



BOUNCING BACK

IN AN EXCLUSIVE ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW WITH 2MAGAZINE, PARADORN SRICHAPHAN OPENS UP ABOUT THE INJURY THAT ENDED HIS TENNIS CAREER, HIS DIVORCE FROM MISS UNIVERSE 2005 NATALIE GLEBOVA, AND HIS NEW-FOUND POLITICAL AMBITION. *François Oosthuizen*

ONCE CALLED 'SUPER BALL' by fans and foes, former tennis ace Paradorn Srichaphan has a new agenda. He wants to use the experience and know-how garnered from a successful international career to make sports promotion a national priority in Thailand. And for that he needs your vote.

2magazine: If you could turn the clock back to 2003 when you won your first ATP-level singles title and were named

one of the year's 'Asian Heroes' by Time magazine, would you?

Paradorn: Yes, it would be great to enjoy it all again, because it felt like time flew by too fast. Thinking back to that, it is a great memory, and I enjoyed it very much – especially 2003, which was the peak of my tennis career. At that moment it felt like all my hard work had paid off. I was happy for myself, but happy also that I was able to make my country proud.

Is there anything you would have done differently with regard to your tennis career, given the chance?

I've asked myself this question many times... But I think I did the best I could do. So I wouldn't change anything, no. Being a Buddhist I know everything happens for a reason, not only when it comes to my tennis career, but also other parts of my life. I always try to apply the lessons that I have learned in my life.

Do you ever reminisce about 'the good old days'?

Actually I very recently started to think back about that time. I went through a pile of newspaper clippings of my tennis career that my family kept, watched some of the tapes [match recordings]. It felt good, and brought a smile to my face. I think it's important in life to look back at good memories. It motivates us for the future...

What stands out as the biggest highlight – the proudest moment?

Winning was of course always great, but personally, the biggest moment for me was when I got a chance to meet the king [HRH King Bhumibol Adulyadej]. That was more rewarding for me than any big match that I won. The king used to play tennis himself, and told me that he is a big supporter of mine. That made me very, very proud, and I will never forget it.

Who was your toughest competitor ever on court?

There were a lot of good players out there – different player, different style. But the one I always knew was going to be a long game is Lleyton Hewitt. His game was very solid – he seldom missed a ball. I played him a couple of times, and it was always a tough match.

Is there a victory that was particularly sweet?

If there's one match I could never forget, a match that gave me a lot of confidence and boosted my tennis career, it would be beating Andre Agassi at the second round of Wimbledon. The match was played on Center Court, and to this day it is my best tennis memory. It was a very special moment.

After becoming the most successful and highest seeded Asian tennis player at the time on the ATP circuit, then came 2007 and a serious wrist injury after which your professional tennis career never quite got back on track... Do you have regrets about how far you could have gone – had it not been for that injury?

I felt very disappointed at the time. I was only 28, and that's quite young to retire from tennis. But injuries are sometimes unavoidable, and again, everything happens for a reason. Despite the injury I still hoped to recover well enough to be able to play for another three to five years, but I also started to get involved in other things I could do, like becoming a businessman and coaching other players.

How exactly did the injury happen?

I injured the wrist on my right hand, the hand I play with. I would say that it was the result of over-use. My game style was quite

aggressive; I used to hit the ball really hard. Maybe I pushed myself too hard, maybe I didn't allow enough time to rest between tournaments.

You're credited for inspiring a whole new generation of Thais (and Asians) to pick up tennis racquets, while your success led to a spike in popularity of the game in Thailand... How does that make you feel?

If I had any part of that, I feel very honored. Tennis wasn't really popular in Thailand or Asia back then, and it felt great to be an idol for many kids. Their parents started supporting them to play tennis, or to do other sport – and that's a good thing. Sport teaches kids to be disciplined and committed, and there are also the health benefits.

Has tennis – and the fame that it brought – changed you as a person? What are the most important lessons you've learned from it?

Tennis didn't really change me; I still remain the same person I always was. Even once I had made a name for myself and people were starting to recognize me. In retrospect, I think I managed to control that very well. I am from a normal middle-class background, which meant having to work hard for everything that I wanted – especially using tennis to make a living. I always remained focused on my goals.

I learned a lot from my father and brother, who coached me. It wasn't always easy; they were my coaches, and also my father, brother... But they taught me how to be a good boy on court and off court – how to 'walk the line', how to always behave correctly.

The fame and fortune on Thai shores (and beyond) also meant that you became a household name... It could not have been easy to live up to all that pressure, attention and adoration?

In the beginning I didn't think much about that; I just focused on practicing, traveled for tournaments, played my best, came back home, started practicing again – that was my routine. Then, when I started to realize how many people were showing an interest in the game, the impact hit me. The pressure was good to motivate me, I turned it into a positive, but it took some time to get used to all the attention.

How did the motorcycle accident happen in 2010 which finally led to your retirement from professional tennis?

Since a young age I've always been interested in motorbikes, especially super-bikes. Before the accident I had actually already decided not to play tournaments again, and I got involved with the Super-bike Thailand team. Of course it's a dangerous sport, and I broke my left-wrist, my fingers, a toe...

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How important is tennis in your life today?

I think in one lifetime we don't need to do just one thing. My tennis career is over. I look back, I smile when I recall the good memories, but now I'm stepping into a new chapter of my life. I'm more looking forward to this than thinking about the past. But the experiences I had and the things I learned from tennis is something that could be transferred to my new chapter. Tennis was never the beginning or the end. It was a step along the way.

The Srichaphan Tennis Academy you set up with your brother is reputed to be doing great work. What are your long-term ambitions for this endeavour?

The first Srichaphan Tennis Academy we opened is in my home-town in the northeast, Khon Kaen, and there are now two more facilities in and around Bangkok that concentrate on beginners. Khon Kaen is more like a camp; we have an apartment there, and six tennis courts. There are a lot of kids from the northeast who train for periods of up to three weeks, and some of them have also moved school to Khon Kaen in order to train there. We've also had groups from India and Indonesia.

Is the search on for the next Paradorn?

Oh yeah. We're looking for players who can go professional. We have a couple of good players, but it will take time. It depends on how well we can support them. For example, sending them to train and compete in tournaments outside of Thailand. I also assist the Lawn Tennis Association of Thailand as a coach of the national team. There is a lot of potential in Thailand, but there should be more kids playing to increase our chances. I try to draw on my own experiences, the difficulties I had turning pro. You need a sponsor to travel and compete internationally, so good support is key.

You've been quoted as saying that you want sports promotion to be a national agenda, and that you want to use your experience for this purpose. Is that why you decided to enter politics?

Yes. I never had an interest in politics before. But then this opportunity arrived for me to help promote sport in Thailand. I see a lot of problems, I know what the players need, and I also know what they *don't* need. I realize I cannot make a difference on my own. By being part of the political process I can influence on the highest level to bring about change.

Why the Chart Pattana Puea Pandin Party?

Sports promotion is very high on the list of priorities for the Chart Pattana Puea Pandin Party. The party head, Suwat Liptapanlop, is president of the Lawn Tennis Association

of Thailand, and has always been a keen promoter of sport in Thailand. He's been responsible for some very big sport events here, so he is a man who makes things happen. I've been working with him for many years, and I know what his vision is. Other sport stars have now also joined the party, so we have a good team and know what we would like to achieve.

Why is sport so high on the party's agenda? What can it do for the country?

I think sport can do a lot for the country on different levels. Firstly, it can improve the lives and attitudes of kids. Sport teaches hard work, and commitment. Then, as a whole, it has the potential of uniting the country again.

Where do you see yourself fit in on Thailand's political spectrum?

That's exactly why I joined the Chart Pattana Puea Pandin Party; it's neither on the left, nor on the right, but somewhere in the middle – which is also where I stand. Within the party I would like to fill the gap of being a specialist advisor on sport and all related issues.

Do you foresee running in a constituency or as a party list candidate?

Either way, really, but it would be a party decision. I might not even be eligible to make it onto the party list because of requirements candidates must comply with. But whatever happens, my mind is made up that I want to help the party to achieve the objectives of its sports policy. For me it's not about winning an election personally, but to start using my experience on the highest level.

When you got your degree in political science from Ramkhamhaeng University earlier this year, was it with a plan already formulated in your mind to enter the political arena?

No, my plan was always to study once I stopped playing tennis. I think that's a good example for kids too; to show them how important education is, that it's never too late to study. An athlete's peak time is between 17 and 30, and if you want to go pro you need to go for it 100 percent. But after that you can still graduate. It is pure coincidence that I studied political science, but looking back at it now it was a very fitting choice.

When you announced your political intentions at a press conference earlier this year, many people were surprised that your ex-wife Natalie was there to support you...

When Natalie and I got divorced we decided to remain good friends and to support each other in whatever we do. I know it doesn't normally happen like this in Thailand. When

people get divorced they each go their separate way. It was a big day for me, and I appreciate the fact that she could be there. I will also continue to support her in everything she does, because we will always be good friends.

The two of you were Thailand's golden couple... What happened?

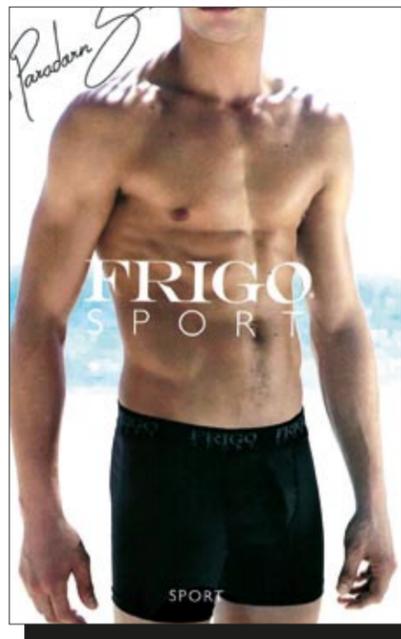
I don't know... [pauses] After we got married I started a new chapter in my life, while Natalie was also very busy with her own things. Our timing was never right, and we didn't see all that much of each other. In the beginning we tried to adjust our schedules, we didn't just give up. But we were both so busy with our own lives and responsibilities...

What are the biggest misconceptions people have about you?

People think they know me from what they read in the newspapers. There's always a lot of gossip about me; how I go out all the time, partying with girls... In Western culture hugs and kisses among friends are okay, but here people are a bit narrow-minded and always read something in that.

Your latest business project is with the Swedish men's underwear label Frigo... In what capacity are you involved?

We bought the license to be the sole distributor in Thailand and Asia. It all started because it is a product that I really like, owned by a friend of mine – it's a best-seller in Sweden. We are currently negotiating with a chain of department stores here in Thailand, but in the meantime we are doing direct marketing through a TV show and the call center 1577.

**Frigo claims that it's going to do for guys what the Wonderbra did for women, albeit in a different area of anatomy... How does it work?**

It has a pocket at the front and a drawstring, so basically it separates the 'man thing'...

The 'man thing'? You mean genitals?

Well, uhm, yes. It all fits in a special pocket that separates it from the body, and there's also a drawstring that can be adjusted to lift 'it' for more comfort.

So what are the benefits of this?

There are many benefits, especially for guys who are active. Instead of feeling 'squashed', you feel, well, more free...

Does it make men more virile?

There's no research to back that up, but yes, it does promote better blood-flow, and it feels good wearing it. And it looks sexy too.

“TENNIS WAS NEVER THE BEGINNING OR THE END. IT WAS A STEP ALONG THE WAY”

**What is the status of your other business ventures, like the Italian restaurant you opened in 2009?**

That was my first business, but it closed down. I don't look at it as a mistake, but as a lesson.

And your company Magic Thai Herbs? Magic Iris is billed as a natural alternative to Viagra, right?

It's more of a health supplement, really, and as a result makes guys feel... 'stronger'.

What ingredients does it contain that makes it act as a stimulant?

It has oyster, ginseng, and black galangal – all natural ingredients. We launched this product a few years ago, and it's doing really well.

You also had plans to launch a similar supplement for women?

Yes, it's called Magic Pink, and Natalie will be getting involved with that. We are busy helping her to create a brand identity for it. Over a certain age, women's hormone levels drop – not just because of age, but also factors like work, and stress. Magic Pink helps to restore hormone levels.

What part of entrepreneurship do you enjoy most?

Making money! [laughs] Actually I enjoy every aspect of it; business development, the marketing, distribution channels, the finance part – pretty much how it all comes together. ☺