

# STAR PERFORMER

STORY 44

**F**ormer motoring journalist and racecar driver Lee Chiu San joined Wearnes when his friend, Barry Kan, rang him to ask: “Hey Chiu San, can you help me get Volvo?”

Lee, now General Manager of Starsauto, the dealer for Chevrolet, replied incredulously: “Barry, you don’t need me for that. Just hop along the road and you’ll find dozens of models.”

“No, I don’t mean a Volvo. I mean Volvo!” clarified Kan.

Lee said his ears pricked up. “Now you’re talking!” he told Kan. So, round about the start of the new millennium, he found himself in Wearnes, helping to win the Volvo dealership.

“Royston K S Tan realised that you need critical mass to be a player in the Singapore car market. With globalisation, the whole economics of the car business had changed. You had to have big numbers to be a serious player. Volvo was his first step.”

A few days before the year 2000, they succeeded in buying SM Motors and adding the Volvo franchise to the Wearnes stable.

Lee says Royston’s next move was to have him help acquire the insolvent Starsauto, which was at the time representing the ailing Daewoo. At the Pine Tree Club in Singapore, Royston introduced him to a group of Wearnes managers, saying: “Meet the man who’s going to run an insolvent company representing a bankrupt principal.” The move was a strategic one, as Royston realised one of the big car companies in the world would buy up Daewoo. In this case, it turned out to be General Motors.

“We climbed out of bankruptcy. Unfortunately we had to retrench a few people. We then signed an agreement with General Motors to be its dealer, not specifically for Chev-

rolets, but for whatever vehicle they wanted us to carry. We launched Chevrolet in 2003 and it took off. But the in-between years were lean ones with a lot of cost cutting, DIY-ing and pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps.”

With Chevy they had an advantage. Seen as an American brand, with cars possessed of a European feel, put together by German designers, it is very much part of American popular culture and heritage. There are about 300 songs written about it, including American Pie, Crocodile Rock, Riding with Private Malone, Route 66 and Little Red Corvette.

“My parents know it from the movies of the 1950s and 1960s as this huge American car usually with a successful businessman in the back. The new Chevys, however, are value for money and fun to drive.”

In Singapore the brand went straight for the English-speaking market, selling on the Chevy’s heritage and it took off. Now Starsauto is going to the heartlands. There was of course, the very successful tie-up with the popular American and Singapore Idol TV shows.

Although his days as a motor journalist and racecar driver are behind him, Lee is still a fast car enthusiast, which he picked up as a teen from an uncle who raced cars. Over the years, he has owned and driven three Austin Healeys, five Volvos, a Lotus, a Volkswagen Golf, a Mini Cooper, two Alfa Romeos and a Jaguar. He now drives a Chevy “like a good corporate man” and a Suzuki Vitara on weekend nature drives, an interest he shares with his wife.

But there is still fire in his blood. Sometimes he goes to the racetracks in Sepang to race a saloon or rented sports car, although he says a bit woefully: “At 59, I’m not as fast as I used to be.”

