

How Olympic medal hope Max Maeder was raised as a 'decision-maker' – who would choose Singapore 'over and over again'

Ahead of Paris 2024, CNA speaks to the loved ones of Team Singapore's athletes to find out what it takes to parent an Olympian.

SINGAPORE: A memory which Hwee Keng Maeder has kept closest to her heart is not what one might expect.

It's not the medals or the titles won by her son Maximilian, a world champion and now the top-ranked kitefoiler in the world; but the time he helped his younger brother Karl during a race.

"He (was) following him through the entire race and telling his brother exactly what he was doing, how he was doing and to give him tips," Hwee Keng told CNA.

"I didn't even know about it. It's not like he did it to tell me."

Related:

It was only when Karl spoke to his mother after, that she found out what had happened.

"I can't ask for more. He had this in mind, without me telling him," said Hwee Keng. "For me that's the hallmark of how he really cares."

"MINDSET LIKE ASTRONAUT"

Max's childhood was spent between his father Valentin's native Switzerland and his mother's Singapore where he was born, as well as the Indonesian island of Sulawesi where his parents built a dive resort.

And pretty much as soon as he could walk, Max was up and skiing and enjoying being active, recalled Valentin.

"He was exposed to many different sports," said his mother. "I brought him to ping-pong, tennis, badminton; we gave them a whole range."

Valentin described Max as having strong legs since he was small – at six months old, he once "hopped out like a frog" from a shopping cart.

What was also clear to Max's parents was that he had a "healthy ambition" to succeed.

As a four-year-old, after losing to some older competitors in a ski race, he was the first one to show up at training the next day.

"He didn't like to lose," added Hwee Keng.

When Max was six, Valentin introduced him to kiteboarding, and the youngster eventually progressed to kitefoiling.

Even when he was a child, Max had a "mindset like an astronaut", said his father, explaining that he would follow procedures in a meticulous and precise manner.

Today, he still does so - and even under pressure.

A DECISION-MAKER

Heading into the Olympic Games in August, Max, a back-to-back world champion and arguably the most in-form of the racing fleet, will undoubtedly be one of the medal favourites.

But never mind the weight of expectations: - the 17-year-old was brought up to be independent in his thinking.

"(He's) always encouraged to review (things) himself, to make sure he doesn't run away with any preconceived notions, that he doesn't just believe what others tell him without questioning it," said Valentin.

What they hoped to do was to raise a "decision-maker", said Max's father.

"If he is out there, an eight-year-old boy in 3m waves, he needs to make the right decision," Valentin added.

One choice Max had to make earlier in his life was whether to represent Switzerland or Singapore.

"Like with everything else, we presented options together with context, consequences, effects, what it means to make certain decisions," said his mother.

Max told CNA that as a child, it was "the feeling of home and the food" which drew him to Singapore.

His feelings for the country then "have only grown in terms of pride, in terms of how Singaporean I feel and in terms of patriotism for your nation".

Maximilian with his mother Hwee Keng. (Photo: Hwee Keng Maeder)

"I made the choice then and I would do it over and over again, no problem."

Max's parents also encouraged him, while not yet a teenager, to talk to others about National Service, which would be part and parcel of taking up Singapore citizenship.

He said he now views it as helping the nation in a small way, while growing from the experience.

"It can push you, it can help you, it can give you a new perspective, whatever that may be," said Max. "I think I would enjoy it, at least from what I heard.

He added that when he spoke about NS to fellow Singapore sailing youth team members, they joked that he would be a "wayang king" - a Singlish term for being good at putting up a show.

Max would have been due for NS enlistment in September. But on Saturday, Singapore's Defence Ministry [announced](#) that he'd been granted deferment up to August 2028, to train and compete at the Los Angeles Olympics that year.

The ministry noted that "deferment may be granted to exceptional sportsmen who are assessed to be potential medal winners for Singapore at top-tier international competitions such as the Olympic Games".

BRINGING OTHERS ALONG

That Max was serious about making a big splash has been known - to the world - since he was just 11 years old.

At a beach in Mexico, the youngest competitor at the 2018 Hydrofoil Pro Tour was asked about his long-term goals within the sport.

The answer was simple: "World champion."

Valentin told his son, however, that he was not going to be world champion by "sitting in the classroom most of the time".

"You need to be out there in the waves and the wind, competing against the top guys," said the father. "That means you will have to learn by yourself because I am not going to finance a beach bum."

He asked Max to be "at the level that others have in the first semester of university, by the age of maybe 13, 14".

Max was homeschooled, but not as it's usually seen in the Singaporean context.

It would be more accurate to say that he learned from home, with the "education built flexibly around his ambitions", as described by Valentin.

There were two sides to his learning, said his mother. One was the more "mundane" aspect of doing exercises, solving problems and various drills but there was also a practical element of asking questions, and digging deeper.

Max's relatively unconventional path has now taken him to the world's biggest sporting stage, though he has consistently spoken about not viewing the Olympics as a be-all and end-all event.

"It's about the process and it's about the journey in the sense that every time you get to compete, you get to go through the experience ... you get to show your skill, you get to bring others along," he told CNA.

"A shared joy is twice as fun. If you're in it alone, it's not really uplifting when you do well. When you do well with people who helped you, not only are you happy, you're happy that the others are happy ... It's multiplicative.

"(It's) about how much value can I bring to the people around me by continuing to do well."

It's again closely linked to something Max has been taught by his parents - that he needs to make the best of his gifts, while not forgetting the less fortunate.

"When he says that, it's what he has heard from young," said his father. "He's sincerely contribution-minded."

His mother recalled a panel discussion where Max was asked how he was dealing with the pressure of the Olympics.

"He said: 'I don't frame it negatively. I find myself in a privileged position to even get this because other people have real problems.'"

Regardless of how he does in France, Max is already a shining light to not just kitefoilers, athletes and other Singaporeans - but also his parents.

During a walk in a forest earlier this year, his father told him as much.

"I said: 'You've really become a source of inspiration and strength for our family.'" recalled Valentin.

"He said: 'Thank you dad, it means a lot to me.'"