

Sports and National Defence

By Nicholas Fang



George Orwell famously wrote that sports is “war minus the shooting”. While the celebrated writer meant that sports at the highest levels was similar to war in that it was about winning, almost at all costs, it is worth exploring the value that sporting contests have in the context of national defence.

This is especially so for a small nation like Singapore, which espouses a policy of Total Defence. This is defined as a whole-of-society national defence concept where every aspect of society contributes to the collective defence of the state. Its six pillars - military, civil, economic, social, psychological, and digital – do not explicitly include sports, but a case could be made for this.

Most would agree that Singapore has some ways to go before becoming a true sporting nation. Other pursuits, such as academic excellence, financial stability, and other elements of what could be defined as a mainstream traditional concept of a good life often dominate priorities of Singaporeans.

But we have been making progress. Through the years, we have had national heroes and icons across a range of sports, ranging from Ang Peng Siong in the pool, C. Kunalan on the track, our women paddlers at the Olympics, and of course trailblazing weightlifter Tan Howe Liang who won our first Olympic hardware back in 1960. In recent years, we have been dazzled by the likes of shuttler Loh Kean Yew who became world champion in 2021, Yip Pin Xiu who has been winning Paralympic swimming gold medals like it was going out of fashion, and of course Joseph Schooling who took home Olympic gold at Rio in 2016.

I am missing out many other sporting greats of course, and to name them all would take up too much space. Suffice to say, Singaporean sports fans have been enjoying a bit of a purple patch when it comes to having athletes and results to cheer about.

The recent South-east Asian (SEA) Games in Cambodia also showcased many local sporting heroes and stories, including speed queen Shanti Pereira's double-sprint gold on the track, the Quah siblings' exploits in the pool, our water polo team regaining their golden swagger as regional kingpins, and many other sports also delivering medals. These results were cheered on by Singaporeans from all walks of life.

Uniting A Nation

As such, it becomes apparent that having an athlete or sports team to get behind can have positive effects in terms of pulling a country together. Most of us can remember the moment when Joseph Schooling touched the wall first, beating out such swimming legends as Michael Phelps, to win our first-ever Olympic gold. I was watching at home and heard cheers and shouts of joy from my neighbours and indeed the entire estate.

In subsequent months, besides the positive spin-offs for swimming schools and clubs across the country, there was a palpable sense of pride from Singaporeans, a feeling that we had arrived on the global sporting stage and that we could hold our heads up high, especially when compared to other small states and territories like New Zealand and Hong Kong which had already tasted success in spite of their small size and populations.

This unifying and uplifting effect is a key facet of the sports community, as people from different backgrounds and experiences come together to share in a common love of the game, but also a more visceral passion and support for the "home team", of individuals who fly our flag high in contests against other nations.

This aspect of sports certainly contributes to the social aspect of Total Defence, cutting across socio-economic, racial, and other fault lines to bring a nation closer together. It applies even in cases where victory is not on the cards, when a team is struggling or performing poorly. In such cases, public sentiment can range from commiseration to condemnation, both of which can have a galvanising effect. Such variation in views is part and parcel of supporting sport and can be a part of the enjoyment of being a fan as long as it materialises in a respectful and hopefully constructive way.

Not Just About the Medals

While gold medals and victory ceremonies are exciting and rewarding for athletes and fans alike, it's important to remember that there are many other aspects of a sporting journey that can be beneficial for the concept of Total Defence.

The path of an elite athlete is never completely easy, and there will be challenges and difficulties to be overcome. This requires and teaches resilience, determination and commitment, the ability to bounce back from defeats, and to manage both highs and lows while not losing sight of the ultimate goal.

The psychological resilience needed to reach the peaks of sporting excellence and also to withstand the pressures of participating in high-level competitions can have many benefits for societies should it become part of the social fabric.

This is especially so in times of crisis, which in all honesty is not something that all Singaporeans are necessarily very familiar with, given the peace and stability that many of us have come to take for granted over the years. With the increasingly complex and complicated geopolitical environment being seen around the world, it's probably a good idea for us to start focusing on social, mental, and psychological resilience, even during times of relative peace and calm. The sporting arena is uniquely qualified to serve in this respect.

This is to say nothing about the inherent benefits that come when more people take up regular physical activities and enjoy healthy lifestyles.

Another positive aspect of sports is the opportunities to showcase values and principles that do not get much attention in our daily lives. At the SEA Games in Cambodia, runner Soh Rui Yong, who admittedly has made headlines in the past for his abrasive nature and run-ins with sporting authorities, displayed a much-lauded example of values in action.

The two-time gold medalist in the marathon was competing in the relatively shorter 10-kilometre footrace on the track when he noticed a competitor from Indonesia who had fumbled when trying to take on some water. Soh then passed him some of his own water in a show of sportsmanship and graciousness, with little thought as to whether this would have aided a rival or not.

In the end, he lost out to the Indonesian in the battle for gold, but still took home the Singapore's first medal in the event since 1983, set a national record and won his first-ever SEA Games medal on the track. However, his demonstration of some of sporting values won him equal, if not more, plaudits from audiences.

This and other examples of sportsmanship are potentially some of the less tangible, but no less important, benefits of sports that can bring to a society seeking to unite and mature with shared values and harmony.

Much To Look Forward To

As a sports fan, the recent results in Cambodia bode well for the years ahead with many more opportunities to cheer on Team Singapore. We can look forward to the Asian Games later this year, as well as numerous championships in individual sports. And then of course the Olympics in Paris loom in 2024, just three short years after the Covid-delayed Tokyo Olympiad in 2021.

I strongly believe that Singapore athletes will continue to grow from strength to strength. Our male sportsmen also seem to have come to terms with the need to balance their sports and

national service commitments, with some 20 full-time national servicemen and NSmen who had completed their full-time commitments recently winning medals in Cambodia.

These include hockey player Gerald Wong and swimmer Jonathan Tan, who bagged four golds and a silver medal enroute to qualifying for the Olympics in Paris next year. What used to be a consistent point of contention for male athletes is likely to continue to be a necessary inconvenience, but it's great to see many sportsmen rising to the challenge to overcome and achieve top results regardless.

As we look to the future, my hope is that we continue to progress and develop as a sporting nation in all aspects – from athlete development pathways leading to medals, to a sustainable sports business sector, to a true sporting culture among not just athletes but every citizen so that we can all appreciate the power and beauty of sports.

But at the same time, I sincerely hope that sports will be able to continue to contribute in its own unique way to the Total Defence of the country for many years to come.

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