

05/08/1998

KL '98 serving up a welcome relief

K.C. Boey

LEAVE it to sport. Many of us, in quiet moments, confess to reading the papers from back to front. Back pages first, then the front - if at all.

That's where sport is: at the back, where we bask in the reflected glory of the achievements of humanity.

The front pages? They chronicle man's failures.

If there was a period in our lifetime when we needed sport more, there are few among us who might recall: the decade and a half from the Great Depression of 1929 on are two generations and more removed.

Thank God for small mercies such as the World Cup.

Now that's behind us, the Commonwealth Games is serving up welcome relief Down Under - for Australia and Malaysia.

The opening of the national sports complex in Bukit Jalil triggered interest here in the run-up to the Games, opening in little more than four weeks. Positive reception of Sukom Ninety Eight Bhd's efforts to turn around negative perceptions of Malaysia's hosting of the Games are a refreshing change from the doom and gloom that have overwhelmed the media focus on Malaysia over the past year.

In Australia, the prospect of another record-breaking medal-winning performance by Australian athletes gives intermittent lift to a descending despondency rooted in a sense of failure of politics and economics.

The Games is creeping off the back pages. It isn't quite front-page material yet, but previews, analyses, commentaries and travel guides are finding their way out of the back pages and into the middle feature sections.

Australia's domination of the Games is legend. Its record in Games past shows almost a whitewash in the way this nation of sports lovers has exponentially won more and more Games medals.

Four years ago in Victoria, Canada, Australians won 87 gold medals. That's 40 per cent of the gold medals up for grabs. The medalfest harvested 182 medals from 250 athletes competing in 10 sports.

Now the talk is of 100 gold medals. The Games contingent has grown to 350 athletes, after an expansion of the Games to a record 15 sports.

Making their appearance for the first time are the team sports of limited-overs cricket, seven-a-side rugby union, tenpin bowling, squash, hockey and netball - all sports in which Australia is particularly strong.

It seems that if there is anything holding the Australians back, it is a worry about what such domination might do to the future of the Games. The others just may no longer want to play.

The good news for Kuala Lumpur is that success breeds success. The prospect of Advance Australia Fair sounding ad nauseam in medal presentations across the Games venues may yet get Australians to make the journey in support of their sportsmen and women - and put in some travel on the side after.

In the financial crisis confronting the region, there remain few as much in the mood to spend as the Australians.

The value of earning Australian dollars and spending ringgit is not lost on potential visitors to the Games. With the ringgit having fallen by more than 30 per cent against the dollar over the past year, word is being sent back of cheap living in Malaysia.

One report has budget accommodation with breakfast starting at A\$12 (RM30). Good medium-priced hotel rooms start from about A\$60 a night.

Ticket prices in Australian dollars are as cheap as A\$2, rising to A\$200.

Beyond a cheap holiday and sporting glory, Australia has a stake in the continued well-being of the Games. The State of Victoria wants to have the Games for its capital, Melbourne, in 2006.

The State Premier, Jeff Kennett, will lead a high-powered team to Kuala Lumpur to lobby for the Games.

Sydney, in neighbouring New South Wales, hosts the Olympic Games in two years. Australian athletes won't be the only ones looking to Kuala Lumpur to prime themselves for the millennial Games.

Officials of the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games will be in Kuala Lumpur to see how Malaysia copes with 6,000 participants. That's almost twice as many participants than the previous record number for the Commonwealth Games.

It will be the first Commonwealth Games to be held in a developing nation of the former British Empire. Initial bad Press about Kuala Lumpur's capacity to cope has been fuelled by concerns about health hazards brought on by the haze, and problems of water rationing.

There is a perception that the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, has an "anti-Australia chip on his shoulder", as one report put it. But the view is that Dr Mahathir's desire for recognition among developed countries for Malaysia's achievements will prove more compelling.

Don Stockins, the chef de mission of the 455-member Australian contingent of athletes and officials, is one who is said to believe pessimism about Malaysia's hosting of the Games has gone out of hand.

Stockins endorsed Kuala Lumpur's preparation for the Games after a reconnaissance trip. "I think we have an outstanding Games ahead of us," he told The Age.

"In terms of venues, they are the best I have ever seen for a Commonwealth Games. I can't find fault at all."

For Prime Minister John Howard and his Liberal-National coalition in Government, a trouble-free Games conducive to Australian sport performing at its optimal best will be a welcome diversion to lift the national spirit.

The Games from Sept 11-21 will be run off at a time of intense politicking for elections that Howard is yet to call, but is speculated to be likely in October.

On today's straw polls, Howard's will be a one-term administration. Which is a remarkable reversal of fortune for a coalition kept out of office for 13 years by the opposition Labor Party, but which swept back in with such a tidal wave of support in March 1996 that it was thought Labor would never recover.

That was before the independent Member of Parliament Pauline Hanson stood up for her maiden speech in Parliament that year in September. The rise of Hanson's One Nation party since has called into question the quality of elite leadership in general - and the leadership of Howard in particular.

The populist appeal of One Nation has shaken confidence to the core in the National Party, the rural-based partner in Howard's conservative coalition.

The pressure on the Nationals to respond to the concerns of economic security in the bush raised by One Nation, has forced on Howard backflips on policy that have compromised his claims to leadership.

Howard's backpedalling on his commitment to full privatisation of the national telecommunications carrier Telstra raised perplexity about the coherence of his decision-making.

In succumbing to National Party pressure to limit the sale of Telstra to 49 per cent, Howard nevertheless continued to insist that he would eventually sell all of Telstra - exposing himself to political risk on the one hand, and yet forfeiting any possible political benefit on the other.

Now Howard is betting the survival of his Government on public acceptance of tax reforms that he will unveil on Aug 12.

The centrepiece of those reforms will be a goods and services tax dreaded within Howards coalition as being unsaleable in a climate in which growing numbers of voters are turning their backs on mainstream politicians.

The judgment of one respected commentator is that there is a feeling among some in Howard's own Liberal Party that he is a leadership disaster.

One 16-year-old student, invited for her opinion in the newspapers, wrote: "I'm not old enough to vote, but I know who I wouldn't elect to lead my country - a nondescript ditherer like John Howard. His uncertain leadership does not impress me at all."

At the other end of the generation spectrum, a 75-year-old pensioner responded: "It's not John Howard's looks that make us cringe, it's what he represents, which is just about everything people are becoming opposed to."

For all the criticism dumped on Howard, there is nothing personal in the main. The sense of a leadership vacuum pervades the mainstream political parties.

The politics of discontent is widespread, and the national psyche is ripe for a generous dose of sporting populism to lift spirits.

Bring on the Games.

(The writer's e-mail address is kc.han@bigpond.com)

(END)