

22/10/1998

Time to change mindset and nurture athletes from grassroots

THERE are only two lasting bequests administrators can hope to give sport. One is roots, and the other, wings. They have given them neither.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad - himself lifted by the spirit of Malaysia Boleh that burst into flames of enchantment and drove Malaysians beyond their own capacities in the recent 16th Commonwealth Games - was sincere when he said we should host the 2008 Olympics.

An unprecedented 10-gold medal haul by our athletes in the Games series, seemed to fire that belief - that Malaysia can - even more.

Reacting to the Prime Minister's enthusiasm, the decision to make the bid for the 2008 Olympiad was made, notwithstanding his advice that we had to excel both as performers and organisers.

But too often have we raised false hopes of a summer on the sighting of a single swallow. Too often have we assayed the purity of gold in katties, when we should in carats.

And the truth is, we are not ready to win that pure gold - a gold in the Olympics.

So, how can we look at the 21st century or the Olympiad with renewed hope when we have not distilled sport of its impurities?

If we are really sincere with cutting our teeth in the Olympiad we should revive age-old reserve, and mindsets that made sport a big part of our lives.

The change must start with the schools. Sport must regain its pre-eminence in an education system that has all but turned the playgrounds of budding world beaters into the "killing fields".

Schools, until the early 80s, were the nurseries where the seeds of sporting excellence were planted and nurtured. Until then too, when sport was as much a necessity in our lives as acquiring career skills, we were a force.

Take soccer, for instance. We used to pulverise teams like South Korea and Japan. But while they have been to the World Cup finals, we have not got past the preliminary stage.

Then, we had teachers who were dedicated and passionate enough about sport, to acquire coaching certificates. It was this breed of teachers who had nurtured those seeds with great care and precision.

But the last icons of that breed like Gerard Rozells, Bernard Khoo, Vincent Fernandez, Leslie Armstrong and Rene Martin have since retired.

School sports councils have also become inactive and officials like A. Vaithilingam who were just as passionate about development and dedicated to the pursuit of sporting excellence are no longer around.

Today, if there is any meaning in reality - in sport - it is in what survives as "virtual reality".

If there was a World Cup for cyber soccer, we would be in the finals. Observers claim that sport is played more on computers than it is on the pitch.

Teachers say they are not responsible for that.

"Don't blame us for not looking at sport seriously. The system is such. I won't get promoted if I can produce a soccer team who are champions in the district. But I will, if I can produce a class with 100 per cent passes in PMR or SPM," said a senior teacher.

"Those days, teachers could afford to spend more time on sport, because they didn't have to deal with the pressure of producing successful

students, as we do now," said another.

So who do we blame?

Blame that on the age of Information Technology. Blame that on the highly competitive environment the education system has advocated. It has failed to strike a balance between the paper chase and competitiveness in sport.

Something, which even the Youth and Sports Ministry has failed to perceive. Recently its Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said it was time his Ministry sat with the top brass of the Football Association of Malaysia to help save the game.

But that's not the place to start. A good place would be just one block away from his office, where the Education Ministry is. He should be sitting with Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

The two Ministries had come up with two sports schools - the Bukit Jalil Sports School, Kuala Lumpur and the Bandar Penawar Sports School in Kota Tinggi, Johor. Both completed at a cost of RM25 million and RM64 million respectively, and equipped with various sports facilities of Olympic standards.

But the truth of the matter is, it does not address the problem of grassroots. It does not cater to the need to build a wider base of talented athletes.

While Khoo admits that it may not be easy to change present mindsets overnight, he believes incentives could help "plant seeds of contentment in parents."

Said Khoo: "The Government should award full scholarships to talented students, like they do in the United States, where they have - among others - basketball, baseball and football scholarships."

The Malaysian Hockey Federation is already doing that. It has, through its own resources, sought scholarships for at least two of its players, Calvin Fernandez and Brian Jayhan Siva, to do medicine at Universiti Malaya.

But what do we do about developing skills in schools?

Rozells: "If we don't have the teachers to do that job, maybe the professionals ought to do that now. Every sport association has qualified coaches. The FAM, I believe has more than 10,000 coaches with C licences and most of them are not utilised.

"Maybe the Government can assign some of these coaches to schools throughout the country and pay them an allowance."

(END)