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Don't just go by numbers

Peminat Sukan

DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad struck a nerve last week when he said Malay students should now strive to gain admission to universities on merit rather than rely on government help.

Perhaps the sports administrators should take a cue from the Prime Minister and seek only the best when selecting athletes to represent the nation.

Being hosts of the 21st Sea Games is one thing, but when there's talk of lowering qualifying times to accommodate the stragglers and ensure there is large representation in the opening marchpast, then everything that we have worked for will serve no purpose.

If development is the excuse for granting substandard athletes a chance to represent the country in the Kuala Lumpur Games on Sept 8-17, it will only serve to do the opposite.

The Sea Games, which Malaysia last hosted in 1989, is not a preparatory exercise nor a platform for associations to send their athletes for exposure. It's the real shebang where the men are separated from the boys.

Most sports associations, especially those dependent on financial aid from the National Sports Council (NSC), have already sent their athletes for various overseas stints over the last few years, to expose and prepare them for the KL Games.

If the Olympic Council of Malaysia (OCM) were to bend the rules by gifting athletes who have little or no chance of winning medals places in the KL Games, it will send negative signals which would further destroy the already fragile fibre of Malaysian sport.

If this happens, there will be no genuine distinction in being a national athlete. Little pride and honour will be felt, and competing for the country will be something which will be taken for granted.

Worse, sportsmen and women will aim to represent the country for the sake of adding credentials to their curriculum vitae, and quit the sport after graduating from universities.

Not that it is not already happening.

While it is difficult to draw the line with subjective sports, it is amazing to see the national associations for measurable sports like swimming and athletics still lobbying for the inclusion of more athletes for the Games.

It is difficult imagining these associations making the same demands if Malaysia were not hosts.

Only three swimmers have qualified for KL 2001, based on the silver medal winning time at the Brunei Games in 1999.

But the Amateur Swimming Union of Malaysia (Asum) have resorted to having another trial starting on Thursday, with the qualifying mark lowered to the fourth best time at Brunei '99.

They should have spared us the embarrassment of sending several swimmers to qualify for KL 2001 at the recently concluded World championships in Fukuoka, Japan, where the likes of Australia's Ian Thorpe rewrote three individual world records.

For track and field, only 24 athletes have met the qualifying mark. But on Aug 9, the Malaysian AAU are hoping to convince OCM to allow more athletes to compete in the Games.

OCM will most probably bend the rules, but it is hoped they will do so sparingly, giving only a select few who have a realistic chance of

winning medals, instead of including them just to make the numbers.

The rationale should be in quality, not quantity. Allowing substandard athletes to don national colours will make a mockery of the whole event, and besides creating unnecessary embarrassment, it would do little in developing sports locally.