

26/09/2000

Stop pampering our athletes now

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THE 2000 Olympiad in Sydney is into the halfway mark and it's not surprising to see Malaysia performing rather disappointingly, like in past Olympiads.

The difference between the Sydney Games and the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta is the fact that at least we got a silver for badminton then. Our failure to garner any medal in badminton proves that we are indeed losing our grip on world badminton.

See what happens to teams like Denmark and Britain which are catching up on us, particularly in the women's singles, women's doubles and mixed doubles. The men's and women's singles and doubles now seem firmly in the hands of the Chinese and Koreans.

The story is not much different in swimming, diving, shooting and athletics. While we should feel encouraged by the determination of our athletes to give their best in their respective events, I feel that if we are serious in wanting to host the 2006 Asian Games, we should do something about this.

The fact that some national records have been bettered in Sydney proves that indeed, if our athletes really want to do it, there's no stopping them. However, it is sad that some athletes can't even match their best national record in Sydney. I guess Malaysians back home will not be so bitter even if they failed but matched their national records.

Unfortunately, our contingent fared miserably, for reasons only known to themselves. I have to admit, men's hockey at least gave us some reason to be happy and proud, despite their inability to really make the mark.

Perhaps in years to come and if exposed more to international friendlies and tournaments, they will be better players.

The only thing I wish to point out is our tidak apa attitude when our athletes fail to shine. Indeed, there is not much that we can do when they lose. We have to accept that, but giving lame reasons like, "the Olympics is merely an exposure for our athletes" or "It's a training platform for our athletes, to give them an opportunity to compete with world-class athletes" are a bit too much.

First, this talk of exposure has been said since a long time ago. I think, if we mention about exposure, say 10 years ago, by now we should have least been able to get something.

The government, through the Youth and Sports Ministry and the National Sports Council has spent an enormous amount of money and energy to make our athletes better.

No doubt, the Bukit Jalil Sports School has to some extent produced quality athletes and potential medal winners.

But until we reap the benefits of that, we have to ask ourselves, what about now?

We are still paying exorbitantly for training, competing at overseas level and so on. Certainly we deserve something than what the athletes are giving the country at present.

In the spirit of "Malaysia Boleh", I think there is nothing impossible as far as sports is concerned. Our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has given his utmost support to this.

The late Mokhtar Dahari, Dr M. Jegathesan, Mumtaz Jaafar, Marina Chin, Ishtiaq Mubaraq - they all have proved that indeed we can. Why now, with the better training facilities, more money allocated to sports and larger

number of foreign coaches around, are we still not able to do it?

Is it the tidak apa attitude? Is it because our athletes are so pampered? Or we Malaysians are simply "physically smaller" than the more-prepared European or American athletes?

Just to make a point, look at Ethiopia, one of the poorest nations in the world.

Look at their athletes, like Haile Gebrselassie and company. They are the world's best. Tell me that they have better training facilities or more money allocated by their government.

One bad habit is that we Malaysians like to comfort ourselves and give excuses when our athletes fail. We sometimes justify why our athletes fail, without giving an accurate picture of the whole scenario.

While we have to accept that others are better and participating is more important than winning, we must also see in the mirror, admit our mistakes, say that we are not good enough, certain training programmes are ineffective and accept that our contingent is merely holidaying in Australia.

We must stop this culture if we want to excel. Think about the reality here because we have been comforting and justifying too much.