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DIAN GOMES

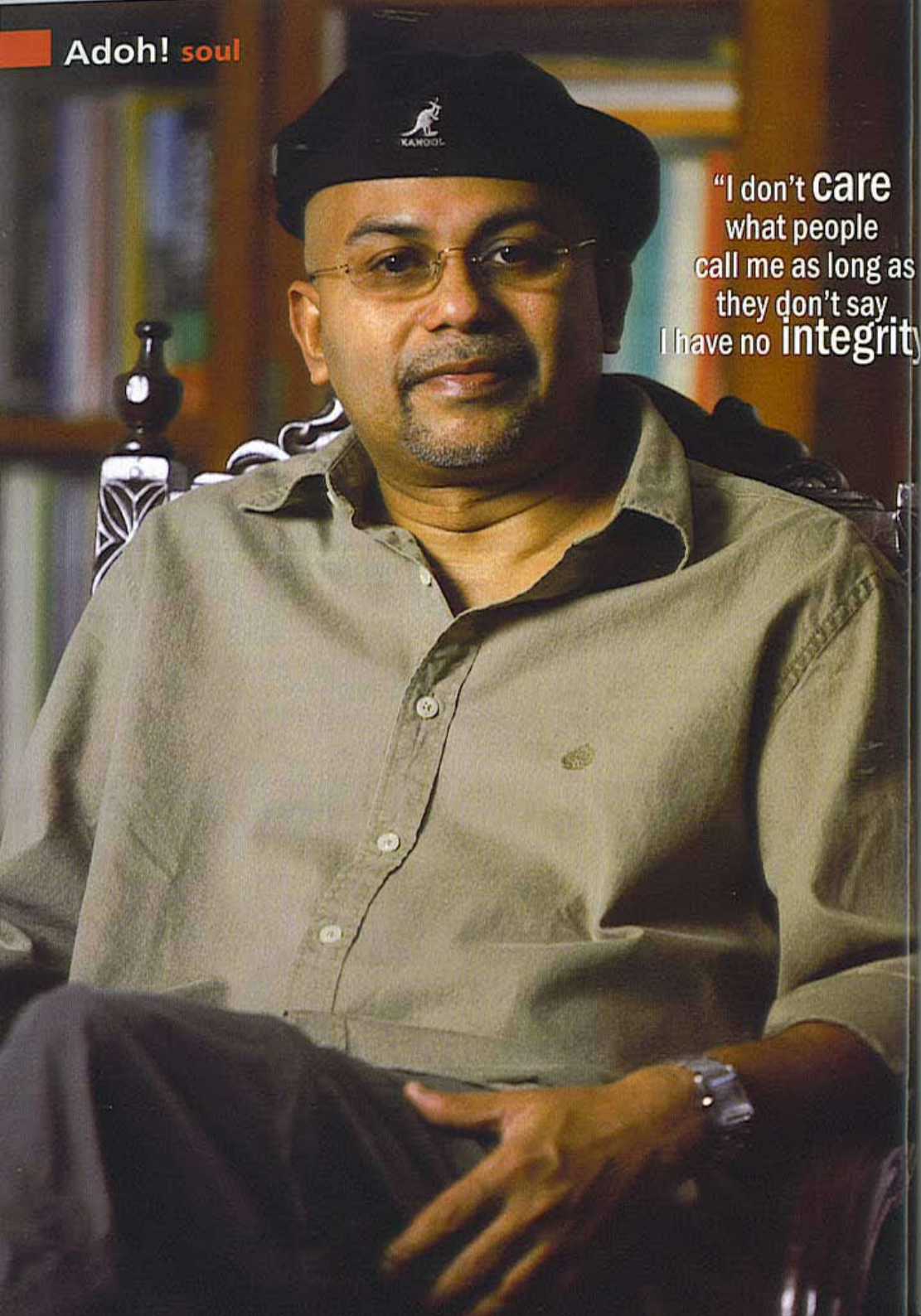
THE MAN

BEHIND THE MAGNATE

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"I don't care what people call me as long as they don't say I have no integrity"

"No biting, no hair pulling... let's have a clean bout"

While those are words familiar to any boxer worth his salt, the instructions of a fight referee are coincidentally the same principles on which Dian Gomes has chosen to live his life. Successful corporate giant, successful boxing coach cum manager, successful sports administrator, successful entrepreneur – Dian's list of achievements seem almost tedious in the stratosphere they occupy. He reminds me of the Australian cricket team, who make news when they don't win, rather than when they do. ►

By Shanaka Amarasinghe

Photographed by Luxshmanan Nadaraja

Much has been said and written about Dian Gomes, and it is a challenge I find daunting to present the true 'soul' of the man beyond what has already been said. What could I say about a man who has already been profiled in the Wall Street Journal?

When I walk into the magnificent 'Gandhara' and seat myself in one of the display items, I am taken aback not only by the simplicity of the place but also its

tastefulness. The artefacts around me do their utmost to distract my attention from their trustee, who is my interview subject, but Dian is a compelling assignment and I cannot help but take down furious notes. Despite the fact that he was a 'third generation Royalist', he struck me as a stellar bloke who wears his heart on his sleeve.

Many of us who see the familiar face of Dian on magazine covers and billboards and corporate profiles, seem not to appreciate

the sheer amount of blood, sweat and tears that have been shed to achieve that familiarity. Dian Gomes, just like any one of us mere mortals, was not born with a silver spoon in his mouth. His school days may have been slightly more entertaining than most, but while 'scooting' school to watch movies and scaling walls to evade the evil Royal College prefects, he also found time to pick up the form prizes in his A Level year. 'I wanted to get into university' he

said, showing the beginnings of a focus that did not need to be single-minded. Most often the average among us must slave hard at what they do in order to achieve the sort of standards Gomes has set in all his spheres of activity. This tends to preclude them from being involved in more things than one, and finely polishes only one facet of their lives. However, these limitations have not barricaded Dian Gomes' life path and his resounding impact in diverse fields have set him apart from his peers.

Although he doesn't take himself too seriously, Gomes also does not shy away from the fact that he too did have to work hard. Starting off his post CIMA career with Saracens International and then moving onto May's Department Store, he soon found himself evolving from 22 year old rookie to the regional head honcho in his chosen realm of finance. "I was far too young for the job", he says with hindsight, but is proud of his achievements. It is with these two international organisations that Gomes cut his teeth. No success in the corporate world comes without a sound technical base, which long hours and dedication ensured that he received. His experience in his early working years stood him in good stead when he met the man who would be one of the largest influences in his professional life; Mahesh Amalean. Amalean, a seminal figure in the garment industry in Sri Lanka, employed the promising Gomes, initially at Shadowline. Gomes moved to the factory and

Pannala and says that this was the single most epiphanic moment in his life.

"Moving into this rural environment, and seeing how people struggled through life, made me want to make a difference", he said with the same steely glint in his eye that he would have had when he surveyed what would become his magnum opus. What strikes me most about the Dian Gomes that I am conversing with is that he is a man of action and not mere words. He doesn't seem to be the type that enjoys meeting after dreary meeting, and functions more on a 'get it done' philosophy. He also takes an extremely hands on approach to any project. Not many Presidents of National Sporting Associations will get down and dirty with the charges they administrate. Not so with Gomes. He is always ring-side "I pull out the gunshield between rounds, I wash the spit, I towel him down" he says of being a second to his protégés. It is not a glamorous job, especially less so in boxing, where one deals with very literal blood and sweat. However, his love for the sport – he was unbeaten at Royal for four years – has dictated that he will go to any lengths to promote and better the sport of boxing in Sri Lanka.

"People ask me why I always recruit sportsmen", volunteers Dian, "it's because of their competitive spirit and the way they perform under pressure" he says. The cauldrons that are sporting events generally tend to produce characters that are moulded into the

correct shape to take on life. Dian is quick to spot this and recognise the traits that are required for a demanding profession. "I always recruit people better than me" he says, "that is the only way to develop an organisation". He concedes readily, that some of his more junior colleagues will probably be more with it vis-à-vis finance theory. Nevertheless, he realises that given his positioning within the organisation now, his management skills need to be given prominence. "I have to motivate people to perform", he says with a look of anticipation. Motivation is his big 'thing' and he is currently involved on the lecture circuit as a motivational speaker especially since his recent profile in the Wall Street Journal.

"I'm not a control freak at all" he says when I question his leadership style. Most people who are hands on generally tend to be controlling. However, he says he has implicit faith in his staff, which of course is achieved through his recruitment strategy. It is indeed testament to a confident person who is not afraid to recruit quality staff to work alongside. At the same time Dian's ego is not so large that it does not allow him to admit that yes, people are indeed better than him.

He accepts, and in fact is inspired, by challenges. "What would you do if one of your workers asks you to piss off?" I ask him. "Happens all the time" he says, without batting an eyelid. "I like it when people question and challenge me" he says. He remembers an incident when he was on a

"I always recruit people better than me that is the only way to develop an organisation".



boat with other members from his team and he had shelved his oars for an instant and been taken to task by a crew member who cared nothing for the fact that he was telling his CEO to 'bloody well row!' It is the sort of mutual respect he gives and expects.

Dian reckons his greatest strength is his ability to relate to people. Within the course of his day he will lunch with top corporate CEO's, and have plain tea with his cleaner if a problem needs to be discussed. "Some people don't feel comfortable doing that, but I have no problem with it" he says. His school days at Royal may have been what instilled this character trait he opines. "I met the richest guy's son and the poorest guy's son at Royal...and that's what gave me a sort of egalitarian approach to life". This ability to relate to people on different levels is an ability shared by all great leaders from Mandela to Gandhi – both of whom he respects greatly. For now, though his power to motivate is coincidentally what motivates Dian as well. He recalls how he was unable to make it to a meet that one of his boxers lost the gold by 3 points. "If I was there he might have been able to win that gold" says Dian with a tinge of regret. He recalls how he once faced the dilemma of watching his daughter swim in the Public Schools meet or watching Damayanthi Dharsha qualify for the Olympics just a few hundred metres apart at the Sugathadasa Stadium. Putting country before self he had opted