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COVER STORY

# Infinite Grace

Evanna Ramly



*Sarina aims to nurture her students and produce the first Malaysian Olympian in rhythmic gymnastics*

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Travel back to 1991, when renowned Malaysian gymnast Farrah-Hani Imran transfixed audiences at the Manila SEA Games with her spellbinding ribbon routine. That year, Farrah-Hani won gold and with it, the hearts and imagination of the entire nation – including that of Sarina Sundara Rajah, who witnessed the memorable event on television as a little girl.

“I told myself that I wanted to be just like her,” recalls the founder of Sarina’s Rhythmic Gymnastics Club (SRGC) and former national gymnast.

When her school, SMK Convent Sentul, offered lessons, Sarina jumped at the chance. “I was 12 when I started, which is considered very late.”

Thankfully, studying Indian classical dance for three years when she was younger had already prepared her for the athleticism of the sport. She trained for six months before taking a shot at her first competition.

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“My coach didn’t think I was ready so my friend and I participated without her knowledge,” she reveals. “I don’t remember how I actually performed that day!”

Later, she was discovered by a talent scout who was looking for athletes to compete in the 1998 Commonwealth Games. Sarina was selected out of 1,000 girls and underwent intensive training of six days a week.

At the time, the Bukit Jalil Sports School had yet to be completed. “We rented a few units at a nearby condominium and had a caretaker looking after us. Because we had to train together in a group, we all had to move to the same place. So we were always changing schools and even had our own bus driver sending us there.”

Sarina studied the techniques of her role models, Olympic medallists Alina Kabaeva of Russia and Anna Bessonova of Ukraine. Eventually, she went on to win gold medals at the 1998 Commonwealth Games as well as the 2001 SEA Games, where she also won a bronze medal.

When she was competing, her ambition was to be the first Malaysian rhythmic gymnast to qualify for the Olympics. Sadly, she was forced to retire early from the sport due to torn menisci, which led to double knee surgery in 2003.

Needless to say, she was heartbroken and it remains her greatest regret that she was unable to bounce back. Since then, she has dedicated her life to coaching the next generation of gymnasts – some as young as four – through SRGC, which was formed in 2003. She conducts lessons at SJKC Puay Chai, Petaling Jaya and currently has about 300 students.

Sarina reveals that SRGC was initiated with the vision of enriching lives while nurturing and developing young children’s skill and ability. She started with only two girls (both of whom have since left to further their studies) and the sole aim to offer the best rhythmic gymnastics programmes.

“I wanted to give back to society, I’m very passionate about the sport, and I love kids so it was a natural decision. My vision is to train the first Malaysian to qualify for the Olympics, a dream I was unable to pursue myself.”

With many years’ experience now under her belt, she says that the biggest lesson was learning how to deal with children as well as their parents. “Everyone is different, so it’s not easy,” she notes.

“Finding a permanent venue was my main challenge. Of course, teaching for the first time is very different from training. With kids, it takes some time and I must say that I’m very strict.”

Still as graceful as ever, she believes she is a stronger person because of sports and hopes to foster her budding athletes in the same way. “It has made me more disciplined and I overcome challenges with the confidence that I can do it. That’s what I want for my girls.”

The impact of her methods is evident. "When these girls come for training, they tell me that having me as their coach has helped them to set a goal for themselves. In school and at home, they are not taught to have a higher goal, so in gymnastics, I always push them to be better than they think they can be."

Some of her students have gone on to emerge victorious at international competitions, such as the prestigious Queens Cup in Hong Kong and the Shoin Cup in Osaka. One student she has her eye on is Eva Goh Hann Ning, 8, whose parents drive all the way from Johor every weekend for training. "She's been with me for over three years and is very hardworking. I can see the fire in her and hopefully she will be our first Olympic rhythmic gymnast."

Where giving back to the community is concerned, Sarina conducts programmes for underprivileged children who are passionate about gymnastics but lack the finances to pursue it. She also arranges excursions for them along with other members of the club. "Some of them train for hours every day so even simple trips for ice cream or bowling can be a lot of fun." Most recently, they enjoyed an outing to the sporting venues of SEA Games 2017, where Sarina hoped to inspire them the same way she was inspired all those years ago as a child sitting in front of the television.

"Growing up in a traditional family that wanted to see me become a lawyer, engineer or doctor, I didn't really have much support to pursue competitive gymnastics, which wasn't popular back then," she recalls. "I know what it means to expose these kids to the sport, to inspire and empower them to dream big. The process is arduous and challenging so I love being able to give them hope and guidance in a nurturing environment."

She hopes to open more branches, not just across Malaysia but also in Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan. "In Malaysia, gymnasts tend to drop out at 13 or 14 to focus on their studies. Other countries have a culture in which older girls continue to pursue gymnastics, as they should because this is the age when they peak and are better equipped to compete at international level. I want to cultivate that culture here."

Needless to say, watching her students grow in the sport is thoroughly rewarding. "When they first start lessons, they can't do very much. Grooming them takes years and patience. But when I finally see them compete, the feeling is truly fulfilling."

Apart from coaching, Sarina is also venturing into TV – she is producing *Twinkle & Twirl*, an upcoming reality TV show documenting the journey of aspiring gymnasts. Slated for broadcast on Astro in 2019, the show is currently being shot and follows a group of young girls between the ages of six and 14, all of whom are training and preparing for various competitions both locally and overseas.

She hopes to eventually see a change in Malaysian society where athletes are concerned. "A lot of people don't know what it takes to be a sportsperson so it's very easy for them to criticise," laments Sarina. "If the public could be just a little bit more supportive and cheer for them at sporting events, it would be great."

***This article first appeared in Focus Malaysia Issue 251.***

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