

With sporting events having grown exponentially in Singapore in the past decade, more companies are using the Republic as the launchpad for unique or large-scale sporting events which they plan to roll out in the Asian region. **CHEAH UI-HOON** reports

## Next, a sporting hub

**I**T PROJECT manager Lawrence Ang, 45, has a dilemma. His wardrobe is bursting at the seams with event singlets and T-shirts of the races he participates in. "I also try to limit the number of events I sign up for because the fees have also gone up!" laments the endurance runner. Like many runners out there, he's feeling the effects of being spoilt for choice when it comes to running events these days.

Just less than a decade ago, athletes like Mr Ang wouldn't have been able to pick and choose their races with such ease; those days, the Standard Chartered Singapore Marathon was the longest race in town. But with runs of various distances held practically every month these days, distances have also gotten as long as 84km and 100km, all with phenomenal rates of participation.

It's not just endurance running that's caught on, but sporting activity of many kinds - including more unusual ones like recreational boxing - and all this is quickly making Singapore a high-octane sporting hub.

Has sports turned the corner to become a viable industry? It would seem so, with several sports events companies basing their operations in Singapore, citing the potential in the market here and beyond.

"Compared to the last 5-6 years, there's been a shift in the interest level in sports," says Ian Mullane, who quit as chief operating officer of an S&P top 500 software company to start up his own sports events company last year.

### Greater awareness

The Singapore Sports Council should take credit for this shift upwards, he thinks, but the explosion of events in the scene is also because there's a greater awareness in the public and in the marketplace, says the founder of Vanda Promotions.

"There are adequate facilities and good marketing channels, so there's opportunity to reach out to an audience," he notes, adding that that's key to a viable business. Last year, a White Collar Boxing event drew a more than 4,000-strong audience to a black-tie event who paid \$275 a pop to watch banking-and-finance industry executives face down each other in the boxing ring.

In fact, despite the economic uncertainty earlier this year, Mr Mullane managed to sell out tickets for its April event in six days, with more sponsors than necessary whom he had to refer to a later event. The linkage between so many sporting events is that as participation in a particular sport increases, it also generates interest or participation in other sports, he reckons. "There's a crossover now... there are triathletes who are interested in boxing, as well as rugby players," he cites as examples.

If Singapore is moving towards a service and hospitality-oriented economy, then sporting events will always be a key component, he says, because it's part of discretionary spending, citing his dinner-cum-White Collar Boxing events as an example. As a result of that, there is the need for variety. "Certainly, a decade ago, the choices were a lot more limited," he says. The F1 night race here, and big-name teams like Liverpool coming to Singapore to play are "branded" spectator sports which are giving Singapore a positive image. "The quality of events is getting better as well," Mr Mullane says.

Spectrum Worldwide might have started in Australia more than 15 years ago, but it's now shifted its office to Singapore - and it is professional sports events organising companies like this which are broadening the base of events here. The company is now developing proprietary events for Singapore which can be rolled out in the Asian region, says managing director Chris Robb.

Since opening an office here to organise the JPMorgan Chase Corporate Challenge seven years ago, Spectrum Worldwide has focused on growing its portfolio of events by providing turnkey solutions from planning and marketing to the organising of sporting events. It came up with the Anlene Orchard Mile, for example, and then the inaugural OCBC Cycle Singapore event last year. They recently won the master tender to organise this year's Standard Chartered Singapore Marathon as well.

"We look at OCBC Cycle - which was a massive success in its first year - as a property that grows as opposed to just managing contracts," explains Mr Robb, about the value of the company's self-generated events. He adds that, already, he's had a major Indian TV network contact him to do something similar there.

He says it's amazing how Singaporeans enthusiastically embrace sporting events - like the Standard Chartered Singapore Marathon that went from hundreds to 50,000 in the last 6-7 years. The same with the JPMorgan Chase Corporate Challenge, for which numbers have had to be limited because of the capacity of the route.

### Still growing

Elaine Tay, who's organising the North Face 100 Ultra Trail run this year, attests to the phenomenal response from Singaporeans. She's seeing up to 1,000 participants this year, compared to 300 the year before.

Despite these numbers, those in the industry still believe the market hasn't reached its peak potential yet. "I believe that the market is still growing," says Jonathan Fong, lab director of Racers' Toolbox Pte Ltd, which educates people on how the body works and how they can effectively programme it to achieve their own personal goals.

"In fact, we feel that there could be more events. Ideally, we would want to have a few events running every week, which would then prevent overcrowding at races in general," he says. This would also allow people to pick and choose the events they want to do without having to stress out about how to fit it into their training programme, or if it suits the preparation for their main event.

With growth like this happening on homeground, companies are using Singapore as a launchpad as well to roll out their programmes in the region - "especially when you consider that a lot of companies have their headquarters here," says Mr Robb. All this points to the ability of companies like Spectrum Worldwide to create a regional footprint through sports.

But why would companies choose to sponsor sports? Because these events provide an "experience," says Mr Robb. "It's different from a print ad, and the company can also hold fringe activities leading up to the event. And



**Rising sporting fever:** (Clockwise from above) The popular JP Morgan Chase Corporate Challenge has had to limit numbers because of the capacity of the route. The inaugural OCBC Cycle Singapore last year was a huge success too. Vanda Promotions staged the world's biggest White Collar Boxing event in Singapore.



**Something for everyone:** Mr Robb (above, left) says companies choose to sponsor events because they provide an "experience". Mr Mullane (right) looks for a "property" which can be replicated in other countries.

the billion-dollar mark after Singapore successfully hosted the inaugural Formula 1 SingTel Singapore Grand Prix last September.

The government is currently looking to the industry to contribute \$2 billion to Singapore's gross domestic product (GDP) by 2015 and bring employment in the sector to 20,000, up from the current 14,000, according to its January newsletter.

What are foreign numbers like? An event like the Aviva Ironman 70.3 Singapore Triathlon, organised by local company HiVelocity, could find foreign athletes making up more than half of the participants. For its inaugural race, for example, up to 56 per cent of the field were international and were each accompanied, on average, by 3.1 supporters - 71 per cent of whom stayed in Singapore for at least four nights.

And a major-league endurance race like North Face 100 Ultra Trail run also gets its fair share of foreign participants, says organiser Ms Tay. "We expect more than 30 per cent foreign participation this time around. And since we're doing the 100km solo trail run for the first time, it's by invitation only, for elite athletes," she explains.

If the popularity of such races continues to grow, athletes like Mr Ang may soon find themselves having to hit qualifying times to enter some of the top events. Well, that will only make that race shirt all the more desirable.

then there's the opportunity to get staff involved, do some corporate social responsibility events as well. Money alone can't buy the experience," he adds.

And there's still lots more room to expose Singapore's athletes until they become as recognisable as celebrity actors, for example, he points out. So he sees more upside to the industry now even though the sports events organising scene is hotting up with more companies vying to organise events.

Ultimately, organising sporting events is also about the balance sheet, believes Mr Mullane, who thinks he has an advantage because he's dispassionate about the sport of

boxing itself. "When I think of an event, I'll ask if there'll be participation, if the infrastructure is sufficient, and whether it's a 'property' which can be replicated in other countries," he says. Organisers call it a "property" because of the investment put into it, such as copyright, securing venues and so on. Any event has to be a sustainable, recurring one, he adds. He thinks that the multiplier effect will come when the concentration of events will bring more foreign spectators in, like what the F1 is able to do.

According to a report by the Singapore Tourism Board on sports tourism, the sports industry was tipped to cross

## Smart way to get 'em sailing young

By **CHEAH UI-HOON**

**BESIDES** the private sector, public bodies are also seeing commercial potential in sporting activities. SailSmart, a programme which introduces sailing to young children, could well be the poster programme for local sports entrepreneurship among public institutions.

The Singapore Sailing Federation took about two years to design its SailSmart programme for children between the ages of seven and 12, but the groundwork is well worth it once it franchises it to other sailing clubs in Singapore and in the region.

"There's definitely a lot of interest in it, and we hope that it'll eventually become a programme that will bring income to the federation as well as build the pipeline of young talent in the sport," says federation president Low Teo Ping.

How the federation set apart its SailSmart programme from other more technical sailing courses was to inject an education component into it. "We wanted to reach beyond parents who were already interested in the sport, or who already wanted their children to learn to sail to gain some extracurricular points," he explains.

So by having educational components



**Sun, sea, sand, fun:** SailSmart is a four-day course of interactive and hands-on activities

in there like understanding water safety, how to read the weather and the tides, and the physics of how sail boats work, the federation hopes to hook parents who want their children to gain extra knowledge. "This widens our potential market," says Mr Low. "We changed tack - to use sailing parlance - to offer something beyond technical sailing courses."

To change tack, of course, is to shift the sails according to the wind direction.

Since the launch of the programme late last year, SailSmart has gotten quite a fair amount of interest from schools. SailSmart is a four-day course of interactive and hands-on activities, and the federation spent over \$200,000 to draw up the necessary collaterals and purchase equipment, as well as hire staff. The course is conducted at the National Sailing Centre in a dedicated space, and each participant pays about \$300 to attend the programme.

What else sets this apart from other programmes is that it has a business-minded approach. "There's already interest shown in Korea and Japan, and we plan to expand it as a franchise. That in turn will be a revenue stream for us, and we can help improve the facilities and training programmes for our sailors," says Mr Low. The federation aims to train 5,000 children in the next two years, while maintaining the ratio of one instructor for every five students.

"Students who develop an interest in sailing after the course can go on to the Optimist Sailing Scheme," he says, talking of the pyramid structure that the federation is building.

The federation's success in coming up with a business idea like this could well be due to how it's run, Mr Low says, pointing out it is the only sports body that has ISO9001 certification. And with the federation's members having garnered 10 world titles since 2005, Mr Low is keen to make sure that sailing remains one of the top sports here - by streamlining the talent in when they're young.

To find out more about the SailSmart programme and how to sign up, please go to [www.sailsmart.sg](http://www.sailsmart.sg)

