

Racial diversity lacking in some sports here

Noah Tan, Teo Teng Kiat

TODAY, 8 August 2017

SINGAPORE — Multiracialism and multiculturalism may be values that Singaporeans hold dear. However, the training fields, indoor halls and hardcourts of popular sports here such as football, basketball, table tennis and badminton seem to tell a different story.

While they are all different sports, they share a common trait especially at the elite level — a lack of racial diversity.

A quick look at these sports' respective national teams is revealing. Of the 23 Lions called up for Singapore's Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Asian Cup Group E qualifier against Taiwan in June, 18 were Malay. The rest: one Chinese, two Indians, and two Caucasians, who are naturalised citizens.

The SEA Games-bound national table tennis teams are made up entirely of Chinese players. It is almost likewise in the national basketball and badminton squads.

The national men's cricket team, on the other hand, consists mostly of Indian players, although the women's team has a fair mix of players of various races.

As such, the question arises: Why is there still this lack of ethnic diversity in certain sports in our multiracial society?

TODAY spoke to observers and sociologists, who identified several factors that play a part in determining why some sports in Singapore do not attract players of different ethnic groups.

RACIAL COMMUNITIES' CULTURE AND HISTORY

Dr Mathew Mathews, of the National University of Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies, believes the different cultures of racial communities are why some races gravitate towards particular sports. "Certain ethnicities (in Singapore) have built up a history in a particular sport," the senior research fellow explained.

"So the young people of that ethnicity are more inspired to follow in their ancestors' footsteps and try to excel in that sport ... so this is why football might be more celebrated among the Malays compared to the Chinese."

As football is the only sport in Singapore with a professional league, the viability of pursuing a meaningful career in sports here also becomes a factor, said NUS Associate Professor of Sociology Tan Ern Ser. "One may argue that Malays find football an accessible and viable career, with the potential to achieve some fame," he said.

"Chinese youth and their parents are less likely to see football as such, and would aspire for careers in the professions or management."

Mr Philippe Aw, the head coach of S.League club Hougang United, agreed. "The mindset of Chinese parents is that their children's studies will be affected if they spend so much time on football," said the former Home United player.

"So it starts from the parents. They tell their children football is not a viable career ... it's short-term and risky, compared to having a conventional job where you can build a career and probably earn better."

Mr Khairul Asyraf, who runs private football academy 2Touch Soccer, thinks Malays in Singapore are more inclined to follow their passions.

"I think we have a culture of encouraging individuals to pursue their passions," said Mr Khairul, who is also the head coach of National Football League (NFL) side Eunos Crescent FC. "There's more emphasis towards personal fulfilment and satisfaction, and decisions are made based on what they are passionate about."

"Football in particular allows one to make a decent living while doing something one loves, and so many do aspire to become professional footballers."

Mr Aw hopes parents will come to realise their children can pursue their sporting aspirations without compromising on their education.

"It is possible to balance both," he said. "In other countries, schools and football clubs work together to come up with the best plan for the athlete to train and compete while also ensuring that he does not miss out on getting his educational qualifications. Perhaps this is something we need to work on here."

SPEAKING DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

While most Singaporeans speak English, local sports observers admit that if most of the participants in a sport are from one race, they tend to speak in their native language instead of English.

Ex-national paddler Isabelle Li, 22, said this is apparent in local table tennis. "Internationally, the sport is very Chinese-dominated. This is reflected here as well, with the coaches, whether from Singapore or China, usually speaking only Mandarin to the players."

"I've only had one coach, (former national player) Tan Paey Fern, who spoke English. I think this communication barrier makes it very hard for other races to join the sport."

Singapore Slingers head coach Neo Beng Siang, who also runs the ActiveSG Basketball academy, believes that players or coaches sometimes feel more comfortable communicating in their native language.

"In a group of people of the same race, there is a tendency to revert to speaking in the native language because they're more used to it," he said.

“So other races may hesitate to join the sport because communication could be an issue. Otherwise, they may feel pressured to pick up the language.

“I think that’s why you see a lot of Chinese and Indian footballers who speak and understand Malay.”

Mr Neo feels that to ensure inclusivity, English should be the main language of communication for all sports in Singapore.

Singapore Rugby Union (SRU) president Terence Khoo cites the wide use of English in local rugby for its ability to attract players from all races.

“English is Singapore’s main language after all, so this ensures that rugby here doesn’t veer towards any one cultural or racial line,” he said.

THE NEED TO KICK OUT RACIAL FAVOURITISM

Mr Khairul said football’s lack of racial diversity can also be caused by coaches who tend to favour Malays because of their own pre-conceived notions and assumptions.

“I’ve seen a Malay coach selecting Malay players ahead of Chinese players who are of the same level, if not better, because he feels the Chinese players will probably drop out of the game without turning professional. So he doesn’t want to invest the time and effort to groom them,” he said.

“But such favouritism is hurting our sport. As coaches, we should select players based on their abilities. I grew up in a football environment that is predominantly Malay, and unfortunately, there is a mentality among some coaches and players that Chinese players usually don’t make good footballers.

“But to me, a Chinese or Indian player has as much a chance of making it into the national teams.”

Former national footballer R Sasikumar, who runs sports marketing agency Red Card Group, agreed: “Racial favouritism is a problem, especially at youth levels. I’ve seen such things happening first-hand, and it should stop. Coaches must put their hands on their hearts and say they’ve chosen the best player, but this sometimes doesn’t happen. This all boils down to the lack of coaches’ education here, which I think is one of Singapore football’s Achilles heels.”

Mr Aw, who recently promoted a few young Chinese players into Hougang’s senior squad, said: “Players like Justin (Hui), Gareth (Chan), Gerald (Ting) ... I’ve seen them grow and train with the S.League players, I know they have potential and we should give them an opportunity to play professionally,” he said.

“Now, will they stay on, or leave eventually? To ensure they stay, we have to create the right environment for them to thrive and break through to the next level.”

INCREASING RACIAL DIVERSITY

According to former national swimmer Patricia Chan, the inherent nature of sport should be “colour-blind”.

“Sport has never been racially conscious ... you are defined by your physique, your genetic make-up, interest, and opportunities, among other factors,” she said.

“I was brought up completely colour-blind, and I don’t measure my friends or team-mates by race and least of all, religion. We are all Singaporeans first, and sport especially welcomes people of every colour.”

For Mr Sasikumar, the answer lies in having more local sporting heroes performing on the international stage, who, in turn, will inspire Singaporeans of all races and walks of life.

“The players of my era ... we watched footballers like Terry Pathmanathan, V Sundramoorthy, Fandi Ahmad, and all of us aspired to be like them.” said Mr Sasikumar who played professionally from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s.

“Unfortunately, right now, there’s no one except Joseph Schooling who can inspire the young ones to want to be like him. All kids are crying out for heroes ... and if we can create them in the sporting scene, then the diversity will naturally come.”

Dr Tan believes it is also important to promote multiracialism not only at the elite level, but at youth and grassroots levels.

“Sport is a good platform for facilitating social integration,” he said. “And it shouldn’t be difficult to encourage a mix since ... recreational sport is about having fun and keeping fit, and not about turning professional and making a career of it.

“Of course, it would be good to do the same with professional sports. But until they can be viewed as viable careers capable of supporting a large number of professionals in Singapore, it will be difficult to enhance the extent of multiracialism in them.”

Dr Matthews added that schools play a key role too.

“Schools are probably the best ‘playground’ for such inter-racial encounters to occur and for friendships to form,” he said.

“So primary schools can possibly introduce a wide variety of sports to young students, and let them choose from there (the) particular sports they may eventually pursue.”

Nonetheless, Dr Nicholas Aplin, a senior lecturer at the Physical Education and Sports Science Education Academic Group at the National Institute of Education, believes that encouraging steps have already been taken by the authorities to ensure that sport in Singapore is more open and inclusive.

Said Dr Aplin, whose son Anders plays for S.League club Geylang International: “In line with effective sports policies and more recent refinements in (Sport Singapore’s) Vision 2030, people have opportunities to choose from a very wide range of recreational and competitive sports.

“They may not thus feel ‘prevented’ from vying for a spot in the activities. In fact, today, people can enter any activity if they are motivated to commit and sacrifice other options.

“Initiatives like ActiveSG and the media can help to establish even more positive coverage over all aspects of local sports, and social media can help in highlighting less superficial aspects, such as sporting spirit, true sporting potential and talent, and diversity.”