



FUEL FOR SPORT

Watsons Water is a star performer when it comes to providing a sporting chance for Hong Kong's athletes.

By Tim Metcalfe



It's no walk in the park being a top athlete. Even if you have natural talent to take on the best, competing at either national or international level not only requires time, effort and dedication but a significant amount of funding.

Entering events usually costs a fee. Travelling to competitions and finding somewhere to stay is also pricey. On top is the expense of equipment and gear – not to mention special diet supplements.

Then, of course, there is all that time devoted to training, at the cost of earning a living. Sport may be the road to riches for those at the very top, but most other athletes have to scrape by on the breadline.

In Hong Kong, even those athletes who do reach the highest levels struggle to make a living. Take 27-year-old Daniel Lee Chi Wo, for example. A gifted triathlete, Lee represented Hong Kong at the Athens Olympics.

Although he finished 43rd out of 50

contenders over the gruelling 1.5km swim, 40km cycle ride and 10km run, the fact that Hong Kong boasted even a qualifier for the event was a triumph. After all, Hong Kong has only one Olympic gold medal to its name – courtesy of brilliant windsurfer “San San”.

And Lee isn't giving up yet. “I didn't do as well as I hoped in Athens, but it was a fantastic experience and amazing atmosphere,” he says. “I learned a lot which should help me over the next two years, competing in the All China Games in 2005 and the Asian Games in 2006.”

The cost of staying fit and preparing for big events is substantial. “It's really a full-time job without any pay,” says Lee. “Diet supplements for my training alone cost me over HK\$1,000 a month. Without sponsorship, I doubt whether I could have reached international level in my triathlon career.”

Lee is one of the lucky few Hong Kong athletes who have been able to focus on reaching the highest competitive level –

and it's thanks in large part to sponsorship received from Watsons Water.

“It's a tough decision to become a serious athlete in Hong Kong where sports culture is still thin,” says Marina Tsui, Sports Development Manager at the A.S. Watson Group (ASW), who administers Watsons Athletic Club (WAC). Since its establishment in 1989, the club has been a major sponsor of local Hong Kong athletes, funding training camps and events for all, both at the elite and junior level.

The club started from humble origins, supporting just 30 athletes. But it has thrived and now grown into the biggest athletics sponsor in Hong Kong with more than 500 members, including a stable of over 300 youth athletes under its wing.

“It is a way for us as a company to put something back into the community,” says Tsui. “Of course, it also helps promote the pure, healthy image of Watsons Water.”

COMMUNITY

A fully fledged member of both the Hong Kong Amateur Athletic Association and the government's Community Sports Club, WAC has successfully nurtured a number of elite athletes to an impressively high level.

Besides Daniel Lee, brilliant WAC athletic stars include long-distance runner Maggie Chan Man Yee, 28, who holds the Hong Kong record for the women's 1,500m, 3,000m, 5,000m, mile, 10km, half-marathon and marathon. She qualified for this year's Athens Olympics, but unfortunately fractured her leg before the Games and was forced to withdraw.

Another club athlete, Tang Hon Sing who competed in the Sydney Olympics and is the Hong Kong Men's 110m Hurdles and 400m Hurdles record-holder, agrees that without the WAC sponsorship he would never have reached such dizzy heights.

Watsons adopted the talented athlete straight from school and he now finds time to train in tandem with an administrative post within the club – one of just five employees who run it.

“Hong Kong does not focus so much on sports, so it's difficult to compete and earn a living at the same time,” says Tang. “The club's support was vital to me.”

Over his eight-year career, Tang has repaid the WAC's faith in him by breaking Hong Kong's 110m hurdles record no fewer than seven times and was last year named “Star of the Stars” in the Hong Kong Amateur Athletic Association's “2003 Athlete of the Year” award.

Tang hopes to complete a decade of competition over the next two years at the Asian and all China Games. “I'm sure I can break my record again,” he says.

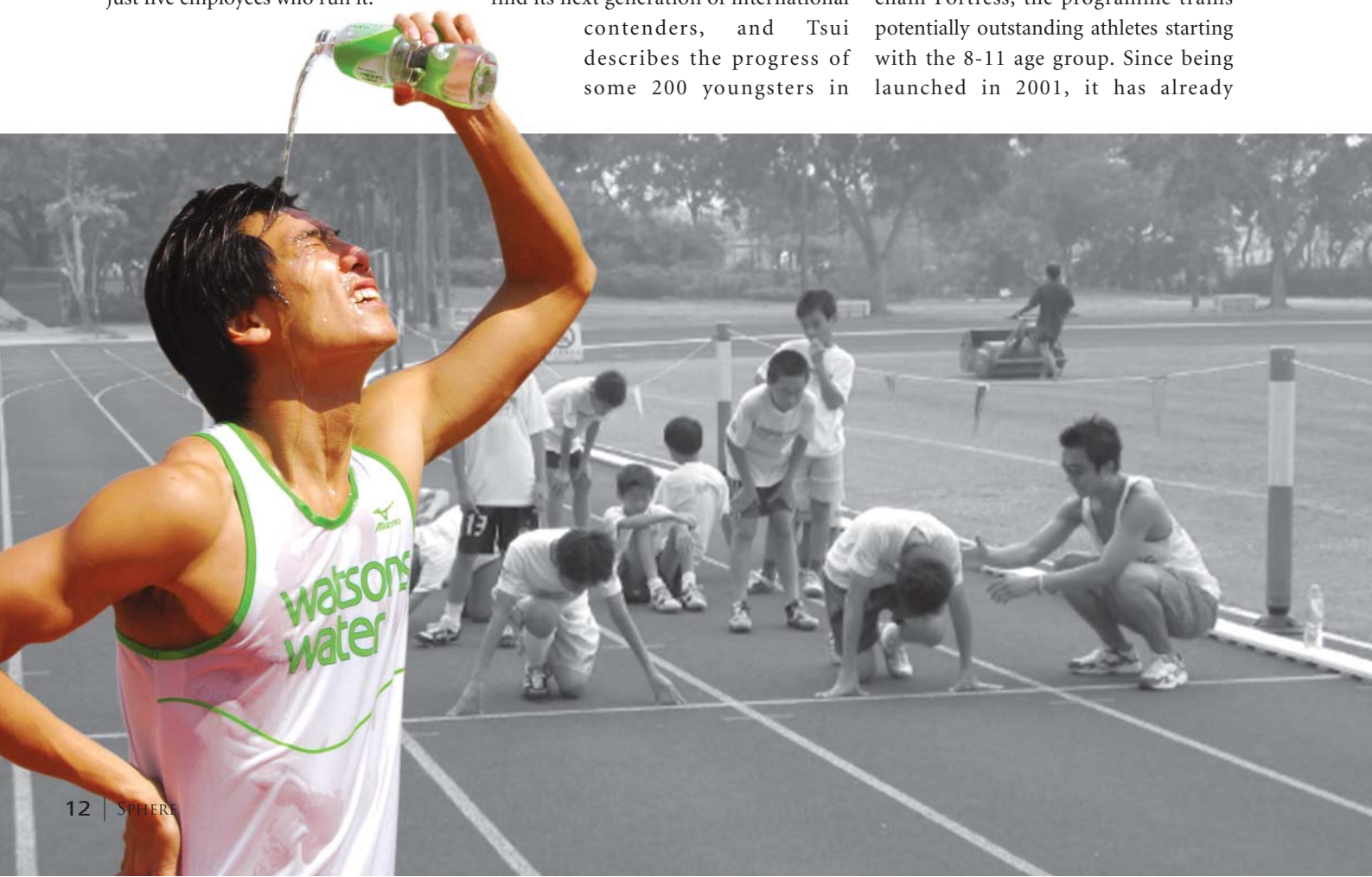
Other stars nurtured by the WAC have included Men's 400m and 800m record-holder Leung Tat Wai and Chang Yu Ho, record-holder in the Men's High Jump and Decathlon. The club has also found and trained more than 50 distinguished juniors identified from the All Hong Kong Inter-District Primary Schools Athletics Competitions.

From this Junior Elite Training Programme, the club now hopes to find its next generation of international contenders, and Tsui describes the progress of some 200 youngsters in



training as “a true highlight of A.S. Watson's sports initiative”.

Launched with supporting sponsorship from the group's supermarket arm PARKnSHOP and consumer-electronics chain Fortress, the programme trains potentially outstanding athletes starting with the 8-11 age group. Since being launched in 2001, it has already





produced more than 100 junior athletes who have set new Hong Kong records in junior age-group categories.

“The first intake is now in the 11-12 age group and setting records. It’s a great challenge and extremely rewarding,” says Tsui. “We hope some of them will be competing in the 2009 Asian Games. That is our five-year target.”

But she stresses that the programme is not all about winning. “We teach them a lot about sportsmanship as well,” she says. “They have to learn to act in a dignified way whether they win or lose. We also insist on them having the discipline to also concentrate on their studies. In fact, we regularly meet parents and monitor the academic performances and conduct of our youngsters.

“Our mission is to build character and promote the wellbeing of local youth through participation in sports, especially in track and field, while uplifting the standard of Hong Kong athletes through local and overseas training programmes and nurturing special talent in pursuit of sporting excellence.”

In the meantime, the WAC holds annual summer youth training

programmes, on the lookout for talents from the 12-18 year age group. It also organises track and field training sessions for primary and secondary school students during the summer months of July and August.

“It’s one of the largest and most prestigious summer athletic programmes in Hong Kong and has always been well received by schools and parents,” says Tsui. Over 900 children in the 12-19 age group attend every year, for just a nominal fee. Another programme specifically targets long-distance runners aged 13 and over.

Beyond training, the WAC further stages free athletic demonstrations at schools, especially on “sports days” when its accomplished athletes demonstrate proper skills for different events and share their experiences of top competitions.

“If we can arouse the interest of local youngsters to the world of sports so that they ultimately take up sports as a lifelong pursuit for physical and mental fitness, then it’s quite an achievement for us, one that is rare but very meaningful for a commercial company,” says Malina Ngai, General Manager,

Corporate Communications at the A.S. Watson Group.

And it’s not only in Hong Kong where ASW is giving a boost to local sports. “The Group encourages each country operation to identify the best way to contribute to local community sports,” Ngai adds. With operations in 20 countries and regions throughout Asia and Europe, this adds up to a lot of support for young athletes.

“You usually don’t need any special equipment or facilities to be an athlete,” says Ngai. “Really, you don’t even need designer label running shoes. You can run bare-foot. That’s the joy of athletics – it’s pure, just like Watsons Water.” 