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Learning integration through sports

Ho Koh Chye

HARDLY a day passes without some comment or mention about national service in the media.

When proposing the idea of NS, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said: "It does not necessarily require compulsory military training. Through national service, they can participate in group activities and this can help in fostering greater camaraderie and understanding among them."

According to Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, the Special Cabinet Committee chairman on National Service: "Compulsory national service will be introduced by 2004 in a bid to instill patriotism and build national unity."

The message is overwhelmingly clear. I may be wrong but if it is national integration that we are after. So why don't we just call it the National Integration programme?

And if integration is the prime objective of the programme, then sport has a role in it. I've always considered the weeks and months that I used to spend in centralised training camps preparing for international competitions as national service.

In my time, the racial mix of the hockey team was good. C. Paramalingam, M. Arul Raj, M. Doraisamy, Mike and Christie Shepherdson, Lawrence and Peter Van Huizen, Ismail Bakri, Sheikh Ali, Ismail Ali, Zam Ariffin and the Chua brothers - Eng Cheng and Eng Kim, to name only a few, were household names.

Time spent with the hockey team provided me with valuable lessons for life. There was hardwork, fun and camaraderie.

We witnessed first hand how our team-mates observed and practised their religious and cultural obligations. Together, we savoured the 'kueh', 'muruku', 'love letters', puddings and cakes sent to the camp by doting parents after Raya, Deepavali, Chinese New Year, Christmas and for birthdays.

There were the stories too about Kokuvil in Jaffna, 'toyols', 'polong' and so on. What about the jokes and the songs? By golly, we learned so much about each other and most of all, we learned to respect each other's beliefs and cultures.

Working together as a team, we achieved training and competition goals that seemed beyond reach. We played so that our team would win. And when our team won, it made us proud because it was our country that won. Beating Singapore was such a big thrill back then.

Beating India for the first time in 1964 was better still. It was the 'Thrilla in Malacca'. The crowd went wild at the final whistle. The team, a miniature united Malaysian nation, huddled and hugged. In that moment, we embraced our differences.

The Government's decision to implement NS is a golden opportunity for young people to get together.

"Sports, like entertainment, are the equalising factors for youth. If there is one component that can unify youth, it's sports," said Datuk Mokhzani Mahathir, when commenting on whether sport should be accorded its own ministry.

How true. Sport, the great equaliser, provides everyone an opportunity to come together on equal terms, irrespective of race, social standing, sex, age, ability, ideology or religion.

They say that teams who sweat together, work and play well together. Working and playing together, in this case for six months, can lead to better understanding and respect for each other if we get the ingredients right.

Crucial to the success of the programme will be staff training.

I have heard about instructors of so called motivational camps intimidating and humiliating trainees during course activities. Instructors involved in the programme need liason skills and an understanding of the needs of young people. It is too important a programme to be left in the hands of bullies or untrained personnel.

It will be extremely rewarding if properly conducted. Najib, a man not given to soap box talk, has given an assurance that the structure of National Service will mirror a `Bangsa Malaysia' involving the participation of all races.

National service or national integration? Heck, what's the difference as long as the job gets done. A rose by any other name smells just as sweet.