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No one is bigger than sports or the country

NOW who can blame Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for being indignant and disgusted with some of our self-serving and spoilt athletes and officials? Most Malaysian are, too.

Typically, Dr Mahathir went to the crux of the matter, decrying the lack of national pride in athletes and officials who put their own interests before that of the nation.

He threw a sharp left jab at these errant sports people, saying the disputing parties should engage in a boxing match with the winner representing the country in the KL Games.

It would be wonderful if these people took cognisance of the PM's reprimand. But knowing how shallow they are, it will likely fall on deaf ears. And they will continue doing their mischief with impunity.

Self-interest - that is the malady afflicting our sports. The disease has spread from our increasingly materialistic society to sports - borne largely by self-serving officials and politicians who have corrupted our sportsmen and women.

It has compromised our values and principles, with greed and bigotry supplanting ideals and a sense of fairplay. And our sports is suffering. Just look at the calibre of our footballers. Once the best in Asia, now they are a pathetic lot mired in mediocrity and corruption.

We never had problems with athletes in the past, at least not of this magnitude and shame. Those were the days when sportsmen took great pride in playing for the country. They always gave their best and never shamed the national flag.

People like Wong Peng Soon, Tan Aik Huang, Punch Gunalan, Dr Mani Jegathesan, Rabuan Pit, Mokhtar Dahari and many more were not only great athletes, but great individuals.

They didn't expect anything in return, certainly not the rewards lavished on athletes in recent times. Their only reward was often just a pat on the back.

They never complained or whined as being a national athlete was a reward in itself. Just ask badminton great Ng Boon Bee, who remained a meter-reader for much of his working life.

These days, they want to know what there is in them playing even before they don national colours. Some, like some footballers and badminton players, even spurn the call-up because it doesn't pay them enough.

Spoilt by easy wealth after just marginal success, they think they are bigger than the game. Bigger even than the country.

That is the problem. Bad attitude.

It is so disheartening for someone like me who has seen the degeneration of our sporting standards and denigration of our sporting values over the years.

It came even as a bigger shock when Olympic Council of Malaysia general-secretary Siah Kok Chi tried to deny an athlete, who had won her place fair and square, in favour of another.

I've known Kok Chi since I started my sportswriting career in 1975 and had great respect for his single-mindedness in preserving what is right in sports. He often found himself at loggerheads with other officials for his uncompromising stand.

But his controversial handling of the selection of the rhythmic gymnastic team has raised all sorts of questions. His veiled threats to

the parents of the four gymnasts now raise questions about his integrity and OCM's credibility.

Kok Chi had no business even suggesting to Sarina Sundara Rajah's father that his daughter step down to make way for Farah Zelinah Kemal, who had finished fifth in the order of merit.

Following the threat of the fathers of the four gymnasts that they would pull their daughters out of the Games if Farah was selected, Kok Chi even suggested that the OCM would not pay for the fourth gymnast.

Kok Chi denies acting under pressure from the top, but he was wrong to have done what he did anyway. It was not only unethical, but he clearly overstepped his authority.

He, in fact, violated the very Olympic principles he is supposed to be safeguarding - the interest of the athlete without fear or favour.

Why are OCM, or is it only Kok Chi, being so accommodating in Farah's case, anyway? Hasn't it been past practice to channel all grievances and appeals of individuals through their associations?

It's become one unpleasant concoction. A maze of intrigue leading to walls of deception and the public are not amused.

Following the due process of qualifying standards, the selection of the gymnasts should not be questioned as the top four were picked. The MGF and their coaches know best and it was courageous of them to stand by their decision as, it now transpires, they had outside influence to deal with.

I salute MGF president Dr Zakaria Ahmad for his commitment to see justice done. We need more men of principles in sport.

I can imagine how disappointed Farah must be. But it's not for her to go around telling people that she is better than the other gymnasts or demand that she be, not only selected, but named among the top three.

The MGF coaches are the same people who selected Farah in the past. So it is unfair now to accuse them of being biased. They obviously know Farah's current form is not good enough.

Athletes like to think they are better than their closest rivals, just like politicians do. But it is not for them to say so as we have competitions and elections to decide that. And it is a fact that the best do not always win in both cases. But the results have to be accepted, otherwise there would be chaos and anarchy.

Past performances also do not mean a thing in sports. Otherwise, we would be pre-selecting our athletes without any need for selection trials based on current form. OCM, and Kok Chi of all people, know that as they are the ones who enforce this rule.

It is so easy for an athlete, particularly a gymnast, to lose form in a short period after a scintillating performance. There are so many factors involved and gymnastics is much more cruel than other sports in that suppleness and youth are key factors.

Farah, despite her many achievements, may have to concede that, at 18, she may be too old and that it is pointless to keep waving her past records.

Athletes don't dictate terms, anyway, whoever they may be.

And let's put an end to the unpleasant Roslin Hashim farce. He made his bed and must lie on it although his employers Nusa Mahsuri and their sympathisers are cooking up new conspiracy theories, like the Kelantan BA's alleged failure to submit Roslin's appeal to BAM.

Thank God for athletes like Shalin Zulkifli, Ong Beng Hee and Nicol David who keep a measure of sanity in our sports.

Today is the closing date for the registration of athletes for the Games. Let us hope that good sense, fairplay and, most of all, justice will prevail.

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