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It's not about colour or creed

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I WISH to respond to a series of articles on the National Sports Awards for year 2000 which appeared in the New Straits Times, the Malay Mail and the Sunday Mail. In general the articles questioned the wisdom behind the selection of bodybuilder Sazali Abdul Samad and hurdler Noraseela Mohd Khalid as Sportsman and Sportswoman of the Year respectively.

Peminat Sukan on April 11 implied there were other forces which influenced the selection of Sazali and Noraseela ahead of the squash duo of Ong Beng Hee and Nicol Ann David. The Malay Mail, on April 20 and April 21, suggested a revamp in the selection process, including proposing each association to cast its vote in determining the winners.

With deep regret, I also would like to refer to Johnson Fernandez' Game All column in the Sunday Mail on April 29 in which he raised the question on whether selection was based on competition or complexion.

I am propelled to shed some light into the matter and put things into perspective.

For your information, I was away when the panel of selection convened to select the winners. Secondly, I would like to make it clear that the National Sports Council (NSC) serves as the secretariat for the awards. We took over the function from the Sports Ministry in 1983 as all high performance sports in the country come under our preview. As such the award is not the property of the NSC as claimed by some journalists.

For a clearer picture, allow me to divide the issue into several points, namely the methodology in selecting the winners, the composition of the panel of selection and some insight into their thinking.

We invite nominations from all national sport associations. Forms are handed and attached is a list of the athlete's achievements and his or her national, regional, continental and global ranking at the end of the year. They are also required to submit a summary of the athlete's performance to back their recommendations. For the year 2000 we issued forms to 47 associations on Dec 20, 2000. The closing date was Jan 22, 2001. Only 19 associations responded on time, 12 submitted their nominations after the deadline, 14 did not respond at all, while the remainder did not nominate anybody.

In 1997 only 24 associations responded on time while 14 did not bother to reply at all. In 1998 the response was fairly good, possibly following the considerable success of our contingent in the Commonwealth Games. Some 31 associations submitted their nominations on time and only five abstained.

With reference to the suggestion by The Malay Mail writer SS Dhaliwal that each association be entitled to a vote each, their lukewarm response to our invitation and lack of respect for deadlines based on the present method illustrate their apathy.

With this indifferent attitude, claims that they want to be a part of the process do not hold water. Mr Dhaliwal too suggested a more comprehensive selection system, with an independent auditing firm be appointed to oversee and verify the selection process. However, in evaluating a winner among winners, more is needed than mere computation. Of course if we really want to be objective, we can key in all the data into the system and let it decide. But this is where the panel of selection comes in. It is required to give a more balanced view, taking into account the human and universal aspects as well. After all it is what

sports is all about, not merely about winning and losing.

The panel comprised chairman Dato' Mahamad Zabri Min (Ministry of Youth and Sports Secretary General), myself in my capacity as the NSC Director General, Datuk Noni J. Said (Permanent Secretary of the Sabah Ministry of Youth and Sports), Dato' Sieh Kok Chi (OCM Secretary General) Fathul Razi Bakri (Ministry's Director of Sports Division), Fadzil Othman (OCM Assistant Secretary), Azman Ujang (Bernama), Zanirun Baba (sports commentator from TV3) Abdullah Sani (sports broadcasting journalist from TV3), Adriana Aris (NTV7 Sports Editor) Yusof Othman (RTM), YP Sivam (sports journalist with the Star), Mustakim Aminuddin (Utusan Malaysia and the deputy president of the Sportwriters Association of Malaysia), U Chin Ong (Sportwriters Association of Malaysia (SAM) secretary and Guang Ming Daily sports editor) and Ik Pahon Joyik (Director of Sarawak Sports Concil).

I believe the panel had a cross section of policy makers, sports leaders, sportwriters and sponsor who are knowledgeable in the field. Of the 17, seven were sports journalists, of whom six are very much involved in reporting on a daily basis with a combined experience of more than 80 years. The Secretary General of the Ministry and Director of Sports Division are in charge of policy matters while Sieh and Fadzil represented the Olympic Council of Malaysia (OCM), the country's umbrella body in sports.

In my opinion Sazali certainly merited the award since he had reached the apex of his chosen sport. Is the Mr. Universe title not the ultimate in bodybuilding? Although the sport has been tarnished by doping scandals, Sazali should not bear the stigma. In the present scenario where even cricket, supposedly the game of gentlemen has been tarnished with allegations of bribery, it is not fair for us to prejudge our athletes. We realise drug abuse and bribery are rampant in the world of sports but is it fair if we accuse Sachin Tendulkar or Imran Khan of match-fixing or athletics' Carl Lewis and former Tour de France winner Jan Ullrich of doping? Even football has not escaped the scrutiny, with Portuguese defender Fernando Couto, Dutch star Edgar Davis and Diego Maradona being the centre of allegations of drug use but does that mean Luis Figo, Ruud van Nistelrooy and David Beckham are guilty of the offence as well?

Furthermore, the Malaysian Bodybuilding Federation have conducted year-round competition and out-of competition tests on the bodybuilders, Sazali included. Unless somebody of authority in the sport comes forward and tells us that it's not a sport, we shall accord the sport its status.

Besides, that we are also counting on bodybuilding to provide the country with medals in the Asian Games in Pusan next year.

If consistency is the sole criterion, Sazali won the South east Asian Bodybuilding Championship in May, the Asian Bodybuilding Championship in August and the World Bodybuilding Championship in November. He was also voted the Most Improved Bodybuilder of the Year 2000 by the International Federation of Bodybuilders (IFBB). He finished the year as the No.1 in the country, region, continent and the world. In contrast, Beng Hee won the Wimbledon Cup, Mega Italia Open and Asian Championship but the lad faltered in the British Open, which is widely regarded as the All-England of squash.

While Nicol was a deserving 1999 Sportswoman of the Year, Noraseela too deserved recognition for her consistency in 200 metres. Most probably the panel chose Noraseela instead of Nicol because the latter's performance chart in 2000 did not really show an upward curve. Granted Nicol might have retained her Asian individual title, won the Finland and KL Opens and finished runner-up in the Danish Open but she can already be considered an elite athlete. As the incumbent, she should surpass her 1999 achievements.

Norseela too made the semifinals of the Australian Open, won the Adelaide meet and won both the 100m hurdles and 400m hurdles in the Philippines Open. She too finished second in the Thai Open, clocking 58.9s, only 0.20 seconds off her national mark at 58.7s. Although performance in track and field is measurable, we have to give credit where it is due. For instance Rabuan Pit's relatively slow 10.69s earned him the 100m gold in the New Delhi Asian Games in 1982, defeating the rest of the field, including his Thai rival Suchart Jaesuraparp.

The fact remains Noraseela had succeeded in returning with a bronze medal in highly technical event and in the process became only the second Malaysian to win a medal in 400m hurdles after Marina Chin in 1975. To say her bronze was a poor effort was certainly unfair. A year earlier she became the first Malaysian to dip below 60 seconds in the 400m hurdles, clocking 58.7s en route to the SEA Games gold medal, obliterating Onn Yee Chan's 11-year old record of 60.23s from the record books. Track and field too is the blue riband event of any multi-sport festival. It is globally acknowledged as an Olympic sport and enjoys mass participation, from Malacca to cosmopolitan London. As such to win a medal in the Asian Track and Field Championship is more difficult than to win a gold medal in ladies' squash where Nicol is already the undisputed numero uno.

Sprinter G. Shanti won the 1998 Sportswoman of the Year Award based on her best achievement in 1998 when she won the bronze medal in the 100m (11.41s) and fourth placing in the 200m (23.42s) in the Bangkok Asian Games. Besides that, she won the bronze medal (11.60s) in 100 and fourth placing in 200m (23.37s) in the Asian Track and Field in Fukuoka, Japan. She too qualified for the quarterfinal in the 100m (11.58s) and semifinal in the 200m (23.72s) in the 1998 Commonwealth Games.

She was chosen instead of shooter Nurul Hudda Baharin who was another successful athlete in 1998 when she won the gold medal in Air Rifle with a new Commonwealth Games record. She was placed 13th out of 115 shooters in the same event in 1998 World Championship in Barcelona, Spain. What made her achievement greater was the fact Nurul Hudda won the Commonwealth Games after having recovered from a motorcycle accident and competed under duress and with a bandaged hand in the presence of our Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad.

This is a clear example where the panel had put greater emphasis on the track and field event at Asian level ahead of the Commonwealth Games although one won two bronze medals while another grabbed the gold.

In relation to claims that there have been disputes and controversies in the past, as far as we can recall, there was only one, in 1985 when cyclist Rosman Alwi's two-gold medal haul in the Bangkok Sea Games was adjudged better than B.Rajkumar's gold in the Asian Track and Field (ATF). To question the decision on the recent awards is akin to accusing the panel of sheer incompetence.

With regard to Mr. Dhaliwal's claims that rationality took a back seat when the Olympic silver medal effort by badminton pair Cheah Soon Kit and Yap Kim Hock was deemed not better than Rashid Sidek's bronze in Atlanta '96, it was because there was no provision for team sport athletes to qualify for the Sportsman and Sportswoman awards then. The selection criteria was amended in April 1998 to include teams with a maximum number of five athletes, as announced by the then Secretary General of the Ministry, Dato' Ahmad Bakri Shabdin. Cheah and Yap became the first team to be conferred the award in 1997.

The National Sport Awards are unique in that we invite each association to nominate their athletes. This is in contrast to the Sportswriters of Malaysian (SAM) awards or the Olympian of the Year Award. SAM shortlist their winners from the outset while OCM pick and choose a winner solely

based on his or her performance in a multi-sport event such as the Sea Games, Asian Games or the Olympics.

Lastly, to refute insinuations that the awards were based on complexion not on competition, allow me to highlight the list of winners of all the seven categories of the awards since 1983 based on race.

Of the 102 recipients, 42 are Malays, 45 Chinese, 13 Indians, three Sikhs and two others. Ten Malays, seven Chinese and two Indians won the Sportman of the Year award while five Malays, 10 Chinese, one Indian and one others won the Sportswoman of the Year award.

For the record, 12 Chinese athletes won the Most Promising Sportsgirl Award throughout the years as opposed to three Malays and one others. In the list of winners of the Most Promising Sportsman awards, seven were Malays, six Chinese and three Indians.

Sports in Malaysia is designed to promote racial harmony in an effort to shape Bangsa Malaysia rather than ethnical identity. Sports journalists too are also responsible towards meeting this noble aspiration.

Ultimately sports is about glory, emotion, ecstasy and agony, hence the human aspect is very much involved. To impose explicit criteria to the panel of selection will only rob the awards from its universal, sporting and human values, therefore we have to allow the panelists some leeway in coming to a decision.