

No time to lose in a boccia game



Kagan Gan, as ramp assistant, helping his son Aloysius in a game of boccia where Aloysius has to plan the strategy in double quick time and signal his father to set up the ramp accordingly before he propels the ball. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

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Aloysius and dad know they have to be on the ball and on the same wavelength in this sport



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Six minutes can be an eternity in sport. In that span, German football club Wolfsburg saw a 1-0 lead become a 1-4 deficit in 2015 as Bayern Munich's Robert Lewandowski bundled in four of his five goals.

But it is no time at all for boccia player Aloysius Gan, who has to size up the field of play, make a decision and communicate it to his father-cum-ramp-assistant Kagan six times over the course of a round, also known as an end in boccia.

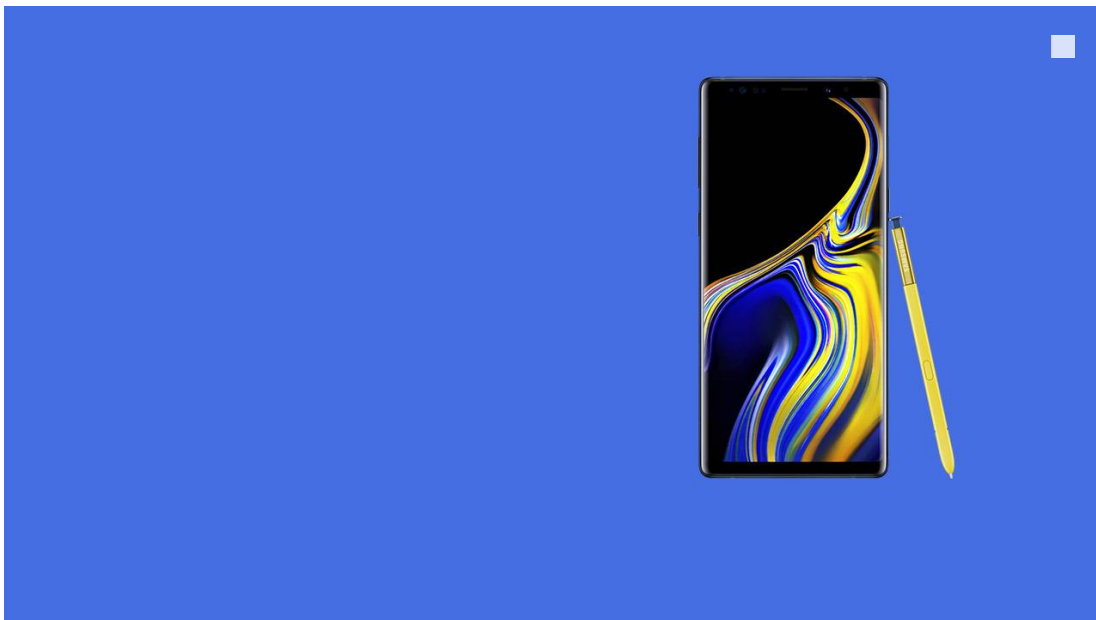
Kagan then sets up the ramp accordingly before Aloysius propels the ball with a slight dip of his head using a special helmet.

Such an involved process is needed for the 11-year-old because he suffers from cerebral palsy that affects his mobility and his ability to speak.

"We have worked out a system where certain words mean certain things but I still have to pay a lot of attention to catch what he says and make sure I don't get the wrong distance. And when he wants to raise the ramp, that's when we're racing against the clock," said Kagan, 38, who works for a security firm.

Boccia is a sport similar to lawn bowls and petanque. Depending on their level of physical mobility, players either throw or propel leather balls with the aid of a ramp.

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The goal is to get the balls - which are red or blue - as close as possible to the white ball. There are four ends in individual and pairs matches, and six in team matches.

Aloysius competes in the BC3 category and was the individual champion at the Singapore National Games two weekends ago. He also won a silver medal in the pairs category with 2016 Paralympian Toh Sze Ning at the Singapore Boccia Open in June.

He was introduced to the sport at seven when he started going to the Cerebral Palsy Alliance (Singapore)

GETTING MUM AND DAD EXCITED

Even watching others you start to get excited. You'd never think a disability sport could be so exciting to the point where Mummy (Eve) is afraid to look because her heart is pumping so fast.

KAGAN GAN, father and ramp assistant of boccia player Aloysius, on how he and his wife share their son's passion for the sport.

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School, where he is a Primary 5 pupil. His parents realised how much their son was enjoying the sport a few months later in their first competition at the then National Disability League (now known as the Singapore National Para Games).

"We went there not knowing much and without our own equipment. I still remember when we lost the game, he really cried. He cried out in the hall in front of everybody," said mum Eve, 38, who was Aloysius' first ramp assistant.

Aloysius' passion for boccia soon began to rub off on his parents.

"Even watching others you start to get excited. You'd never think a disability sport could be so exciting to the point where Mummy (Eve) is afraid to look because her heart is pumping so fast," said Kagan.

Sitting on the couch in their family home in Punggol, there is little to suggest that Aloysius is anything but a normal boy.

The signs are there, however, in the slightness of his frame and how quiet he is, unusual in a boy of his age especially in contrast with younger brother Sebastian, eight, who trundles about showing off his toys and making interjections during this interview.

The first two to three years of Aloysius' life were a struggle for his parents.

Neither of them knew anything about cerebral palsy prior to his birth and were thrust immediately into a cycle of continuous therapy.



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Eve quit her job to take Aloysius to China for a year for daily stem cell therapy, and they also had to live with a question mark hanging over how much Aloysius' damaged brain cells would come to affect his everyday function.

"It was tough because we would find out only bit by bit from the doctors how it might affect his mobility or his IQ. At the time he couldn't even crawl, only flick his fingers," said Kagan.

"In the beginning we did wonder if it (Aloysius' condition) was our fault and why this had to happen to us but our religion gave us the faith to carry on. We may have walked through a different journey but I think it's still a success, even a glory in our life as a family."

Today Aloysius, who turns 12 next month, is able to move around slowly on his own at home, does his homework (his favourite subject is Science) and can be counted upon for slightly naggy reminders.

His first public appearance was as one of the torchbearers for the 2015 Asean Para Games on home ground. He was too young then to compete and is still too young for October's Asian Para Games in Jakarta but there is no doubting what his goal is.

"I want to go out of Singapore to play," said mum Eve, helping to interpret. "We hope that he can do that, of course, but, at the same time, we try to teach him competition is not everything."

And which country does Aloysius most want to visit for competition?

The answer comes with perfect clarity and in no time at all: "US (the United States)."

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