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Sport - a serious cause for concern

By Lazarus Rokk; Vijesh Rai

ANOTHER Prime Minister has said it, that Malaysian sport - especially football and badminton - has greatly declined.

This time it was Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who made this glaring observation on Saturday during the National Youth Day celebrations, further attributing the cause of the malaise to a distinct lack of a competitive spirit in our youth.

Prior to this, it was his predecessor Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who had said the same about Malaysian sport. Dr Mahathir even went a step further by suggesting that we should start looking at more foreigners to represent the nation by according them citizenships.

But the three prime ministers before them however didn't need to make this observation as sports - namely badminton and football - was a thriving culture under their respective leaderships.

The questions that need to be asked are when did the sports culture begin to regress, and how did it happen. Did the spirited thrust for socio-economic affluence all but bury a rich and healthy sports culture.

The truth, as Sports Minister Datuk Azalina Othman Said put it, hurts. And the truth as we Malaysians know it, is that Malaysian sport is being barely kept alive by a life support system.

"The truth is painful, but we have to deal with it, and we are. I am looking at sports for all, elite sports, and more importantly building a solid grassroots foundation," said Azalina.

But while the accent of frustrations is mainly on the failure of national associations to produce champions and world beaters, and on athletes for their lack of desire and patriotism, the contemptuous finger has also been pointed at the apathy of Government agencies.

FA of Malaysia deputy president Tengku Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah - one of the most abused sports officials in the country - in acknowledging the sad state of affairs of football, took a shot at Government agencies that had failed to support the sport.

"This not FAM's role, the Government machinery, State FAs, schools all must play their roles. This is not the time for pointing fingers," said Tengku Abdullah in a telephone conversation from Germany.

He is in Germany to study the workings of two sports schools to get ideas on how best to manage football academies here.

Tengku Abdullah will also explore the possibility of establishing exchange programmes with clubs in Frankfurt, Stuttgart and Munich.

Education Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein responding to such claims, gave his assurance yesterday that three sports that Malaysians are most passionate about will get their due recognition at the grassroots level.

To Hishammuddin, who was the former Sports Minister, the three sports that Malaysians love are football, badminton, and hockey.

Olympic Council of Malaysia secretary Datuk Sieh Kok Chi, in endorsing Abdullah's observation, explained that athletes are not as competitive now because the club structure that kept them combative throughout the year has been dilapidated.

"Apart from that, our leading athletes - apart from squash players Ong Beng Hee and Nicol David - aren't prepared to have a go at the professional circuit. They must be encouraged to do that, we need icons," said Kok Chi.

Malaysian hockey that also failed on all fronts, but managed to garner

sympathy votes from the world governing body IHF, agree that athletes don't have the killer instinct, and that they are pampered.

Malaysian Hockey Federation secretary S.Satgunam said: "Players lack the passion, and this is the feedback we got from our foreign counterparts. And we have to counter this."

But one of the main reasons why Malaysian sport is also in this state is because it progressively stopped being a level playing field over the last 15 years.

And this is something that only the Government can fix by taking steps to ensure that Malaysians, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds and creed, are involved shoulder to shoulder in the restructuring of Malaysian sport.

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