



# ONG BENG HEE: MALAYSIA'S LOSS, CHINA'S GAIN

By Rajes Paul

Some people dream, others make those dreams come true. And former squash player Ong Beng Hee belongs in the latter group. Beng Hee's dream to have his own academy is now a reality. However, it's not in Kuala Lumpur. It is in Beijing, China.

This week, his Dream Squash Academy has opened for official training sessions. What makes it special is that the academy is open to players from all countries and will be a hub for the Asian squash community. Even players from Malaysia can go there to train.

You could hear the excitement in his voice as he marvelled at how fast everything unfolded. "An exciting journey awaits. The vision has become a reality," exclaimed the 44-year-old Beng Hee when I reached out to congratulate him.

It took just four months for the building to go up and finally, the spanking new courts at the sprawling vicinity are ready. They have been certified by the governing body, the World

Squash Federation (WSF).

It's the first big academy in China where squash is in its infancy. Unlike other racquet sports like badminton, table tennis and tennis, squash was not really big in China. But that has changed after squash was included as an Olympic Games sport, making its debut in Los Angeles in 2028. Cricket, flag football and lacrosse and squash were named as the new sports in October last year.

Just months later, the academy was off the ground. "Dream. Believe. Achieve," said two-time Asian Games champion Beng Hee. That, incidentally, is also the motto of the academy. The three short words tell the long arduous journey and an amazing story of a young talented and intelligent boy from Malaysia who dared to dream big and went on to make a difference. Beng Hee paved the way for Malaysian men in squash. In fact, he was ranked seventh in the professional circuit during his heyday, a position yet to be overtaken by all his successors. Being a person who dares to take a risk, he ventured out of

Malaysia in 2017 as the head coach of Qatar and also had a successful stint as the United States head coach from 2021-2024. All his struggles, highs and lows, and strong will power to prove his coaching credibility toughened him up and taken him where he is now.

Many others have ventured out to coach – like former badminton players Jeremy Gan, Tan Kim Her, Lee Wan Wah (Japan); Mohd Hafiz Hashim (India), Chin Eei Hui and Vountus Indra Mawan (Australia), Lim Pek Siah (Singapore) but Beng Hee probably is the first to set up a big scale academy in a country where the sport is slowly growing.

It's a huge gamble but one that I believe will strike a rich vein. The Chinese have a way of making anything really big. "The opportunity to start this academy arose after I met several enthusiastic parents seeking a better, more systematic training structure for their children," Beng Hee said.

"Together with dedicated parents, we founded this academy, with Beijing as our first centre. There are long-term plans to expand to other regions in China." I am happy that the boy we used to interview at the squash courts at Jalan Duta and Lakeview Club in Subang decades ago is building a career in China, but there's a tinge of regret as well.

How wonderful it would have been if Beng Hee had started a similar academy right here at home but like they say, the prophet is never recognised in his hometown. He did try to offer his services in Malaysia a few times but it's learnt that he was offered peanuts compared to foreign coaches here. That

did not weaken his resolve. Instead, it made him stronger.

Now, our loss is China's gain. And it could turn to pain if China win a medal – or even a gold – in squash at the Olympic Games. The cheerful Beng Hee, however, is not concerned about such rivalry. His main intention is to promote the sport he loves. That's why his academy is open for all – from beginner to elite, and from all nations. The academy is also set to open up job opportunities for players who retire one day. And we may see an exodus of more former Malaysian players.

Our wait to win a first gold medal in the Olympic Games continued at the recent outing in Paris, and top sporting bodies continued to blame one another after the Paralympics team fell short of their four-gold medal target by winning two. And one of Beng Hee's charges could deny us of a squash gold in LA. Yet, Beng Hee's achievement already feels like an Olympic Games gold-medal victory. Continue to dream big, Beng Hee. We are proud of you! ■

Rajes Paul is a writer for The Star under her column, Sports Box.

Source:  
The Star  
14.9.2024



Rajes Paul



Ong Beng Hee was the head coach of the US squash national team from 2021-2024