

Embracing **Merdeka** spirit with sports

COMMENT

by Vijay Eswaran

AS Malaysia celebrates her 61st Independence Day, I am asked this question – what is a major unifying factor that is not given enough emphasis in our country?

Having just witnessed the euphoria of the Jakarta-Palembang Asian Games, the biggest multi-sport games after the Olympic Games, my answer would undoubtedly point to sports.

We saw how Malaysians rejoiced with joy and pride when our athletes, men and women, struck gold, silver or bronze medals. Their feats in Indonesia were just the right tonic for a nation that has endured many challenges of late.

Malaysians stood united and cheered for the national contingent as true Malaysians, and not as Malay, Chinese, Indian, Iban or Kadazan. Besides sports and during festive occasions, when else have we displayed a true spirit of Malaysia Boleh?

Our strength as a multicultural nation started since our conception in 1957, leading up to the unification with Sabah and Sarawak in 1963, and was followed through the decades when people stood united and rooted for many occasions and celebrations, including sports. And when our team performed well, especially on the world stage, all of us celebrated wholeheartedly together as Malaysians.

I must emphasise that sports, until today, is a great unifying factor. Malaysians forget about race, religion and who they are when they come together to support their national team. We have all witnessed that at the recent Asian Games, and also not forgetting the last Rio Olympics.

Just as in the glory days of our national football team where we saw players of all races and religion such as M. Chandran, Soh Chin Aun, Mokhtar Dahari or “Super Mokh”, Santokh Singh, R. Arumugam, Shukor Salleh, James Wong and Hassan Sani were our heroes, and whose names may not be about being the best in the world, but about being passionate, united and devoted to the game that allowed us to even qualify for the Olympics twice, in 1972 and 1980.

It is imperative that racial politics be

completely removed from our sporting recruitment. Instead, the focus has to shift to producing the best athletes the nation has ever seen, just as how we have cheered and supported our own world champions Datuk Nicol David and Datuk Lee Chong Wei as well as Shalin Zulkifli and Pandalela Rinong in their respective world-breaking feats.

It is also with great pride that I recall the 2003 QI-IBF Badminton World Championships in Birmingham, England where I was given the opportunity to present medals to the winning players including our own Wong Choong Hann who finished runner-up. At this juncture, we also remember the many other champions who have done the country proud including the famed Sidek brothers, namely Misbun, Razif, Jalani, Rashid and Rahman.

Unfortunately, when sports is taken out of the equation, Malaysians tend to focus and be

bogged down by religious and racial strives that threaten to tear our society apart.

We need to bring back the glory days of the 70s and 80s when the whole nation sat glued to their television sets without so much as a thought of race, religion, creed, colour or upbringing differences, but with only one purpose in mind – to cheer for Team Malaysia during the Thomas Cup and Merdeka Football tournaments.

The question that comes to mind is how do we get Malaysians to always unite, especially through sports? It's quite straightforward.

We need to create champions, those with a passion for excellence and who will be role models for the younger generation.

The people behind the sporting associations should not be politicians, but those who are passionate about sports and are genuinely interested in taking the game to greater heights.

Instead of bickering about petty differences, we should be investing in the best coaches to achieve our quest for that elusive gold medal come the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. There should be an effort to include the public in conversations involving national sports. This undoubtedly will bring about the closeness and camaraderie among people, which cannot be inculcated in classrooms or through lectures.

In order to overcome challenges that the nation is facing, especially in fostering race

relations and national unity, we need to first liberalise the education system at all levels.

Malaysia is a beautiful country with a great future if only our diversity becomes our unity and we get the best people to lead us.

Coming back to sports, opportunities should be given to all Malaysians to participate in national games, be it as a coach or a player. National recruitment must be based on merit, and nothing else. I believe that there is no better time than now for Malaysians to come together as one nation for the betterment of the country as a whole.

The younger generation are now more mature, more intelligent, better educated, tech-savvy and more tolerant.

They are passionate about seeing Malaysia rise to the top.

What we need now is for everyone to wake up and realise this phenomenon because Malaysians are more concerned about employment, income, health and education, instead of the age-old ramblings of differences in race, religion, sex or age. More importantly, the people want to remain united under the Malaysia Boleh umbrella.

It certainly is a wonderful gift for all of us as we partake in all Merdeka Day celebrations. I am sure the medal-winning performances of our Asian Games athletes will be a great topic of conversation over teh tarik and roti canai, nasi lemak or thosai. By now, most of us would be pretty tired of discussing politics anyway.

This National Day, let's remember the initial foundations that this country was built upon, and together, let's celebrate Mahathir's Malaysia Boleh simply because “Malaysia Memang Boleh”.

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