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Immigrant Athletes in Singapore: When Gold is Not Good Enough

By Priscilla Cabuyao

Synopsis

Citizens' unreceptiveness towards foreign-born athletes carrying the Singapore flag in international competitions could perhaps be mitigated or even eradicated if immigrant athletes can integrate into Singapore society and express their loyalty to the country.

Commentary

LIKE ITS fellow first world countries, Singapore has the means and resources to import promising athletes to ensure and maintain sporting success. However, compared to counterparts in the developed world, it appears Singapore society is still facing challenges to the acceptance of immigrant athletes.

Some Singaporeans have been vocal about their aversion to the Foreign Sports Talent (FST) Scheme, with a significant number of citizens expressing their sentiments online concerning the absence of pride when foreign-born athletes representing Singapore win medals at international competitions. However, the public's reaction towards the recent retirement of Yugoslavian-born Singaporean footballer Aleksandar Duric indicates it is possible for citizens to appreciate and embrace immigrant athletes if such athletes undergo a traditional process of acquiring citizenship as well as display signs of being part of the social fabric.

Foreign Sports Talent Scheme

According to the Mulier Institute Centre for Research on Sports in Society based in the Netherlands, achievement in sports can rouse national cohesion and pride. Hence, some states invest in their national teams to ensure success in international competitions. Triumphant participation in international sport competitions not only directs acclaim and attention to nations, it also plays an important role in fortifying nationhood. Through shared victories in sports, a nation's anthology of shared experiences is augmented.

This route to fortify national pride by way of sport has been attempted in Singapore. Sports organisations were established to scout and train young athletes. However, due to the demographic challenge of having a small population for example, promising foreign athletes have been enticed to

play for Singapore. Since 1993, the FST Scheme allows sports organisations to recruit foreign athletes to represent Singapore by fast-tracking citizenship. However, in the case of Singapore, based on the public's reaction to international table tennis success, it appears that international sporting success does not necessarily lead to a corresponding increase in national pride. It appears a number of Singaporeans attain a stronger sense of honour and pride from being represented by local-born athletes—whether they win or lose—than victories by foreign-born sportsmen.

For example, in this year's Commonwealth Games held in Glasgow, Singapore dominated the table tennis event by taking six out of seven possible gold medals awarded, but quite a number of Singaporeans reacted negatively towards this achievement. This negativity was displayed when a photo of the winning team was posted on Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's Facebook page only to be followed by a barrage of comments voicing discontent.

The comments for the uploaded photo of predominantly China-born naturalised Singaporean paddlers suggest citizens prefer not winning with local-born athletes to attaining gold with foreign-born players. For the disgruntled commenters, national pride stems from being represented by who they consider born and bred Singaporean athletes regardless whether they win or not. Some netizens even coined the term "fake glory" in reference to table tennis success.

The hostility towards the sports scheme is so strong that even a local-born gold medallist at the recently concluded Asian Games in South Korea received the maligned "foreign talent" tag. Joseph Schooling's foreign-sounding surname led to his Singaporean-ness being called into question even though, like his grandfather and father, he was born and raised in Singapore. Schooling's father had to resort to stressing that the Asian Games medallist is a "true son of Singapore".

The case of Aleksandar Duric

Comparing online comments for news articles on the success of foreign-born Singaporean paddlers to those of Duric's retirement from football, it is quite evident Singaporeans prefer athletes who undergo a more conventional process of acquiring citizenship than the instant naturalisation provided by the FST Scheme.

Duric arrived in Singapore in 1999 and only acquired citizenship after three attempts. He was not under the sports scheme. In his open letter "Thank you very much Singapore" posted online, Duric explained that the biggest and proudest moment of his football career was when he was granted Singapore citizenship in 2007 and was called to play for the national team. Duric expressed in the letter that Singapore is his home and that he is "a son of the Lion City".

The reactions towards Duric's retirement have been largely expressions of appreciation. Most commenters thanked Duric for his contribution to Singapore football and regarded him as a role model for Singaporean footballers. One commenter posted "Now this is what I call 'Foreign Talent'..."

Integration of immigrant athletes

Passport swapping among athletes has also received criticism in places other than Singapore. Some argue that granting and acquiring fast-tracked citizenship through sports defeats the whole tradition of immigration and naturalisation, that is, integrating and assimilating into a community, and negates the nationalistic spirit usually associated with international games. However, Singaporeans are probably the most vocal about their displeasure.

Admittedly, the government has taken steps to attend to this. According to Minister of Culture, Community and Youth, Lawrence Wong, sports associations in Singapore are required to have integration programmes for immigrant athletes. He explained that through these programmes, athletes attend national events, perform community service, visit local schools, and take English lessons. He added that the athletes are assigned local mentors who help them integrate to Singapore society better.

However, it seems that Singaporeans are expecting a higher degree of commitment from immigrant athletes. Some netizens complained about how some foreign-born national players do not even try to

converse in English. In addition, the public's awareness of some naturalised athletes renouncing their citizenship only after a few years also does not help with quelling the hostility towards the scheme.

The example of individuals like Duric is instructive if the government wants to enrich the communal experiences of the relatively young nation through success in sports. It may suggest that integration should come first before citizenship. Glory will then be viewed as genuine because the people will feel represented by athletes who truly want to represent them.

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