

He trained son to set record cycling around Singapore

Ryan Soon was just six years and seven months old when he became the youngest Singaporean to cycle around Singapore on June 1, 2024.

He completed 128.9km within 13 hours and 36 minutes, a feat awarded and officiated by the Singapore Book of Records.

But as his proud father, Dr Benjamin Soon, 47, tells it, the record-breaking attempt started out as a joke.

The family live in Jurong, but Ryan wanted to visit East Coast Park in early April, so his mum, physiotherapist Valarie Goh, 45, suggested that they cycle there. They had given up their car in August 2023 because they did not want to renew the certificate of entitlement.

Ryan, who started on a balancing bike at age two and could cycle without training wheels at age four, breezed through the 52km route there and back on a 20-inch Trek MTB for kids, even after swimming and flying kites at the park as well.

They usually cycle as a family on weekends from Jurong to Gardens by the Bay, a distance of 44km there and back, but Dr Soon was surprised by his only child's stamina during that longer ride in April.

"I jokingly asked Ryan if he



Ryan Soon (right) receiving his Singapore Book of Records award for being the youngest Singaporean to cycle around Singapore on June 1, 2024, from Mr Ong Eng Huat, founder and president of Singapore Book of Records.

wanted to do a round-island cycle with papa and mama. He thought for a moment and said a resounding, 'Yes.' We were taken aback at his response and confidence," he says.

A physiotherapist by training, Dr Soon is programme leader of the Industrial Doctorate and Industrial Master in Clinical Research at the Singapore Institute of Technology.

He realised that Ryan had a chance of beating the previous record holder, Adiv Seth, who was six years and 10 months old when he traversed 120.28km around the island in 2022.

Beyond breaking a record, the couple wanted to include a charity element to make the experience more meaningful, so they signed up on two fund-raising platforms, Giving.sg and 3 Degrees (str.sg/

aVmD), the latter of which is still accepting donations.

"We wanted to show Ryan that he can help people in different ways with his talent in cycling," he says.

They aimed to raise \$100 for every kilometre Ryan pedalled and have thus far collected over \$13,260 in total for SUN-DAC, a non-profit social service agency that runs day activity centres for the intellectually disabled.

Dr Soon took only two months to train Ryan as he was already "well-conditioned" from cycling since a young age.

He and his wife did three sessions of longer rides covering at least 80km, reducing the frequency of breaks and introducing more upslope terrain. In between, Ryan continued his weekly swimming

Ryan Soon (above centre) and his parents Valarie Goh and Benjamin Soon taking a break for photos at Horizon Bench in the Marina Bay area. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF BENJAMIN SOON

and Brazilian jiu-jitsu classes.

But Ryan's strong will meant he did not always want to cycle on the path, preferring grass and slopes instead. Dr Soon found that reasoning with him about the dangers of doing so worked better than forcing him.

Like most children, Ryan also got distracted midway by playgrounds and attractions, so his parents set a break time limit of five minutes, rather than risk a meltdown with a flat "No" to stopping along the way.

They also spaced out his breaks, allowing him to rest when needed but not for too long, which would make it harder to restart the journey.

During the actual ride in June, they invited along family friend Christopher Peh, 56, a financial service consultant, as Ryan enjoys

racing with him and would be more focused while still having fun, says Dr Soon.

He planned the route using only park connectors and pavements, save for a small section in Sungei Kadut, to minimise cycling on the road for safety reasons.

While rain chased them for much of the journey, Ryan loved riding in wet weather and through puddles, his father says.

"The whole of Singapore became his cycling waterpark," he adds.

Because of the rain, however, Ryan skidded on the metal drain covering along the pavement and fell into bushes on three occasions. His parents quickly pulled him out, checked that he was physically all right and continued onward.

"Some parents may think that we are putting Ryan through a hard suffering journey, but if they could see all the fun and happiness he had during the trip, they would think otherwise," Dr Soon says.

Ryan yelled, "Yay, we did it," at the finish line, his father recalls.

"The fact that he said 'we' and not 'I' showed that he sees all of us as part of it," says Dr Soon, who was impressed by his son's fearlessness and determination throughout the journey.

"I hope it will make him feel more confident about himself and to be resilient when faced with future challenges in life."

He adds: "We have only a small window when they will need our time and enjoy our company. When they grow up, they will likely choose to spend time with their friends – or, in some cases, the mobile phone – over the parents."

"I hope this story will inspire more parents to do something a little bit crazy and challenging with their children. They are young, but they can be amazing too."

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