THE ROAD TO MEDALS - NOT JUST A QUESTION
OF BETTER TRAINING AND TECHNIQUE

by

John E. Saunders and Nicholas G. Aplin
School of Physical Education
National Institute of Education
Nanyang Technological University

Paper presented to the International Sports Science Conference 93 Optimising Performance held in conjunction with the 17th SEA Games and the 20th Anniversary of the Singapore Sports Council.

Westin Stamford, Singapore June 9-11 1993
ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Singapore has not achieved a level of success in international sport commensurate with its economic and political status. Many reasons have been advanced by commentators including the anatomical and physiological characteristics of the Asian body type and a lack of mental toughness (i.e. the physical and psychological characteristics of the local population.) However the success of some of the Asian nations in the Barcelona Olympics and the success of Singaporeans in the cut-throat world of international commerce fails to support such easy and fatalistic explanations.

Attempts to raise the standard of performance of national athletes have generally revolved around the application of sports science principles and the seeking out of high levels of technical expertise through the use of overseas experts. Financial incentives have also been part of recent strategies. However current approaches in corporate management are used to develop the argument that such strategies on their own are unlikely to be successful. Rather there is more to be gained from looking at the issue from a social perspective from which it can be seen that if Singapore's sports leaders wish to achieve success in the competitive world of international sport there is a need to address the ways in which the aspiring competitor is socialised into sport and the norms and values to which he is exposed within that process.

The paper concludes with some suggested strategies for developing a sports culture that has the potential to support competitive young athletes and encourage them to remain in sport and invest in the sort of commitment necessary to achieve personal peak performance.
It is clear to the visitor on arrival at Changi airport that he is entering into a remarkable and successful society. Singaporeans themselves are aware of their achievements and can point to the status of the airport as the world’s best, Singapore Airlines as the World’s best airline, the container port as the world’s second busiest, the Westin Stamford as the World’s tallest hotel. There is indeed an emphasis upon excellence and achievement that has propelled this tiny island state rapidly from the status of a newly industrialised economy to that of a developed nation and one of the leaders of an economic area poised to assume major significance in the world stage. The Senior Minister talks with Leaders on the World stage and his addresses are sought and listened to in all corners of the globe. World leaders and their representatives regularly meet with senior government representatives and all this serves to enhance this nation’s status, again beyond what could reasonably be expected.

The foundation of this success is clearly economic. As well as providing political status, this economic success has laid the groundwork for an enviable standard of living, excellent medical services, clean and efficient transport and communication systems. It has not however led to a record of any note within the sporting arena. This despite the excellent range of facilities provided by the Sports Council through the Masterplan for Sports facilities, the introduction of qualified physical education personnel into many schools and the provision of a comprehensive range of coaching and other accreditation
programmes. In other words, the appearance of an appropriate sports infrastructure has been very competently put in place. Yet results and achievement commensurate with the infrastructure have simply not emerged.

Lack of Success

Clearly, the assumption that Singapore has not achieved a record of any note in international sport might be seen as contestable. Defenders of Singapore sporting achievement will no doubt draw attention to Tan Howe Liang’s Olympic Silver in weightlifting, Wong Peng Soon’s reign as All England singles champion in badminton and Ang Peng Siok’s 50 metre 1982 world best time in the swimming pool. Sadly these great achievements serve only to reinforce our point. Tan’s medal was achieved in Rome before Singapore’s independence and Wong Peng Soon’s dominance of the badminton world was a whole decade earlier. Ang Peng Siok was indeed a special case and will be referred to later. More contemporary success such as it is has been limited to minority events or a more local stage. It seems to us irrefutable that in comparison with the standards sought and achieved in the areas previously identified, Singapore’s record is simply not of the same order.

Reasons

Indeed a ready acceptance of this truth can be seen in the manner in which Singaporeans embrace explanations for this
comparative lack of success. Thus the press report on a recent forum on sports excellence at the Singapore Polytechnic reported that there is not enough support from the government, and the administration of sport and that there was a lack of commitment from the athletes themselves. Such views seem too readily expressed of late, but are they indeed justified and how do they relate in a country of such demonstrable competence and commitment in other areas?

Barriers to success at the highest level can be
1. Physiological
2. Psychological
3. Financial
4. Resource based - human
   - physical
5. Cultural

All of these have been cited from time to time as barriers to greater sporting success for Singapore and a person's training and their experience may well pre-dispose them to looking for the answers to the problem in a limited number of directions. Thus many sport scientists may favour looking for physiological reasons to explain lack of success. Consistent with this line of argument is the view that Asians are physically inferior to the larger European and African body builds. Clearly bulk and power are advantages in certain sports and events but increasing Asian success in the Olympics for example suggest that as an explanation in Singapore's case this can have only limited value.
Similarly the psychological explanation can have only limited appeal. Levels of aspiration and commitment have been of the highest in economic, academic and technical spheres. The achievements demonstrate that the people of Singapore have the mental aptitude to succeed. The financial argument clearly is a non-starter. Singapore is now a wealthy country and far richer than a nation like Kenya with its outstanding Olympic record and more prosperous even than New Zealand, a tiny nation with an outstanding record of international sporting success in many different activities. The resources based argument is at first a more plausible one. With a population of a mere 3.3 million Singapore would seem to have a far smaller talent pool on which to draw than even its ASEAN rivals. However Kiviaho and Makela (1978) have suggested that a small urban nation like Singapore in fact enjoys some significant relative advantages. They point out that population size demonstrates a weak negative correlation to success when relative score analysis is used, and that relative advantage can be expected from the fact that Olympic sport is largely urban or industrial by nature and presupposes constructions which can only be built in an urban milieu. Additionally size might provide a severe disadvantage with regard to the effective organisation of sport. As far as physical resources are concerned Singapore though lacking natural waterways, mountains and parks, nonetheless has an abundance of sports facilities as already highlighted - and of course the financial capacity to provide new facilities wherever there is demonstrable need.

This of course leaves only the barrier of culture as a major
impediment to success in international sport. Yet it seems to be the last intervention that Singaporeans have attempted in their unsuccessful search for sports excellence. Characteristic approaches to date have shown an extraordinary faith in the value of the traditional sports sciences. Thus outside experts have been sought to bring in details of the latest training methods, international coaches to expose local coaches and their charges to information concerning the latest techniques. Recently there has been increased interest in sports psychology and an overseas mental skills consultant has been attached to the Sports Council. Yet such strategies have failed to stimulate any major breakthrough in sustained levels of performance. Similarly the complementary approach of sending athletes overseas to train and compete has failed to produce significant results. Some young Singaporeans have been successful in gaining sports scholarships to the United States and thus gained access to one of the most successful competitive sports nurseries in the world. Yet their results have attracted no great attention. In contrast in academic spheres the achievement of Singaporeans overseas has been remarkable.

Visiting experts and fact-finding Singaporeans evaluating overseas development have made recommendations on a number of issues and various schemes have been implemented. Hence Sports Scholarships, a Sports Aid Fund and even now the assistance of athlete's by paying them a wage to train for the SEA games, have all featured in a range of incentives and programmes designed to help Singaporean athletes achieve sporting excellence.
Such schemes however represent somewhat piecemeal attempts and, given the success that has been achieved in other spheres, the outsider might be excused for concluding that if the strategies attempted do not reflect incompetence, then they must reflect a lack of commitment, not within individual athletes or dedicated sports persons but rather at a deeper 'cultural' level.

When we talk of culture, we are not referring to the rich heritage of Singapore's major ethnic groups or the history of this island state's settlement, growth, struggle against adversity and eventual blossoming. Rather we talk of culture in terms of it's use within an organisation. An awareness of its value and use is one of the most powerful of tools in the development of successful organisations. Thus today we can talk of the culture of the corporate successes - Microsoft, MacDonalds and the Japanese giants and contrast these with the cultures of those that have lost their way like IBM. Flood and Jackson (1990) explain.

"In a broad sense a culture refers to various nebulous shared characteristics at all levels of organisation: societal, corporate group etc... At the level of the firm a culture is a shared reality, or a socially constructed reality (of values and beliefs) that deems certain social practices to be normal acceptable and desirable. Culture is extremely important in all organisations because it determines how organisations react, for example to change and what changes are perceived to be feasible.

Creative Problem Solving: Total Systems Intervention p.14
Most organisations these days recognize the need to manage culture, as for example in the growth of Quality Management inspired programmes. These programmes seek to install a quality culture within the enterprise.

Conclusion

Our argument in this brief paper is simply that if Singapore’s sports administrators wish to place sports on an equal footing with other areas of this country’s achievements then it must critically evaluate the current sport culture at all levels - schools, armed forces, universities and polytechnics, the national sporting bodies. The necessary changes and actions must then be installed at all levels. It would be our belief at this stage in our enquiry that Singaporeans have chosen to evaluate sport as play and play as trivial and non-serious and therefore the antithesis to work.

Such a view may have made sense at an earlier stage when national priorities dictated other goals. The effect of the Prime Minister’s counsel at the opening of the National Stadium twenty years ago has been long lasting.

With a population of just over 2 million, let us not waste time to go out of our way to produce gold medallists. Whether for Olympic, Asian or SEAP Games there are no national benefits from gold medallists for smaller countries. For the super powers with large populations winning in sports becomes national propaganda to persuade people of the superiority of their competing political systems. But it is foolish and wasteful for the smaller countries to copy this.
However times have now changed. Many goals have now been achieved, probably beyond the wildest dreams of most. Priorities naturally change in a fast changing environment and international sport in this new world order of interdependence plays a few different role to that of the Cold war era. Indeed with some imagination Singapore's athletes and sportsmen and women could play a role amongst the new entrepreneurs who are currently being encouraged to leave these shores and work for this country's interests overseas. After all the promotion of both "mass participation and excellence in sports" is a goal for the next lap.

We will promote especially sports which Singaporeans are likely to excel in, so that more can do well. Outstanding sportsmen and sportswomen will be given opportunities to realize their potential. The Singapore Armed Forces too will continue to support our national sport efforts.

(p.113)

It must be remembered that all the sports science knowledge, all the technical skill we can muster and develop, can only be successful in achieving these goals, if due attention is paid to the development of an appropriate culture within which these can be applied.


