Maximising sporting and academic achievement in Singapore

Nicholas G. Aplin


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MAXIMISING SPORTING AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN SINGAPORE

NICHOLAS G. APLIN
Nicholas G. Aplin

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Abstract

This study plots the progress of attempts in Singapore to harmonise the joint-pursuit of academic and sporting goals. A historical perspective indicates that sporting achievement has never challenged the attainment of educational qualifications in the mind-set of Singaporeans. However, recent initiatives to attain international prestige in the sporting arena have reinforced the notion that identifying talented individuals and giving them material support will ultimately serve the nation by producing champions. Considerable encouragement has been given by sports agencies and corporate sponsors to talented scholars who show equal aptitude for sporting achievement. There are nationally-based and internationally-based schemes for giving financial support to primary, secondary, and tertiary students. And yet, the results of these ventures provide disheartening feedback to the organisers.

With educational goals of utmost priority in personal development, it appears that there exists a form of resistance to the idea that combining sport and studies can work. Issues relating to the origin and removal of these barriers are discussed.
Introduction

This paper will argue that competitive sport and academic study are uneasy companions in Singapore. Young talented athletes are confronted with many obstacles if they wish to pursue competitive sports excellence, not least the guiding principles that have created an impressively competitive economy. One can identify the principles of pragmatism, strong leadership, and meritocracy as having propelled Singapore into its status of fifth richest nation in the world per capita. It should not be surprising that a nation, which reveres education as the *sine qua non* for advancement, should simultaneously de-prioritise the expenditure of great effort on the playing field. Singapore is a small, dynamic country where the general perception has been, until recently, that succeeding in sport and academic studies are mutually exclusive (Ng, 1996). Therefore, sporting achievements have always played second fiddle to academic and economic success (Sia, 1994).

Any distraction to the pursuit of academic gold is viewed with suspicion. Sports participation is seen as valuable but only for its support role in creating a fit and healthy population. The national ideology, which focuses on survival, security and prosperity views sport and physical education as instrumental to the process of nation building. During the years of independence since 1965, security and defence have been prime concerns. Therefore it is the fitness, that can be derived from sport, that has provided the main focus for school programmes. Whilst in Singapore leadership qualities, character development, and discipline are also seen as important benefits of participation in sport, the pursuit of individual excellence for its own sake has produced relatively few successes involving either teams or the individual athlete.
The growth of Singapore

A brief overview of the history of Singapore can be used to explain the primacy of education and the subordinate position of competitive sport. The period of colonial development, which began in 1819 with the arrival of Thomas Stamford Raffles, was characterised by the diffusion of both educational and sporting systems from Britain. Within this colonial city, there were three particular features, intrinsic to the colonial process itself, that were to have far reaching influence on the relationship between sport and study: first, a high degree of cultural, racial, religious, and social pluralism; second, a system of social stratification that set the colonial settlers above the indigenous population of Malays, and the migrants from China, India, and equatorial archipelago; and third, a concentration of power in economic, political, and social matters in the hands of the ruling elite (Yeoh, 1996). Under this system opportunities for education and sport were not divided at all equally.

Other migrants had very little influence on the formalised sporting practices established by the British at that time. The activities introduced by the colonial power would have had little meaning to the majority of migrant and indigenous races anyway. An exception was the section of the Chinese population born in the Straits Settlements of Malaya. Members of this pro-British group learned English, demonstrated their allegiance to Queen Victoria and the British Empire, and assimilated many of the cultural traditions of the colonialists (Turnbull, 1989), including sports such as tennis and cricket (Song, 1967).

Sporting activities in colonial Singapore were organised and regulated on a largely ad hoc basis, with recruitment based primarily on interest and invitation, rather than on ability.
Sport was a ‘palliative for boredom’ (Sharp, 1993, p.15) and an affirmation of status. The prevailing orientation of the participants was directed at satisfying three basic human requirements. Firstly, individual needs such as stimulation, emotional release, personal challenge, and the exhibition of skill and prowess. Secondly, requisites of co-ordinated social interaction such as conviviality and festivity. Thirdly, requirements for group survival, such as social solidarity and conformity amongst those elite few who were eligible for membership.

Sport did not flourish as widely in the school system, as it had in the English public schools, but manifested itself more as a club pastime for those with time and money. In this way the sporting culture was only available to affluent adults. Sports and social clubs were established to cater only 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 residents, rather than for elite performers. Furthermore, in line with the customs of the time, women were largely excluded from the sporting activities.

The demographic distribution of ethnic groups at that time reflects a recognisable pattern of the elite minority enjoying complete ascendancy over the migrant majority: a pattern that was reflected in sports participation. Between 1871 and 1931 no more than 2% of the population were European settlers, compared to 75% of the population which was of Chinese origin (Yeoh, 1996). Thus through lack of equal opportunity or lack of interest, the largest migrant groups had little contact with sport.
It has been demonstrated that passive and active opposition to the colonial power and its institutions has existed in Singapore (Gopinathan, 1991; Yeoh, 1996). Minimal involvement in sport, resulting from the lack of opportunities for physical recreation, may have been exacerbated by a form of deliberate resistance to the colonial construction of sport. For many years non-English-speaking Chinese immigrants looked to China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong for their inspiration in sport. It might be argued that the combination of this conscious indifference to British-styled sport, close affiliation with China, and the limited opportunities to participate on an equal footing, prevented elements of international sporting culture from being deeply embedded in the cultural make-up of successive generations of Singaporean Chinese. This has become particularly significant given the dominant representation of the Chinese in the national community.

In 1946 Singapore became a separate Crown Colony, independent of Malacca and Penang, with the constitutional powers in the hands of the Governor. However, for migrants and settlers alike there was no real identity with their island home. Until 1959, when self-government was attained, there were no Singaporeans as such, only British subjects and aliens. The majority of the population were immigrants who had little intention of settling permanently (Chua, 1995). They possessed a cultural orientation directed towards their mother country. This lack of affiliation with Singapore and the concomitant concern with accumulating benefits prior to returning ‘home’ had consequences for representative activities such as sport.

A very ugly picture of life in Singapore in the years immediately following the war exists. Singapore had reverted to employing its population in agriculture and in manufacturing.
One in ten of the working population remained unemployed. Forty eight percent of the population was illiterate, with places in school for 81% of the primary-age children, but only for 23% of secondary-age children. Living conditions were squalid. Malnutrition and tuberculosis had been rife (Turnbull, 1989). Many streets were unlit, public standpipes were needed for water, and proper sanitation was a luxury enjoyed by few people. In the midst of the turmoil sport was still dominated by a small English-speaking minority of the population (People's Association, 1980).

During the 1950s a major gulf existed between the English-educated Chinese and the Chinese-educated Chinese. The ‘disenchanted, discriminated, disenfranchised’ Chinese speaking segment of the population had fewer opportunities than the British-educated Chinese, the so called ‘running dogs’ of the British (People’s Association, 1980, p.27). The mass of Chinese blamed their troubles on the colonial regime and resented the privileged position of the English-educated (Turnbull, 1989, p.244). The colonial approach to regulating activities in a multi-racial society was to divide the population on the basis of ethnicity. The segregation of language groups, served to divide, and therefore constrain, the common pool of talented players. This division was reflected and reinforced in allegiances to specific sporting activities. The Indian section of the population have tended to play hockey, soccer, and cricket, the Malay representatives focus on soccer and sepak takraw, whilst the Chinese have dominated basketball, table tennis, and badminton.

**Sport and the Education System**

The gradual evolution of the education system in Singapore has played a significant role in reinforcing the pattern of sport previously established by the British. In the same way that
segregation had hindered the transmission of competitive sport into the life of the general population (Lau, 1973), so the spread of school sport was hampered by this ‘compartmentalisation of education’ (Gopinathan, 1974). The two basic categories of schools, English and vernacular, produced two groups, which were culturally, intellectually, and economically divorced from each other (Gopinathan, 1974, p.3). ‘The overall effect was socially divisive, separating the English educated and those taught the vernacular, widening the gap between the different communities except at the highest level, accentuating racial, cultural and linguistic differences and stressing the rift between rich and poor.’ The Chinese provided their own schools, retaining an orientation towards China (Turnbull, 1989).

Four types of schools existed before independence, each based on a different medium of instruction. The children of the Straits Chinese went to English medium schools, which accounted for 35% of the school enrolment. The government run Malay vernacular schools (6%); community and estate-run Chinese schools (58%), and the Tamil vernacular schools (<1%) accounted for the remainder of the enrolment. In these schools, where there were differences in financial assistance, control and supervision, management, and curricula (Gopinathan, 1974), the opportunities for physical education and sport differed likewise. Sport was not compulsory, appearing in the curriculum at the discretion of the school principal (Oon, 1984). There was racial typing of games (Lau, 1973, p.17) with Chinese schools associated with table tennis, volleyball, and basketball, whereas the English schools identified more with soccer, rugby, and hockey. The sporting traditions of an English medium school like Raffles Institute were ‘totally consistent with those of the 19th century English public schools on which it was modelled’, with sports days, house
competitions, compulsory attendance at school matches, and ‘a great enthusiasm on the part of school teams to win in every competition’ (Saunders, 1993, p.355). In the Chinese-medium schools, which had less open space for activities, there was more emphasis on drills, callisthenics, and relays, although table tennis and basketball did become popular. Today the medium of communication amongst basketball coaches and players is Mandarin or Hokkien, highlighting the resilience of Chinese culture in these sports.

Independence in 1965 brought nation building to the top of the political and social agenda. A number of different focal points were linked to new ideas about the role of education, in particular, and of sport, to a lesser degree. In order to exist as a small city-state, the prime concern was to transform the economy. The three key elements here were: survival, security, and prosperity. Education was a pillar of development as it provided the means for Singaporeans to communicate, manage, and organise themselves for the first time. Prospective leaders in the different spheres of economic, political, and social activity required high levels of education to enhance their knowledge and understanding, and to reinforce their authority. In line with the predominantly Confucian principles that have operated in Singapore, education served to establish not only a distinct hierarchy, but also to provide opportunities for all that could take advantage of them.

The earliest principles concerning sport in industrialising Singapore highlight the limitations of a country with no other resources than its people. The development of sport was concerned with two initiatives. First, to raise competitive standards, and, in so doing, forge a national identity that was visible internationally. Second, to improve the fitness levels of the workforce, who were the heart of the economy, and the Armed Forces, who
were the core of the nation’s defences. National Service recruits needed to be prepared for the demands of basic military and combat training.

The early years of independence were marked by the strenuous efforts of individuals to enhance their economic potential. One of the main consequences of this trend was the drive for material gain. A willingness to compete for material advantages was stimulated and became a dominant theme in the personal uniqueness of the new Singaporean. It was as a consequence of this trend to be competitive, that the attainment and subsequent enhancement of educational qualifications became synonymous with success. Economy-based values were given precedence over the promotion of all other cultural practices, and the achievement of continuing success implanted a ‘material orientation’ as part of Singaporean identity (Chua, 1995).

The earliest national goals were pursued in a volatile political environment. There were political threats from communist insurgents as the revolution in China sought to spread its influence to the Chinese Diaspora (Turnbull, 1989). There were also social threats from the potentially divisive influence of racial communalism (People’s Association, 1980). The political and ideological threat of communism gradually diminished as avenues of infiltration were sealed and monitored. Both state security and national unity were consolidated through the introduction of National Service, which required heavy investment in manpower and equipment (Turnbull, 1989). As the integration of racial groups through housing policies and community recreation initiatives was enacted, so the growth of the economy and the generation of wealth became the focal points. Education played a pivotal role in the task of nation building by emphasising two important tasks. First, the teaching of
essential cognitive, communication, technical, and leadership skills, which provided Singaporeans with the opportunity to enhance individual and social productivity. Second, the inculcation of desirable values, which enabled the society to become socially disciplined and cohesive (Yip, Eng, and Yap, 1990). Thus, the economic transformation of the nation was facilitated and Singapore became a ‘meritocracy’. The government’s ‘emphasis on meritocracy as a pragmatic means to extract the best from each citizen,’ however led to ‘individualism as a logical outcome’ (Chua, 1995, p.27). Rewards for the individual became based on the principles of competition, ability, motivation and performance (Chen, 1972).

The role of sport in emerging Singapore

Sport has first and foremost been conceptualised as an instrument for nation building in Singapore (Lau, 1975, 1978). When self-government was attained in 1959, the People’s Association was established to promote multi-racial community recreation. When independent nation status was achieved in 1965, sport was enlisted by the Government to raise standards of physical fitness amongst National Service recruits. Nevertheless, when a Sports For All policy was introduced by the Government in 1973, sport was fundamentally interpreted as a leisure pursuit. Participation could provide an individual with the satisfaction of basic needs such as challenge, release of tension, and exercise, whilst simultaneously inculcating common values such as loyalty, a sense of belonging, and teamwork (Thomas, 1984). At that time, this conceptualisation of sport was also expected to accommodate the notion of competitive sport as a source of international prestige and as a reflection of national collective effort. The communitarian ideology that has officially supplanted the individualism associated with rapid modernisation in Singapore was
As the nation continued its remarkable emergence as one of the leading developing economies during the 1970s, so the resulting affluence and burgeoning national pride sought new outlets in sport. With an expanding role came the expectations to display all the characteristics of an industrialising nation. Expertise had to be demonstrated in areas beyond the fundamentals required for a sound economy. The best and brightest amongst the younger population were sent abroad on Public Service Commission scholarships, charged with the responsibility of bringing in new knowledge, ideas, and connections, and to contribute to the ambitions of the society.

By 1982 sport became incorporated into this process and a small number of talented student-athletes were sponsored to institutions in the United States and the United Kingdom. Ang Peng Siong, an Olympian in 1984 and 1988, studied and trained at the University of Houston. His victory in the consolation final of the 100 metres Freestyle remains the best performance in the Olympic Games by a Singaporean swimmer.

**Progress in raising the profile of sport within education**

In Singapore, the selection of activities made available to participants has been, in part, determined at the school level. With the integration of Chinese and English streams of education after 1959, students gained exposure to a wider range of sports. The Chinese-medium pupils, for example, were introduced to soccer, hockey and badminton (Oon, 1984). The advent of the Extra-Curricular Activities (ECA) programme in 1970 also
resulted in increased participation in sport, as well as in uniformed groups (for example, the National Cadet Corps) and cultural activities such as Lion Dancing. Compulsory participation in ECA at Primary and Secondary level was encouraged through the use of a grading system which not only 'rewarded effort, contribution and achievement', but also enhanced 'applications for scholarships and bursaries and admission to pre-university classes’ (Singapore Schools' Sports Council, 1987).

Perhaps the policy of awarding marks for participation in extra-curricular activities, including sport, was the most significant event in the evolution of the sport system in Singapore. The whole orientation of sport in schools changed as a result of this move, which allowed pupils to have a balanced exposure to various types of sporting activities.

Joseph David, Deputy Director ECAC, 1983.

Nevertheless, criticisms have been levelled at the equity of the ECA points system and in particular its comparatively poor recognition for sporting achievement. In the past, participation in 'uniform' groups in secondary schools has been perceived as an easier means to accumulate points for entry to Junior Colleges and Polytechnic institutions. It may also be argued that the 'points for participation' system in Singapore schools had a greater impact on broad educational aims, than on the development of elite sport. Extrinsic rewards in the form of ECA points may well have enhanced the positive personal perceptions of competency and self-determination that have been seen as necessary to sustain intrinsic motivation to compete (Deci, 1975), yet the system also links participation in sport to the promotion of students to higher levels of education. This has created a perception that, increasing sporting expertise is a means to achieving educational rather than sporting goals. The Sports Colours Awards system, also organised by the Singapore Schools Sports Council has proved better suited to promoting sports excellence
through its objectives of giving recognition to top performance, encouraging higher achievements, and promoting sportsmanship (Singapore Schools Sports Council, 1987).

In the 1970s ECA could be used as a subject for admission into Junior Colleges. However, a large proportion of those who gained admission subsequently failed in their ‘A’ Levels. This was therefore stopped in 1981. When entrants to the Joint Polytechnic/SSC Admission scheme were accepted in 1991 partly on the basis of their ECA record, there were fears that the same results might occur. Thus far this avenue remains.

Recently the ECA system has been revised in an attempt to correct the perception of ascribing a lower value to the pursuit competitive sport (ST, January 12, 1997). As the time spent on training and competing in sport has become much greater than that devoted to activities in the uniform groups, it has therefore been deemed necessary to increase the incentives for athletes and athletic achievement.

Incentives have played a large role in attracting the potential champion to stay with sports excellence. The Singapore system as a whole very much depends on official, visible and tangible rewards to maintain its momentum. One is drawn to the conclusion that relying on dreams and intrinsic benefits is an insufficient basis for sustained progress in sport or other areas of human endeavour. The Sportsboy/Sportsgirl Award was the first to be introduced in 1977 with the aim of rewarding outstanding sporting achievement. Today there are a number of such schemes and programmes that have been designed to encourage dedication and commitment to the pursuit of high performance objectives. Most of these are linked with a comprehensive plan to raise the standard of competitiveness that was

**Sports Excellence Programmes associated with Education**

1. Sports Excellence Assistance Programme for Schools (SEAPS) provides modest training allowances for elite school athletes.

2. The Talent Assistance Programme (spexTAP) is a scheme, which enables young athletes to train abroad under approved coaches if such expertise is unavailable in Singapore.

3. The Coaching Assistance Programme for Schools (spexCAP) is a scheme to develop a pool of qualified coaches to assist school athletes. This programme is a tripartite arrangement between the Singapore Sports Council (SSC), the National Sports Associations (NSA), and the schools. The SSC is responsible for coordinating the actions of the NSAs and the schools. The NSAs identify the coaches, and the schools pay for the services of the coaches and monitor the progress of their athletes.

4. SPEX 2000 also awards scholarships to help talented athletes pursue their studies in local and approved overseas tertiary institutions. Swimming is particularly well represented with Desmond Koh (a Rhodes Scholar), who is currently studying at Oxford, and Thum Ping Tjin, who is studying at Harvard. At the local level, the SSC/Polytechnic Admission Scheme encourages ‘O’ Level holders to extend their studies to the tertiary level.
5. Private companies also support the sports scene, with ESSO Singapore at the forefront with its series of scholarships dating back 22 years. These awards are based on academic and sporting criteria, and are sought after by secondary and tertiary students.

The motivation for the schemes involving foreign travel reflects the constraints under which local athletes are currently operating. The scholarships’ main appeal is that they allow the athletes to continue competitive sports and studies overseas where the environment is more conducive (Sia, 1994). This is not at all a criticism of the facilities in Singapore, which are amongst the finest in the world, but more an indictment of the competitive atmosphere associated with educational achievement.

**Maximising the potential of young Singaporeans student-athletes in sport**

One might argue that attempts to harmonise sport and study in Singapore are still in their infancy and that there remain problems in identifying individuals who will not only benefit academically but also bring glory to their nation in sporting competition. Some perceive that sponsored overseas visits are rewards for previous good performance rather than the next vital stage in improving or realising potential. Until recently students at the tertiary level of education have been the main beneficiaries and yet their combined contribution to sporting achievement on return to Singapore has been disappointing. Often it is observed that returning athletes fail to achieve the peak performance that was anticipated from them. Some indeed fall into rapid decline, withdraw from competition and move into their career option. Ultimately the educational qualifications that are gained are of more direct benefit to the individual than the rewards of sporting achievement.
Some significant changes have now been made to the system. Most notably, talented athletes at the secondary stage of education are now being identified for foreign assistance. Teenage swimmers Sng Ju Wei and Joscelin Yeo are currently in Australia for example. Their results at major regional competitions are currently promising, but many wait to be convinced that higher targets can be reached through this system. A more radical experiment, however, is currently underway within an autonomous school that boasts a record of high academic achievement.

The Anglican High School Experiment

Anglican High School embarked on a curriculum innovation involving sports excellence in 1994. In this initiative all pupils choosing badminton, basketball and table tennis as their extra curricular activity were selected through trials and time-tabled differently from those students in the mainstream curriculum. These sports figure prominently in school and community-based programmes and are three of the core sports identified for development through SPEX 2000.

Anglican High, which celebrated its 40th anniversary in 1996, was founded by the Chinese-speaking congregations of the Anglican Churches in Singapore. The school is the only Anglican school with a Chinese medium of instruction. It is currently one of 37 government-aided secondary schools in Singapore, with a population of just over 1,000 boys and girls. The school is autonomous as well as being one of nine Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools and only accepts students of Chinese extraction.
The Special Assistance Plan (SAP) materialised out of a concern for the declining enrolment in Chinese-medium schools. There was a need to preserve such institutions to protect and inculcate traditional values. Yet, it was also important to attain as high a standard of English as the English-medium schools, to enable the students to continue into tertiary education and at the same time improve their employment prospects. The school was designated as a Special Assistance Plan school in 1978 in recognition of its consistent academic excellence, its ethos, and its sensitivity to the promotion of traditional values. Mr Moo Soon Chong, the Principal since 1984, identified his continuing vision for the school as emphasising the ‘importance of an all round education for our students, one which provides for their balanced total development: physical, intellectual, social and moral’. To meet this goal, student participation in sporting and non-sporting extra-curricular activities have been strongly encouraged.

The school has had a reputation for sporting success long before 1986, when certificates of commendation were first awarded for outstanding performance. Students involved in the sports programme pursue a specially adapted timetable which has been designed to allow them more time for training and skill development, whilst maintaining a focus on their academic studies for 'O' level examinations. The programme at Anglican High is designed to improve individual and team performance within the school, in line with the national objective of raising sporting standards. Yet the critical assumption is that champions can be created without detracting from their academic attainment in any way. Special arrangements in timetabling and teaching have permitted more flexible management of time for training programmes and for normal academic lessons. Therefore, it has been easier for the school to conduct remedial and supplementary lessons to assist students in coping with their
studies and keeping up with their peers. It should be mentioned that school competitions are organised during school time and team players miss classes and tests through playing in these tournaments.

These sports classes have exclusive use of the sporting facilities, such as a new hall for badminton, large enough for seven badminton courts. However it has been interesting to observe that coaches from the local National Sports Associations and from mainland China have been employed by Anglican High. Chinese is invariably the language of instruction for sport, and often with this comes contact with the value systems of mainland China which are not always compatible with the systems of the local students and not always appreciated by them either.

There were four original goals for the sports classes: first, to be able to specialise in sports as well as studies without endangering academic success; second, to retain and improve the school standing in ECA success; third, to develop potential national players for the future; and fourth to have the programme legitimised by the Ministry of Education as a gifted programme, alongside Language, Music, Art and Drama. However there was a fundamental problem with the third objective as none of the schools which admit ‘O’ Level graduates from Anglican High has a similar sports programme to provide continuity in skill development. The Polytechnic system may subsequently provide an alternative route towards this third goal. However this link with the lower level of tertiary education will again place sportspeople at a lower rung on the educational ladder.
Evaluations of the scheme

The scheme has value for Anglican High because, without sacrificing the provision of an all round education and the achievement of academic results, it is developing the school’s traditions in sport and promoting the school’s reputation at a time when the general competitive climate is becoming more academic. This year for example the school swept all twelve division titles in the Zone competitions for badminton, table tennis and basketball: an unprecedented feat. However, the pressure to improve the academic ranking of the schools may yet ultimately prove to be disadvantageous to the school’s sporting heritage and its traditions.

As might be anticipated, all has not been plain sailing for this scheme, and fine-tuning has been a continuous process. In 1997 the number of sports classes was cut from two classes to one per year, largely because the sports population in the school has been declining and the number of players essential to sustaining team status has been reduced by the time the ‘O’ Level year is reached. An important consequence of this reduction has been the level of disenchantment experienced by those who were dropped. Essentially the sports class exists only for school team players. Those who do not make the team are of little value to the group unless their academic results are very good and they can therefore support the general levels of academic attainment. Such is the concern of the Principal that not only have classes been reduced but also time for sport has been removed from the third and fourth year to allow the students more time for their studies. This has frustrated the coaches who now have to spend more time working after school.
The scheme has been very demanding as the training regime has been exceptionally time consuming. The general perception has been that the more time spent on training the better. Results have been maintained and in the specific case of table tennis unquestionably improved. However, in spite of the considerable amount of time spent training there is a dearth of opportunities to compete against players of the same age and same relative ability. Apart from the school tournaments the pupils get very little additional competition. Indeed, the basketball players are forbidden to represent teams outside the school in other competitions, as it is perceived, somewhat ironically, that the additional time commitment would interfere with their studies.

The student-athletes have developed a very strong affinity with each other and therefore a strong identity has evolved. The Principal continuously and consistently reinforces the uniqueness of this collective identity. The student-athletes (particularly the boys) value their friendships highly, and are very content with the school environment. The vast majority reports that they are pleased to be in the sports class and experience an elevated status and prestige. This mutual closeness has created some antagonism with other groups. Some of their contemporaries are envious of members of the Sports Class programme and perceive the treatment received to be inequitable. Others, however, recognise how hard these sports pupils have to work. The principal considers these to be quite normal reactions from this age group.

The Principal is also aware of external responses to their programme. The scheme has not yet been officially recognised by the Ministry of Education as a special programme, but it does receive enormous publicity and attract media attention. A similar scheme has been
considered by other Principals and may even be adopted by another school later in the year. A very small number of parents object to their children’s involvement but most generally support their children, albeit from a distance. Parents tend to show most interest and concern if and when academic results begin to decline.

Some question marks

It might be expected that the promotion of a sports scheme would influence the ambitions of the participants. However, the students are not particularly ambitious in terms of their sport and most of them have not considered the possibility of committing themselves to long term goals as there are no visible or tangible structures available for their continuing development. There are exceptions, but usually only those students with parents who have tasted sporting success themselves are encouraged to aspire to loftier goals. One doubts that the majority will sustain their commitment after leaving Anglican High for pre-university studies. Many have indicated that they would probably continue in their sport but not at such a competitive level. Most, it appears have no ambitions to attain elite sporting status, but are still more concerned with examination results. Sadly, one of the main disadvantages of establishing the Sports Classes for the school community as a whole has been the marginalisation of Physical Education. Those in the non-sport classes have received little instruction and attention, and are being left to their own devices most of the time.

Conclusion

The historical perspective of this study has indicated that there has been resistance to the development of a competitive sports culture in Singapore. The experience of rapid change
and development after independence has reinforced the primacy of education in the security and prosperity of an industrialising nation. So focused are the economic endeavours of Singaporeans that marginal activities like competitive sport have been severely limited in their scope. A small number of student-athletes have managed to create an impact on the regional sports scene, but on a global scale the results have been largely disheartening. On an optimistic note the successes of the national Table Tennis team, which struck gold in the Commonwealth Championships in 1997, may have provided some inspiration to Anglican High however. Whilst the natural limitations to achievement based on small population size and limited space, and the relative contribution of sport to the national economy have previously been identified as inhibiting forces on success, it seems that, at a more fundamental level, the constraints imposed by the different values and attitudes of these groups have negatively influenced motivation and commitment towards sport as a serious enterprise (Aplin, 1997, in progress). The professionalisation of soccer and the advancing status of netball are two developments which may illuminate a path to success for a few individuals but generally academic excellence remains the top priority for aspiring Singaporeans because of the tangible benefits it can produce for the individual.

At the ESSO Scholarship Award 1996 ceremony, the Chairman of the Singapore Sports Council, Mr Ng Ser Miang cited Dr Benedict Tan as an example of a sports scholar, who had debunked the view that sport and academic study are mutually exclusive. Dr Tan had completed his medical studies and achieved a Gold medal in the Asian Games of 1994. However, this was not an example of managed success, but rather a fortuitous combination of talent, self-sacrifice and opportunity. Currently the Singapore system does not provide a
continuous route for the aspiring champion to plot a course to international excellence. It is inconceivable that a Singaporean athlete could achieve acclaim without first securing the safety net of a complete education. It has therefore become difficult to attract the academic high-flyer to join the quest for sporting gold and underachievement in international sport is now as commonplace as outstanding performance in the field of economic competitiveness.

Enormous efforts and the strong convictions of the Principal have suggested, in the case study, that sport and studies may yet be combined with a certain degree of success. What is needed in this environment is yet more encouragement from legitimate authorities. For example, if sport is further legitimised by the Ministry of Education as a 'special programme', then more volunteers in this meritocratic culture may be tempted to commit themselves to confronting the challenges and risks associated with sports excellence.

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