

Spirit of a Battler

N.S.T. 25/06/03 MISC 8

KUALA LUMPUR: A man with a mission and an indomitable spirit — that is Datuk Zakaria Musa.

In the prime of his life he became paralysed from the waist down. But not one to wallow in misery, he pulled himself up through sheer grit and good old-fashioned hard work with the help of people who cared about him. And he has achieved what many only dream about.

He represented Malaysia in the 2004

Athens Paralympics — the first Malaysian, able or disabled, to compete at Olympic level in tennis.

Zakaria, who is also the president of the Wheelchair Tennis Malaysia (WTM), is married to Zabedah Abbas and has twin daughters.

At WTM, he has many roles, including player, coach, manager, mentor and president.

He was born in 1950 in Negri Sembilan, the third of seven brothers and sisters. The son of a policeman, he is an accountant by profession in Kuala Lumpur.

Q&A

Datuk Zakaria Musa

Q: Where were you educated?

A: After completing my schooling at Sekolah Rendah Seri Rembau and at Clifford School in Kuala Kangsar, I went on to do a diploma in accountancy at Universiti Technology Mara (UiTM (then called Mara Institute of Technology)). I furthered my studies in the United Kingdom and then Australia.

Q: How did you become paralysed?

A: In 1992 doctors suspected I had a tumour in my back and recommended an operation. They found I had no tumour, but the operation left me paralysed.

Q: Did you find it difficult to accept your condition?

A: In the first year, I felt very down. But with the help of my wife and children who encouraged and motivated me, I came to realise life had to go on. I slowly learned to adjust to my condition. I took it as a challenge to live life to the fullest. I did physiotherapy at home and at the hospital and my family helped me to exercise.

In 1996, I started playing wheelchair tennis. And today, after all the exercise, physiotherapy and wheelchair tennis, I can raise my legs and even stand up. I cannot walk unaided, but with the help of a walking frame I can walk slowly! I believe that with God's will, I will walk again.

Q: What are the achievements of your life?

A: I represented Malaysia in tennis in the Athens 2004 Paralympics. I also clinched the Best Sportsmanship award in the World Team Cup event in England. I set up WTM in 1998 and helped establish wheelchair tennis associations in other states too.

Q: Where did you get the idea to set up the organisation?

A: From the International Tennis Federation. Its manager Ellen de Lange came to the National Tennis Centre in 1996 to introduce wheelchair tennis. She gave me the inspiration and motivation to be a world class player, and also to develop wheelchair tennis in Malaysia.

Q: Who would be your mentor?

A: Professor Datuk Dr Zaliha Omar took care of me, treated me post-operation, introduced me to wheelchair tennis and was my mentor.

I'm also indebted to Ellen de Lange. She said she could see the potential for me to be a world class player and believed I could achieve it in a year. And I did it by bagging the singles and doubles championship at the Hiroshima Peace Cup event in 1997, becoming the first Malaysian to do so.

Q: What are the countries you have played wheelchair tennis in?

A: I have travelled all over the world to play wheelchair tennis. I have been to Japan, UK, Belgium, France, Switzerland, the United States, Spain, Korea, Taiwan, Australia, Brazil, Argentina and many more.

Q: What have you learnt from your travels?

A: These countries have a remarkable awareness of the needs of the disabled. They give tremendous social support and enable the disabled to take part in sports and games. There are good facilities and accessibility to sports centres, shopping complexes, transport or public places. Even the media coverage of disabled sports is noteworthy. There is good support for games and activities organised by the disabled from sponsors, the public, companies and others.

Q: What would you like to give to others?

A: I want to be a role model for the young, especially the disabled. Having gone through hardship, I want to share my knowledge and experience with them.

I want to produce more young wheelchair tennis players by training them in a systematic way. I wish to give back to the country by developing wheelchair tennis and coaching, managing and promoting the game. I hope to motivate more people to take up tennis and put Malaysia on the map.



Datuk Zakaria Musa says he wants to motivate the youth in Malaysia especially the disabled to take up sports.

Q: What do you hold most dear in life?

A: Family, tennis, friends and my career.

Q: Do you feel your disability has been a stumbling block?

A: No. Actually, we are not disabled. We use wheelchairs but we are equal to physically able people when given the opportunities. We are capable of organising events, working, participating in sporting activities and promoting games. The only thing is, it needs extra effort from us.

Q: What's your advice to those with disabilities?

A: Lead an active, healthy lifestyle. Whatever you do, do your best and try to go beyond the limit of your ability. For instance, if my coach says practice tennis for two hours, I go for four. That's what helped me to qualify for the Paralympics. If you want to be the best, don't stop with ordinary things, but strive for extraordinary things. You have to walk the extra mile.

Don't feel disabled or inadequate. You must develop a strong will power. Don't have an inferiority complex. Make the best of your life and above all, enjoy life. Join societies and sports clubs. There are 29 sports for the disabled like track and field, swimming, archery, etc.

Q: How do you think society and the authorities can help the disabled?

A: I found people overseas, espe-

cially the Japanese are very concerned about the disabled. We don't want to be pampered but we would like people to come forward wholeheartedly to provide facilities and assist us in whatever way possible. We just need the opportunities.

Accessibility to sports centres, disabled-friendly stadiums, funding for development of sports, local and overseas tournaments for the disabled can all boost sports.

Companies should offer jobs according to the ability of disabled people, just like Carrefour did recently. There are many disabled people who are lawyers, computer specialists, accountants, management experts and others.

Q: How do you unwind and relax?

A: For me, relaxing means not having problems or worries. If I have a problem, I write it down to get it off my chest. I have a PDA, organiser and laptop to input my thoughts. There is always a solution for every problem. I think positive all the way and this helps me to relax.

My favourite place to relax is Mid Valley Megamall where I go with my family to window shop, see movies and whatever else. I listen to music too.

Q: What kind of music do you like?

A: I like light music, country and western, sentimental songs, slow rock, reggae and listen to singers like Tom Jones, Kenny Rogers, Englebert Humperdink, Jim Reeves, Bob Marley and the like.