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"The Changing Face of Sports Excellence in Singapore"

by

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Abstract

The sports culture of Singapore has undergone a number of significant changes during its history. Using Williams' (1977) theme of 'dominant-residual-emergent' elements, it is possible to identify that major changes in ideology have occurred during the colonial and post-independence periods. In colonial times, the aspirations of Government towards achievement in sport were very modest and little direct support was given to top class athletes. Since self-Government was achieved in 1959, the main thrusts have been towards sport-for-all and reaping the benefits of sport for nation building. Today, Singapore's advance as a newly industrializing country (NIC) has prompted subtle shifts of emphasis in the field of sports excellence. A Government initiative to promote high-performance sport (SPEX 2000) has focused attention on the attempt to achieve international recognition at Asian, Commonwealth, and Olympic levels. This paper examines the evolution of sporting practices associated with sport for all (dominant), sport for the leisure class (residual) and elite sport (emergent), that have have been influential in sport in Singapore.

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The Changing Face of Sports Excellence in Singapore
(Abridged Version)

Introduction

The evolution of the competitive sporting tradition in Singapore is the main focus of this paper. The current sports excellence programme (SPEX 2000), which was initiated in 1993 as a joint Ministry of Community Development and Singapore Sports Council venture, evolved as a result of the continual regulation of value systems by policy makers dating back to the period of colonial rule. After a period of witnessing the dramatic improvements in Asian sports achievement (Japan, Korea, and now China), there has been increasing awareness of the need to adapt in order to keep pace. Sports excellence has also been recognized as a vital feature of nation building. The SPEX 2000 programme set in train a system which hoped to maximize the potential sporting talent of a small nation (2.8 million) so as to make an impact in regional and global competitions. Organisational restructuring, increased financing, the identification of 'core' and 'merit' sports to provide focus, and the implementation of incentive schemes form the basis of a concerted effort to raise the levels of performance amongst the elite sportsmen and women of Singapore.

It is assumed that the continuing processes of change, as reflected in the value systems that are operating in Singapore, have given rise to the current fluctuating pattern of participation, performance and success in competitive sport. This study takes a historical view of the development of sports excellence and is illustrated by means of Williams' (1977) theoretical interpretations of cultural production and transformation.
The Historical Setting of Sport in Singapore

1) Residual Elements of the Colonial Period until 1942.

The period of colonial development, which began in 1819 with the arrival of Thomas Stamford Raffles, was characterized by the diffusion of methods of trading and commerce, styles of dress, housing, transport, codes of law, religion, and sport from Britain. In particular, the value system associated with individual and team games made its mark on the early Singapore settlement. The British practiced sport to promote fair play, sportsmanship, qualities of leadership, teamwork, and enjoyment. There was considerable concern for the way in which one played the game. It was this type of philosophy that later impressed Pierre de Coubertin the founder of the modern Olympic Games. His conceptualization of sport was a synthesis of the ancient Greek ideals and the educational value of activity espoused by the English Public School system. As members of the Straits Settlements Crown Colony (Singapore, Malacca and Penang), which was established in 1867, the settlers of Singapore inherited and maintained this tradition. However this viewpoint captures only part of the reality of the time.

A more critical perspective is that sport became associated with the leisure pursuits of the privileged individuals and wealthy groups of settlers. Whilst a small number of wealthy English settlers were displaying their skills on the Padang, the indigenous Malays and the majority of immigrants, including the different dialect groups from China, and Indians from the sub-continent, had little time, if any, for sports participation. For the Chinese, relaxation and entertainment was found in the celebration of annual festivals and rites of passage, or in gambling (Jayapal, 1991). They did become involved as observers of sport and may have taken the chance to supplement their earnings through betting, when the Turf Club was
formed in 1840. Work and survival were their basic concerns (Oon, 1984). Additionally, the value systems brought with the pioneer labouring migrants would have motivated them towards ensuring a full rice bowl before engaging in leisure pursuits. The consequence of these patterns was that sport did not become as deeply embedded in the cultural make-up of successive generations of Asian Singaporeans as it was to be for Eurasian and expatriate members of the community.

Sports and social clubs were established to cater to the needs of the wealthier settlers, of both European and Asian origin. These institutions were set up on distinctly racial lines and catered exclusively for elite participants, if not elite performers. The Singapore Cricket Club (British), the Singapore Recreation Club (Eurasian), the Singapore Chinese Recreation Club, the Indian Association, and the Ceylon Sports Club are residual elements of that colonial period. They exist today as multiracial clubs, transformed by legislation in the early nineteen sixties.

Other dominant features of todays sporting organization were also originated at this time. Many sporting associations were constituted during the inter-War period. From 1923 to 1939, thirteen major sports were officially registered, including badminton, athletics, hockey, and swimming. The formation of these associations did provide the opportunity for enthusiastic sportsmen and women to participate without the necessity of joining exclusive social clubs. Then, as now, the administration of the associations was in the hands of volunteers.

It is difficult to evaluate the level of performance during the colonial period by today's standards. The reports of competitive sports at the Singapore Cricket
Club, for example, indicate the achievements of exclusively amateur participants to be of a predictably mixed range. International successes have been noted however. The five representatives of the Chinese Swimming Club, who were selected to represent China in the Far East Olympics in Shanghai in 1927 (Oon, 1984), were amongst the founders of a strong swimming tradition in Singapore.

2) Japanese Occupation 1942-1945

Of the four periods of development referred to by Chew and Lee (1991), only three of them have particular relevance to this study. The period of Japanese occupation will not be considered in particular detail here. The Europeans were interned and although there is evidence to suggest that Asian and Eurasian participants still played periodically during 1942 and 1943 (Sharp, 1993), there was minimal interest in competitive sport and clearly no international participation.

3) The Residual Elements of the Transitional Period prior to Independence

In 1946 Singapore became a Crown Colony in its own right, with the constitutional powers in the hands of the Governor. Self-government, however, was not attained until 1959, when the first general election was held. The post-War period leading to independence represented what might be termed the Golden Age of Sport in Singapore. Even though there was little active support from the colonial government, and the British Armed Forces and civilians tended to dominate team sports, a number of Singaporean athletes did achieve international acclaim. As part of the Malayan team, Wong Peng Soon and Ong Poh Lim were involved in badminton successes in the Thomas Cup (1949, 1952, 1955). Wong Peng Soon was also the All-England Champion in 1950, 1951, 1952, and 1955.
In the Asian Games, which began in 1951, the major successes were achieved in athletics, weightlifting, and in particular in water polo and swimming. Water sports have traditionally provided Singapore with a relatively rich harvest of regional and continental medals. The Singapore Olympic Sports Council was established in 1947, and the following year two Eurasian athletes, Lloyd Valberg and Jocelyn de Souza, became the first Singaporean representatives to compete in the Olympic Games in London. Most significantly, four Singaporeans reached their respective finals in weightlifting, with one of them winning Singapore's first and, so far, only medal.

Table 1: Singaporean Weightlifters at the Olympics (from Wallechinsky, 1992)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Olympics</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952 (Helsinki)</td>
<td>Lon Mohamed Noor</td>
<td>Bantamweight</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952 (Helsinki)</td>
<td>Chay Weng Yew</td>
<td>Featherweight</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956 (Melbourne)</td>
<td>Tan Ser Cher</td>
<td>Featherweight</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960 (Rome)</td>
<td>Tan Howe Liang</td>
<td>Lightweight</td>
<td>SILVER</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The inception of the South East Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games in 1959 provided a regional biennial competition, that provided opposition and motivation for talented athletes, and at the same time prepared them for harder challenges at the Asian Games and the Olympic Games.

The sporting infrastructure that supported the successes at various levels was based largely on club participation and administration by volunteers, with little enterprise on the part of the government. After 1959, two of the most significant steps taken towards the democratization of sport were, first, to remove the racial barriers to club membership and second, to generate interest through government initiatives. The different sporting clubs and associations were now able to draw
from a more diverse and larger talent pool, and could expect to be assisted in their attempts to nurture young talent.

4) The Dominant Culture and Emergent Elements after Independence in 1965

With the declaration of independence and the withdrawal of the British Armed Forces in 1971, the traditional dominance of national teams by expatriates ended (Sharp, 1993). Factors which may have initiated a decline in the standard of performance in contact sports like rugby. Soccer, hockey, and badminton continued to be the most popular activities, with swimming consistently providing the most international successes. Patricia Chan, Junie Sng, Ang Peng Siong and, more recently, Joscelin Yeo, are Singaporean swimmers who have dominated the scene at the SEAP/SEA Games.

After a brief merger with the Federation of Malaysian States, Singapore achieved independent nation status in 1965. As the focus of attention for all Singaporeans was the process of nation building, the main priorities for action became the provision of housing, employment, defence, and securing political stability. Almost immediately plans were initiated to create an appropriate organizational structure for sport that would enhance Singapore's growth potential. The stages of development were marked by the establishment of administrative and regulatory agencies.

The variety of sports available to the general population became wider and the number of sports associations increased. The Festival of Sports (Pesta Sukan), which had been inaugurated in 1964, was promoted as an informal means of encouraging friendly competition with neighbouring countries. As an annual event its impact on high level performance was considerable up until the early nineteen
seventies, when the focus on mass participation took the limelight. By the end of
the first decade of independence a number of institutions had been established
following Government initiatives: 1971 to 1973 being a pivotal period with the
completion of the National Stadium and the founding of the new Singapore Sports
Council as notable highlights.

The early period of post-independence Singapore was marked by rapid
change in all areas of life. This relative instability, underlined by political,
economic and racial turmoil, created a situation where values representing
tradition and conservatism were competing with values representing autonomy and
change. Kwok (1993) refers to this 'problem of tradition' in Singapore as a
discourse at the official (government) and the public (professionals, intellectuals,
academics) levels. Some of the residual elements of colonial occupation noted
previously proved resilient and were retained after considerable scrutiny. In the
context of sport the conflict which arose over the use of the land occupied by the
Singapore Cricket Club (the Padang) is a clear illustration of this type of cultural
process. Denied the use of the Padang for its political rallies by the members of a
predominantly European membership, the People's Action Party subsequently
debated whether to revoke the lease on the Padang and convert it into a public
recreation ground (Sharp, 1993). Ultimately the advantages of retaining this
institution outweighed the disadvantages and it was decided that the club and its
playing field could remain, provided the number of Singaporeans admitted as
members reached at least 50% of the total membership.

Emergent elements within a culture are associated with the concept of
change or modernization. Rapid change in Singapore has simultaneously brought
about two processes within the sports system. Firstly, the integration of groups
associated with sport, witness the consultative and coordinating role of the SSC. Secondly, and somewhat paradoxically, the disconnection or isolation of those individuals, who seek their livelihood as professional athletes or who undertake protracted periods of intensive training. The changes in organized sport, as identified by the move towards sports excellence and professional sport, illustrate how an emerging element is confronted with resistance from the dominant culture. Ingham (1979) outlined an ideal-typical interpretation of sport in two different time frames, which has been adapted here to represent the Singapore context. (Table 2). The dominant orientation in Singapore is italicized and may register as either premodern, modern or has elements of both:

Table 2: Identifying the Dominant Elements in the Singapore Sports System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Residual</th>
<th>DOMINANT</th>
<th>Emergent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>LOCATION</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sports Council facilities: Community Centres and stadia.</strong></td>
<td>Foreign locations for extended training and exposure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports and social clubs, eg. Chinese Swimming Club, the Turf Club.</td>
<td><strong>Centralized regulatory agencies, bureaucratic administration.</strong> <strong>NB. NSAs retain autonomy. SSC consults with SNOC and the NSAs.</strong></td>
<td>Professional administration and coaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer administration</td>
<td><strong>Standardized, exoteric or made public, designed to avoid ambiguity</strong></td>
<td>Civil intervention (if necessary), in the case of doping or match fixing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual consent, esoteric, written and unwritten rules apply (as in golf clubs).</td>
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RECRUITMENT
Interest, subscription, invitation, challenge, cultural and peer pressure. Ability is not necessarily a criterion. Linked to social status, eg golf club membership.

Community and economic inducement. Ability is definitely a criterion.

Talent identification Career status linked to potential performance value.

ACTION-ORIENTATION

Intrinsic, autotelic, traditional, display, affiliative, affectual

Instrumental, profit and performance, meritocratic.

Professionalism, extrinsic motivation

NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

Amateurism, elite versus popular sports culture, character development spiritual fulfillment

Healthy lifestyle, character building, connection to collective interests. Commercialism, entertainment, politicized, sport sanctioned by claims to fitness and health. Self-discipline.

Work, service, sponsorship, estranged or alienated participants.

LEVEL OF TECHNOLOGY

Non-scientific, journals, magazines, papers.

Some 'expert opinion' few support specialists. Scientific, emphasis on technique, medical support.

Reliance on mass media, business management orientation, specialists and experts.

Conclusion

In 1993 the announcement of the SPEX 2000 programme, was a landmark in the history of sports excellence in Singapore. It acknowledged that the system, set in place under Sport for All for producing elite athletes, required reconceptualization and and then transformation. In the case of Singapore, the emergent culture of sport as occupation or work is materializing. The rapid improvement of other nations within the region and the various barriers to success in Singapore have necessitated a shift in values so as to achieve higher standards and then to challenge international rivals.
Bibliography


