financial assistance and management skills to elevate the status of the chosen sport to world level. The following year, SRAM was given a corporate partner – YTL Corporation Berhad, a Malaysian infrastructure conglomerate founded by business tycoon Tan Sri Dato' Seri Yeoh Tiong Lay. From 1996 to 2003, YTL contributed US\$1.3 million to SRAM. A significant part of that led to the establishment of training centers in all 14 states.

After the YTL funding ended in 2003, and after Datuk A. Sani Karim was named the sixth president in 2004, SRAM found itself back at square one, with no big funder in sight. "I had to go around and become a professional beggar," he said. He wrote countless letters to major corporations in the country and made appointments to see CEOs with a proposal asking for money and promising results on the courts.

He endured nine months of begging. Even the National Sports Council didn't contribute funds. He began using personal money to offer US\$2,400 loans to state associations. His message to them: "Move your program ahead. When you're ready, you pay me back."

Eventually, Datuk Karim approached Maybank, Malaysia's largest bank and one of the largest in Southeast Asia. Dato' Agil Natt, the deputy presi-

dent of Maybank at the time, was the father of his son's wife. In July 2005, Dato' Agil was ready to present to the board, proposing Maybank as the Rakan Sukan for squash. But an out-of-the-blue telephone call changed everything. "Nazir Razak, CEO of CIMB, was playing the inter-bank squash game at Jalan Duta and a CIMB representative said CIMB is interested in becoming a sponsor," recalled Datuk Sani, who then raced to meet him and told Dato' Agil to hold off on the presentation. The rest was history.

JUNIOR DEVELOPMENT

Funding was hardly SRAM's only challenge over the years. Its leaders had to develop junior players (aged 19 and younger) and keep them involved in the sport by organizing tournaments, locally and overseas. After Tunku Imran became president in 1978, SRAM helped start and continued to develop the East Asian Championships with several other countries, including Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines, Japan, and Thailand; it was hosted by a different country each year. They also traveled across Malaysia, persuading squash enthusiasts to form state associations and encourage players to enter interstate championships and other competitions.

The junior development program got an unexpected boost in 1982 when the organizers of the second World Junior Championships accepted SRAM's offer to host the tournament. Hosting the event boosted Malaysia's prestige in the sport and gave SRAM an opportunity to see some Malaysian players hold their own against more experienced competitors. "At the World Junior Championships, we realized that, hey, with a bit of organization, our juniors can be as good as these guys," Tunku Imran said.

The level of competition prompted SRAM to hire its first national coach, Chris Clark, an Australian, and task him with the mission to produce a world junior champion. Clark divided the juniors into four age-based groups and set about sharpening their abilities with intense skills-and-endurance training sessions. In time, Clark's coaching would

produce players such as Jerry Loo, who was nominated for Malaysia's Sportsman of the Year in 1982, and Raymond Arnold and Chris Chan, who each won the GBH-National Closed Squash Championships, whose name reflected the initials of squash enthusiast Goh Ban Huat.

In 1982, SRAM introduced another development program, "Catch 'em Young." Driven by Tunku Imran, its goal was to get school children involved in squash early on and reverse the apathy school administrators then had for including squash in school activities. SRAM also began nurturing collaborations with many corporate sponsors, including SportExcel, Nestle Malaysia (MILO), Dunlop Malaysia, Mulpha International, Malaysia Airlines, and AirAsia, which all helped fund local tournaments and championships.

SRAM's most successful and longest running tournament today is SportExcel Junior Squash Circuit, introduced in 1993. Thousands of junior men and women players from Asia and Oceania advanced to senior levels after competing in SportExcel competition. They include Malaysia's Ong Beng Hee and Nicol David as well as Australian Anthony Ricketts, who all became top ten world players.

SRAM's efforts at the junior level got another boost when on 27 April 1997, in cooperation with SRAM, the countrywide YTL/NSC National Junior Development Program was launched by the Ministry of Youth and Sports. The program divided players into four age groups, from seven to 12 years old – Beginners, Potentials, Back-up, and Elite – over a period of six to eight years. All 14 states started with 50 to 200 beginners, who were identified yearly through coaching clinics.

After one year, 20 to 50 potential players were selected from the pool of beginners. From there, all states developed 10 boys and 10 girls as back-up players. This phase took about two years. Finally, after two more years, each state named its five elite boys and five elite girls. The elites went into the national junior program to be shortlisted for World Junior Championships. Players from the east coast, north, East Malaysia and Kuala Lum-

pur graduated from the program and represented Malaysia in various World Junior Championships from 2002 to 2005.

Sixteen years after SRAM hired Clark to develop its junior development program, Malaysia finally produced its first world junior champion, Ong Beng Hee in 1998, followed by Nicol David in 1999. "Clark established the right path and structure," said SRAM's past president, Tengku Imran. Clark served as the national coach for more than a decade before passing the torch to Major Maniam, who was his assistant from 1983 to 1986.

After YLT Corporation ended its run as Rakan Sukan in 2003, SRAM struggled to financially sustain its junior development programs. This was a challenge that SRAM's sixth president, Datuk A. Sani Karim, had to take on, and in 2005 he secured funding of US\$395,000 when CIMB Investment Bank became the next Rakan Sukan, in partnership



SRAM players and coach Andrew Cross (middle row, right) celebrate clean sweep in boys and girls singles, doubles, and mixed doubles at Commonwealth Youth Games in 2015.

with SRAM and the National Sports Council. So, in 2006, the CIMB Junior Squash Development Program began. Two tournament circuits – the CIMB Rising Stars National Junior Circuit and the CIMB National Junior Circuit – became the mainstays of the junior development program.

The CIMB National Junior Circuit's objective was to introduce juniors to competitions at a very young age. It featured two categories – the Under 9 and Under 11, for both boys and girls. The idea of the circuit was to have players compete at increasingly more competitive stages, or "legs." The circuit included five legs, including the Grand Finals; each lasted three days. The first leg was held in Penang (March), the second leg in Kuala Lumpur (April), the third leg in Petaling Jaya (June), followed by the fourth leg in the eastern state of Pahang (July). The Grand Finals were played in Bukit Jalil in September. Circuit competition helped players take their games to higher levels. "This has been a marked success," Datuk Sani said.

Apart from the circuits, the partnership with CIMB led to the CIMB KL Open and CIMB Malaysian Open squash tournaments, which attracted the world's top players. In 2006 same year, CIMB also signed an agreement with Nicol David and became her main sponsor. The agreement paid off for CIMB in 2007, when David won eight Women's International Squash Players Association tournaments. She was also named Asian Sportswoman of the Year by the Asian Sports Press Union in its inaugural awards.

The success of Rakan Sukan squash programs with SRAM partly led CIMB to believe that it could create more impact if its corporate initiative was institutionalized.

Consequently, CIMB Foundation was established in November 2007 to harness talent from all corners of Malaysia. The partnership strengthened the SRAM pipeline for future champions through the junior circuit.

In 2008, SRAM and CIMB Foundation achieved breakthroughs in the junior development program. In the past, new talent for the pool of nation-

al junior and senior players had come from the traditional squash-playing states of Penang, Perak, Selangor and Sarawak. But the CIMB National Junior Circuit helped discover talents from states such as Kedah, Johor, Negeri Sembilan, Malacca, Sabah and Kelantan. Players also demonstrated higher standards of play with more hard-fought rallies and longer matches. Squash also became more familiar to the Malaysian public, thanks to wider press coverage.

In 2010, CIMB Foundation introduced several initiatives in the junior circuit. In the past, from 1993 to 2009, the junior development programs only covered players from age 7 to 12, but CIMB expanded it to include new age groups – under 15, 17 and 19 – to widen junior development. A second initiative was to hold one of the competition legs in Kuching, Sarawak, thus expanding nationwide participation. The third, and most significant, was to introduce a benchmarking scheme – measuring players against other players – that provided incentives for the circuit's best players.

SRAM's leaders determined the benchmarking scheme was needed to assess the quality of the top emerging competitors against their regional and global peers, in particular those who started out in the Under 9 age group in 2006. Under the program, the top benchmarked players in each age group were sponsored to compete in the Hong Kong Junior Open, which was regarded as the most competitive junior tournament in the region. A further incentive awaited them if they won – sponsorship to compete in the British Junior Open, the premier international tournament for junior squash.

Thirteen juniors competed in the 2010 Hong Kong Junior Open. Seven reached at least the semi-finals and five advanced to their respective finals. Two emerged champions, Ng Eain Yow (boys Under 13) and S. Sivasangari (girls Under 13) while four others were runners-up. At the 2011 British Junior Open, Eain Yow emerged champion and Sivasangari finished fourth in their respective categories.

Their achievements were significant symbols of the junior development program. Both champions started playing in the circuit when it was first introduced in 2006, in the Under 9 group. With such results, SRAM, CIMB Foundation and the National Sports Council were able to conclude that their junior development program was producing the world's best players in their age groups. "This partnership has been instrumental in bringing SRAM to its most successful period," said SRAM's past president, Datuk Sani.

By the end of 2011, Malaysian junior players dominated the Asian junior squash rankings, topping six out of 10 age groups, and 600 juniors took part in the CIMB Junior Squash Development Program. Four squash players were also selected to receive scholarships provided by CIMB Foundation, which also renewed its Rakan Sukan squash sponsorship for 2012.

From 2012 to 2014, SRAM athletes continued their dominance, winning titles and medals at several major international events such as the Hong Kong Junior Open, British Junior Open, Japan Junior Open, Indian Junior Open, Asian Junior Individual Championships, Asian Youth Games, and Asian Games. By 2015, squash was the source of more medals for Malaysia than any other sport.

Over the years, all the effort that SRAM put into its junior development program continued to pay increasing dividends – from helping players reach their athletic potential to instilling positive values, such as integrity and showing respect for others on and off the court. These are embodied by the emblem of the sport's success in Malaysia – Nicol David.

A STAR IS BORN

For a coach, Nicol is a dream come true.

— Liz Irving

Somewhat hidden from view, the Penang squash court sits on top of a hill in an area known as Bukit Dambar. In 1986, five squash enthusiasts decided to incorporate a company called Squash Development Sdn Bhd to lease land from the Penang Water Supply Corporation (PBA) and build an eight-court

complex. It was then known as the Bukit Dambar Squash Center.

With sponsorship from Permanis Bhd, it was later called the Pepsi Squash Center. Permanis Bhd, which started its operations in 1973, is a manufacturer and distributor of some of PepsiCo's global brands, such as Pepsi, Revive Isotonic, 7UP and Gatorade. In 1999, the center was upgraded by PBA to host the 2000 Malaysian Games (SUKMA), a national multi-sport tournament in Malaysia held annually. It was then further upgraded to international standards to host the World Junior Women Squash Championship and also the SEA Games in 2001.

Not long after the Bukit Dambar Squash Center opened, a young girl, about 4 ½ years old, went there to watch her sisters train. But she could not stop running around the court. The sisters' distracted coach wanted to contain her in one place, and so she was placed in one of the courts and given a racquet and a ball. She started slamming it against a wall, back and forth, time and again. "I didn't stop because I wanted to make sure I hit the ball as many times as possible against the wall," David recalled. At home and back at the center, she kept trying to break her record. "There were black stains on the wall; my mom and my dad had to put up with my antics."

David began training regularly at the center. Her sisters were always present, happy to be on the court with her, even though at that point she was not at their skill level. But David had a secret plan – to beat them. So she kept training to get to their level. "All youngest sisters or the youngest in the family have that drive to push harder, to be better than their siblings," she said.

Her competitive drive and developing talent were spotted by the David sisters' first coach, Ms Ee Phoeh Hoon, who was instrumental in grooming a group of Penang players who are now running the Squash Academy of Penang, formed in 2003. Ms Ee, a humble and patient coach, never put excessive pressure on the sisters, but encouraged them instead to stay close, enjoy the sport and learn how to be teammates, regardless of their skill level. "Ms Ee

was really a great mentor to us,” David said. “She taught us a lot about how to grow up.”

As David’s squash skills continued to grow, Ms Ee encouraged her to set goals and to visualize winning techniques. At the beginning of each season, David began writing down her goals, short-term and long. She started “seeing” matches – and how to win them. “It’s not easy, but if you do it over the years, it gets easier,” she said.

At age 8, while training at the Bukit Dambar Squash Center, she was spotted by Ms Ee, who led her to represent her home state, Penang, in the 1992 Milo-Dunlop Sport National Junior Interstate Championship. She won the silver medal – her first national recognition. Two years later, she won her first international titles – the Scottish Junior Open Under 12 and the Hong Kong Under 13 tournaments. In 1999, at the age of 15, she became the youngest player to win a World Junior Championship. She would win her second title in 2001.

In 2003, David moved to Amsterdam to train under Liz Irving, an Australian once ranked No. 2 in the world. Under Irving, David had to start from zero and re-fashion her technique. “Liz basically transformed my squash game to a whole different level,” she said.

Irving immediately realized how quick David was on the court, but concluded that she could not continue relying so much on her speed – “she did too much running around.” So Irving went back to basics and began working on David’s footwork, technique, and tactics. Under Irving, David went on to break every possible record in squash – 79 titles (including eight world and five British Open crowns), two Commonwealth Games golds, three-time World Games gold medalist, and a stunning nine-year run as the uninterrupted world top-ranked player. No player in the professional era of squash, man or woman, has dominated the world’s squash rankings the way David has.

Today, the same squash building still sits on the hilltop. Except now it is named after her – the Nicol David International Squash Center. On August 5, 2010, Penang Chief Minister YAB Lim

Guan Eng renamed the center in honor of Malaysia’s reigning squash queen. “It is here, right here, that she first played, she first trained and she first won,” he said.

On July 1, 2015, Nicol David celebrated her remarkable 108th consecutive month atop the world rankings, but as a player she never took much time to think about success. It was more on improving herself. “Only when I take a bit of time off to reflect do I come to terms with it,” she said.

COACHING STRUCTURE

SRAM’s efforts to build and maintain an enduring local, regional, and national elite coaching structure have set Malaysian squash apart from that of most other nations.

Currently, the coaching structure is split into two – the National Squash Center in Bukit Jalil and the rest of the states. At state level, SRAM’s affiliates run their own training programs, led by a head coach assisted by one or two foreign coaches and part-time coaches.

At the national center, the coaching department was led until June 2015 by Allan Soyza, who had been involved with SRAM since 1992 as a player, coach, and official. From 1998 to 2009, he ran the Squash Academy of Penang. In 2009, he was appointed the national men’s coach.

When Soyza became SRAM’s director of coaching in 2012, the coaches’ contracts were categorized according to the three types of players they coached – “elite”, “transitional” and “developmental.” He decided to change the system to incorporate a more personalized approach that allowed players to choose their coaches by matching their characteristics to their own. “It’s not just a marriage of convenience; more importantly, they must complement each other,” said Soyza.

Over three years, Soyza said, the new system brought about a positive change in the working relationship between coaches and athletes. Soyza said that previously the coaches were too comfortable with an approach that banked too much on one or two players. It imposed no accountability to devel-

op the entire squad and help players to understand the level of professionalism required by the sport.

Over the last ten years, the national coaching structure has evolved and come full circle. Today, it has returned to the old three-tier structure. The “elite” players are trained by Peter Genever, a former Professional Squash Association (PSA) Tour player from England who joined SRAM in 2013 as the Men’s/Women’s Head National Coach. Genever works with Mika Monto, former national coach for Finland, who was hired by SRAM in 2014 to also train the national elite squad.

The “transitional” players (second-tier) are top juniors and those transitioning into senior players. They are trained by Andrew Cross, who hails from Leeds, England. Cross has been with SRAM since 2007. Under his direction, Malaysia has been a dominant force in Asia, winning five of the eight titles at the 2013 Asian Junior Championships and four in 2014. He also helped Malaysia sweep three of the four gold medals at the 2013 Asian Youth Games in Nanjing, China.

The “developmental” players are athletes from the Bukit Jalil Sports School, who enter the training program at the age of 13. They are trained by local coaches, Raymond Arnold and Shahril Shahidan, who work together with Ken Flynn from England. Both Arnold and Shahidan were former national squash players while Flynn was a squash director in Amsterdam and Montreal for more than 17 years. Together, they run training program that feeds players to “transitional” squad, which in turn, feeds into the national “elite” team.

A HARD OLYMPIC ROAD

The Olympics don’t need squash, but squash needs the Olympics.

— Allan Soyza

On May 23, 2009, in addition to squash enthusiasts in other countries, squash centers, clubs, colleges, universities, schools, the Armed Forces Squash Centers, and the Police Squash Clubs from more than 53 venues in 14 states in Malaysia came together to support a bid – “Squash for



Malay traditional dancers welcome competitors to 2015 Asian Junior Championship.

2016” – to have squash included as a sport in the 2016 Olympic Games in Brazil. But squash lost out to rugby and golf.

It wasn’t the first time members of the world squash fraternity had their hearts broken. Four years earlier, they had lost a bid for the 2012 Olympic Games because they could not muster the two-thirds majority vote required by the International Olympic Committee. But the biggest heartbreak came in 2013 when the squash world’s third and most ambitious bid attempt also ended in failure. Squash finished last, behind wrestling and baseball/softball for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games.

The decision sparked much resentment for the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in the squash community. Alison Waters, a squash professional from England, expressed the view of many when she said in a blog post that squash was not just competing against other sports, but IOC as well. Allan Soyza, March 2015, had a different view. He said the squash world should instead concentrate on strengthening its standing in the sports world. “The focus should be on squash itself rather than convincing an uninterested partner,” he said.

The resentment and frustration were understandable, particularly in Malaysia. SRAM, its players and their supporters had pushed hard for the Olympic Games three separate times. Nicol David helped organize pro-squash flash mobs in Kuala Lumpur and New York, and won support from tennis legend Roger Federer. “They run a great tour and they have great players and characters,” he told *Squash Player* magazine in 2013.

The CIMB Group funded the bid group’s presentation in St. Petersburg, Russia, in May 2013. Dato’ Seri Nazir Razak, Group Chief Executive of CIMB Group, believed that a successful bid would lift the status of the sport worldwide. “It would help professional squash players tremendously,” he said during an event to announce CIMB’s sponsorship for World Squash Federation’s bid group’s presentation to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Executive Board.

Squash’s viability as an Olympic sport has always been a matter of much debate, Soyza said. For one thing, despite even the success of someone such as Nicol David, squash has a very small following in Malaysia. A telecast of a squash event featuring David attracted only 20,000 viewers (including repeats), compared to a local football telecast, which often draws 100,000 viewers. Soyza also noted that the official “Back the Bid” video received 175,000 online hits compared to videos of Malaysian badminton team training, which once drew 150,000 hits.

Despite the Olympic snub, David believes the three efforts raised the sport’s profile, and proved it deserved Olympic consideration the next time around. Playing in the Olympics would be the pinnacle of any squash player’s career. “I’ll play in 2020, even if I have to use a walking stick,” David said, prior to news about the latest rejection.

LESSONS AND CHALLENGES

SRAM’s 41-year story contains several lessons. First, it’s one thing to think big, but it’s another to pull it off. To push Malaysia to the top of the squash world, SRAM had to at least match what its counterparts in Egypt, Europe, Pakistan, and Hong Kong were doing. That required SRAM to take squash from what was basically a pastime for a few elite and grow it into a sport played by Malaysians on international stages. It was a long journey.

SRAM got there by multiple ways, and learning how to navigate funding and sponsorship setbacks and opportunities was one of them. Raising money enabled SRAM to raise everything else – the quality of players of course, particularly through its junior development programs, but also of coaching, facilities, and staging tournaments.

Second, SRAM’s leaders committed themselves to one fundamental truth – no pain, no gain. When CIMB decided to fund squash, the decision had a lot to do with the blood, sweat, and tears of SRAM’s coaches and the players. CIMB wanted to be associated with a winning organization and a player such as David. “Having a successful icon is very import-

ant and she has been key to this whole thing,” said the chairman of CIMB Group, Dato’ Seri Nazir.

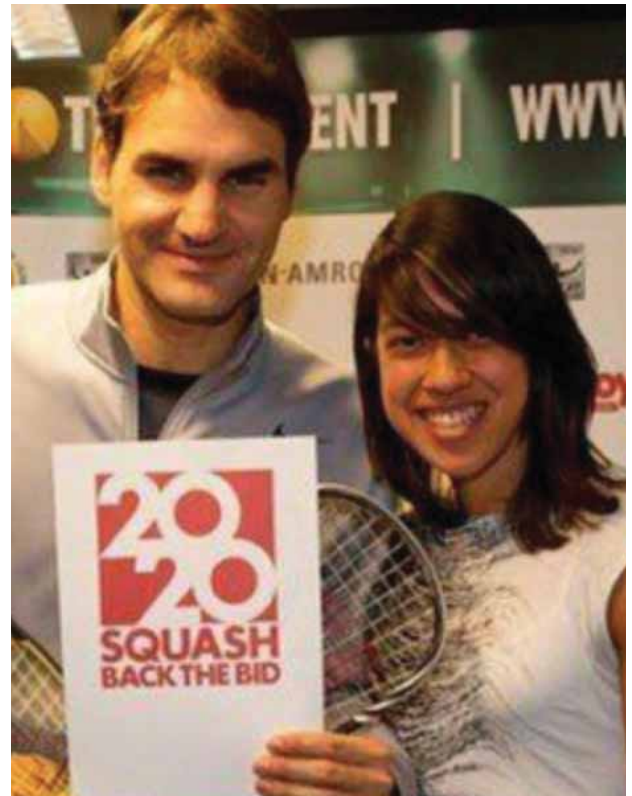
SRAM’s challenges include a familiar one – finding and holding onto funding. The government continues to support SRAM, but other funding and even government funding are never guaranteed because it can turn on issues beyond SRAM’s control – changes in corporate and government strategies, for instance. Again, it’s no guarantee, but SRAM may shield itself from strategic policy changes by continuing to produce top players who put Malaysia in the sporting world spotlight. The current world rankings of the Professional Squash Association show tough competition for that spotlight: half of the world’s top men and women squash players are Egyptian.

Top players in any country also yield another benefit – younger players who want to emulate them. That benefit, however, is tied to another challenge in Malaysia. Even if SRAM’s programs continue to produce quality talent, will enough Malaysians get past the idea that squash is still a sport mainly for the elite? The evidence, in terms of audience appeal, is that football has a much bigger fan base.

Nicol David and everyone like her in Malaysia who fought hard but unsuccessfully to win Olympic status for squash well know the challenges of competing with other sports for recognition.

David, after more than eight years atop the world rankings, finally dropped to No. 2 in September 2015. Now in her 30s, David could be peaking soon. Can SRAM produce more Nicol Davids? Is that even possible, given what she achieved? So SRAM has to prove that it isn’t about this one unique competitor, but instead the consistent production of multiple world-class players.

David’s fondest memory of her years with SRAM is also one of her earliest. She remembers the group of players that SRAM formed in the very beginning. They came from different states for the junior circuit. SRAM kept them all in one place – three different age groups in one dormitory room in Bukit Jalil – because of limited funds. It led to



Tennis superstar Roger Federer joins Malaysia squash superstar Nicol to back bid to include squash in 2020 Olympics.

genuine camaraderie and team spirit. “SRAM was making the most out of limited resources, but they impacted a lot of us,” David said.

Another memory was formed many years later. It happened one day in December of 2014. The setting was the dramatic climax to her match at the Wadi Degla club in Cairo. The stakes were high – whether she would win and hold on to her No. 1 ranking for the eighth consecutive time. “I was struggling to find my rhythm. I wasn’t playing my game the way I wanted,” she recalled.

She began to find her rhythm by the second game, and by the fifth, David was back in control. After sixty-six minutes of intense battle and a stirring comeback, she closed out the match, winning the decider, 11-5.

For the time being at least, Malaysian squash, on behalf of Nicol David, was still No. 1. 🌍

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QUANTITATIVE INDICATORS

Financial

Planned budget or income versus actual expenditure for the fiscal year*	Income: RM 3.925 million (US\$ 1.121 million) Expenditure: RM3.671 million (US\$ 1.049 million)
Income composition by source: individuals, corporations, events, trusts, other (please specify)	National Sports Council: 56% Olympic Council of Malaysia: 1% Sports Excel Circuit: 1% Trusts: 29% CIMB Foundation (18%) YR1M (11%) Events: 11% CIMB Malaysian Open Corporations: 1% Nusmetro Nasional Others: 1% Nestle Royal Lake Club
Income composition: domestic versus international	Domestic: 100%

Personnel

Staff retention rate	86 % (6) staff retained in 2014
Turnover rate	14 % (1) staff left in 2014
What is the board composition?	Management Committee Private/ Corporate Sector – 12 Executive Committee Private/ Corporate Sector – 6
How many meetings does the board hold per year?	Management Committee meetings – 6 Executive Committee meetings – 4-10
How many staff members are there?	7 (2014)
How many staff members have attended some non-profit or management training course?	4

Quantitative Indicators Continued

Organizational

Do you publish an annual report?	Yes
How many sites/locations do you currently operate in?	1 country: Malaysia 14 states: 14 affiliates
Do you measure results?	Yes Measurement indicators include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ranking on Asian Squash Federation ● Number of players at national and state level ● Number of programmes conducted ● Number of psychosocial activities. ● Number of states involved
What types of outreach?	Print, social media, TV, radio, road tours
Do you regularly meet with government representatives?	Yes
If yes, on a scale of 1-3 how close is the relationship with government? 1 = not close; 2 = somewhat close; 3 = very close	Closeness of relationship = 3

* Exchange rate, RM 3.499 = US\$ 1 as of December 2014. OANDA