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Making the right moves in their youth

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THE essential ingredient in sporting excellence is the presence of a solid development programme which would ensure continuity and progress.

Yet this is something most Malaysian sports do not have.

While a handful of associations have gone through the trouble of picking young talent and turning them into internationally-competitive athletes, the majority hardly know what development entails, little realising its importance.

For years, the common excuse everyone seemed to have got away with was the lack of funds, but this can no longer be acceptable since the associations now have a lot of sponsorship ringgit from the private sector.

It is no secret that most Malaysian sports rely on that handful of athletes for success and these athletes have either refused to retire or cannot afford to.

A look at Malaysian soccer will reveal that although it has been 10 years since the League turned professional, Malaysia have yet to impress at the regional stage.

This is unlike South Korea who have gone to four World Cups.

The fault lies in the lack of proper development, although soccer is the number one sport in Malaysia and played by almost every schoolboy and even girls are taking up the sport now.

Even the Premier League, the platform for the elite, does not want to risk developing youngsters at the expense of losing a shot at the title.

"What Malaysian sports need is to re-activate the club system, which would enable more potential athletes to be unearthed," said Olympic Council of Malaysia (OCM) secretary Sieh Kok Chi.

"Take soccer for example. Instead of restricted to looking for a national team from only 14 teams, the selectors can easily shortlist hundreds from clubs."

Indeed the presence of more teams would give a better representation of talent when scouting for national players.

Sieh pointed out that such practice would help eliminate favouritism or personal agendas as some associations have been known to deliberately shut the door on promising athletes to protect their existing stable of sportsmen.

"If every neighbourhood had a sports club and proper basic facilities, it would encourage more people to take up sports for competition or for health and recreational purposes.

"The problem now is there may be potential athletes who do not have an avenue they can turn to in pursuing a particular sport seriously."

OCM vice-president Tunku Imran Tuanku Ja'afar last month pointed out that there was an absence of sports culture, and that interest for sports had undeniably gone down at the schools.

"In fact, sports takes the back seat in our education system, where physical education is reduced to a once-a-week activity," he said.

So lacking is interest that Malaysians are predominantly known to be sports enthusiasts who rather watch television instead of buying a ticket to catch any event live.

At an International Olympic Council Forum for Development in Kuala Lumpur last month, delegates stressed the importance of sponsors at junior or grassroots level.

One relevant point was while some sponsors were quick to invest in sports at the highest level, they failed to realise that without success at the junior level, it would be impossible to produce international-class athletes.

Malaysian tenpin bowling head coach Sid Allen, whose athletes enjoyed considerable success at the recent Commonwealth Games, made some sense out of the success Malaysian athletes gained.

"When it came to the crunch, it was our athletes who on their own, whether at the bowling alley, shooting range or track arena, delivered the medals.

"If they could not produce, no amount of cheering or home advantage would help."

The introduction of the Rakan Sukan programme in 1994, where private sector sponsorship for five years was secured for a number of sports associations, was supposed to have spearheaded the hunt for fresh talent.

But controversies surrounded the programme with allegations of sponsorship monies dedicated for development was instead redirected by several sports associations for other purposes.

Ironically, it was only two years ago that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad criticised athletes and officials for excessive politicking, infighting and lack of discipline which has grossly hurt Malaysian sports.

He said certain officials still fought to cling on to power although they had no more ideas or programmes which could contribute to the success of their sports bodies.

While the Government continued to provide financial assistance and build facilities, Dr Mahathir believed those involved in sports must realise their role and fulfil their responsibilities.

"We need to look at the development of sports from our own perspective and not blindly follow or do what others say," he had told the inaugural national sports convention in April 1996.

There was also a call recently to revive the spirit of volunteerism - which had produced successful sports in the 1960s and 1970s - at a time when athletes were being generously rewarded for their performance, and when bribery and match-fixing became apparent, especially in soccer.

"This spirit is eroding and I fear it will no longer be there. If this happens, whatever services rendered by athletes (and officials) will have to be paid in cash," said Dr Mahathir.

"This commercial approach will be detrimental to the development of sports."

Should the club system be reactivated, it will demand basic infrastructure being built not only at district level, but in every neighbourhood.

National Unity and Social Development Minister Datin Paduka Zaleha Ismail had recently suggested just this, and even proposed that local authorities allow residential premises to be converted into fitness centres.

Dr Mahathir had also commented that the international class facilities built for the Commonwealth Games should not become white elephants.

"They were not meant for one event but for future use," he said.

And future does not necessarily mean hosting events, but allowing maximum use of these prestigious sporting arenas - something you don't hear of when it comes to the Ipoh and Kuala Lumpur velodromes, and the Shah Alam main and indoor stadiums to name a few.

As it is today, even school sports facilities are being underutilised.

Terengganu Menteri Besar Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad recently mentioned something very moving, which again, highlights the lack of development in

Malaysian sport.

He said it was ironic that Terengganu had not developed even one worthy swimmer despite being privileged to have 270 kilometres of beaches, 10 major rivers, Tasik Kenyir and numerous swimming pools.

All the facilities one can imagine not only widely made available, but some built for prestige, all as a service to Malaysians.

Now all we need are the sportsmen to start making use of the facilities.

This is where the sports associations must realise that their role is not just to assist the stars, but also make stars out of the occasional sportsmen.