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Let's not starve to death the very essence of the Games

SPORTS is being given the short end of the stick again - the economic crunch a handy crutch to hobble on.

The preparation of athletes for the Commonwealth Games has been compromised. The Malaysia Games, Sukma, is a casualty - downsized from outsized through economic reality. The very athletes whom these Games are supposed to serve are being sacrificed.

Sure, it's all right to be frugal, thrifty and moderate. But why the obscenely extravagant budgets in the first place? Why should sports be made to pay a heavy price for the profligacy of the system?

The catch-phrases, and we are ever so good at coining slogans, which sports officials have latched on to are "cutting costs", "tightening the belt", "austerity drive" and such. If only they meant it.

But why should the national athletes and budding talent have to suffer the brunt of this sudden concern for cost-effectiveness after the extravagance of past indiscretions?

This monetary austerity has gone beyond the boundaries of realistic control that it threatens to strangle the development of sports in this country. Undo all that has been done and put to waste the millions spent. And anybody would tell you that you have to safeguard your investments.

But the way they are indiscriminately cutting down on areas which need to be sustained, and we are not talking about great cost here, is undermining our Commonwealth Games effort at the competition level.

If the Sports Ministry, the National Sports Council (NSC), Sukom Ninety Eight Bhd and the Selangor Government, who are organising the Malaysia Games, have to cut down, it should be on areas of self-aggrandisement and self-interest. The fat cats of these overstaffed bodies should take a pay cut.

The money saved should be spent on the athletes who are being deprived of proper training and competition.

And it is these athletes who will be inspiring and raising the spirit of the people come the Games, not the officials in their fancy finery.

Was there any need to put a whopping RM20 million budget for the Malaysia Games in the first place? Or those hundreds of millions for the Commonwealth Games? They were overbudgeted from the start.

When I raised these questions early last year, before the seams of the economy gave way, Sukom were indignant and outraged. I was assailed with invective and abuse.

But how do they explain the huge sums being drained through the payment of huge sums for rentals of halls, and to middlemen and sub-contractors.

How do they explain the fact that a middleman, in this case apparently middlewomen, is going to profit handsomely through the Sukom Accommodation Bureau (SAB) who are embroiled in a controversy over exorbitant hotel rates?

SAB are a business arrangement between Sukom, the London-based Byrom Consultants Ltd and Seamons Marketing, a company belonging to two Malaysian businesswomen - Noni Mahmood and Rohana Ramli.

It is based on profit-sharing with Byrom and Seamons keeping a hefty 70 per cent and Sukom only 30 per cent.

What sort of deal is this? Why was it necessary for Seamons to be involved at all? Shouldn't, or couldn't, Sukom have entered into a direct deal with Byrom and split the profits 50-50?

What was the need for Seamons? Who are Noni Mahmood and Rohana Ramli? Questions and more questions? In the interest of transparency and accountability, of course.

How many more such deals are draining the millions tied up with Sukom?

Sukom were set up to organise the Games and turn a profit, if they could, for sports. Not to enrich individuals. The profits would have been returned to sports but at the rate they are going there is not going to be any and losses will be conveniently blamed on the economic slowdown. The signs are already there.

The Malaysia Games never needed such a massive RM20 million budget in the first place. Indonesia hosted the last Sea Games for less.

But it is all about style and one-upmanship and the opportunity to make a ringgit or two on the side, isn't it?

So now they make a grand show of whittling it down to RM5 million and have done away with some sports depriving hundreds of young athletes the chance to test their mettle.

Come on, the athletes never asked for a grand show. It was the State Government and the officials who needed to show off - "gaya mesti-mahu".

So if Pahang spent RM10 million on the last Games, we will double it. That is the sort of attitude which puts one in a financial hole.

But then the Selangor Government were always big on spending. That RM5 million budget for renovating the Menteri Besar's residence is now exactly the amount they will spend on the Malaysia Games.

Why couldn't we set realistic budgets in the first place? Is it because we lost touch with reality? Instead of thinking and keeping a tight check and reign on expenditure we started to think millions and billions when thousands and millions would have sufficed.

Profligacy became the standard economics of our progress.

If only those Selangor politicians, who have invested so heavily in Australia, heeded Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's call to bring money back from abroad, Selangor would be easily able to host a good Games and not disappoint the young athletes.

Sport is the rallying call that unifies the rakyat. It raises the spirit of the people in difficult times and it is the athletes that do this, not the officials in their need for gaudy pomp and ceremony.

But we are denying the people exactly that by not allowing the athletes a fair share of the training they need in order to excel.

And the irony is the preparation of athletes constitutes only a small portion of the overall expenditures involved.

Sports was always meant to be a spartan discipline. A platform for individuals to strive to beat physical limits. For human endeavour.

You don't need frills and luxury for this. They are contrary to the very nature of sports.

Let us not punish sports and sportsmen and women for the profligacy of the system.

Let's control expenditure by all means, but let's not starve to death the very essence of the Games.

For ultimately, it's sports that matters, not the Sports Ministry, NSC, Sukom or the Selangor State Government.

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