

From the Sports Federation and Olympic Committee Secretariat

Moving towards a new sports structure and future

Background

These are disquieting times for the sports community, which has never had it so good and yet never had it so bad. The Hong Kong contingent fared exceedingly well in the Bangkok Asian Games in December 1998 and certainly exceeded all expectations, admittedly low to begin with. The diligence and dedication of individual athletes, with the support from their associations, produced a record five gold, and six silver and bronze medals apiece in what many reckoned were by far the most competitive Asian games ever. Their feats roused public interest as never before, culminating in media kudos and a street parade. But for all their achievements, against the odds, they are concerned for their future because the sports culture, in which many have invested their hopes, has not evolved. Some are afraid that the euphoria from the games would evaporate and an opportunity slip away.

The National Sports Associations, more than any other, are the organizations most responsible for the success of the athletes. They have always been there with their charges through the trial and tribulation. Despite being starved of resources and toiling in obscurity, these groups somehow nurture the young talents and propagate their sports with zeal and a hunger that no bureaucracy can generate, however much money it spends. They do not even mind the Sports Development Board poaching the athletes they

discovered and developed as long as their sports are advanced in the process. What these Associations did not recognize at first was that they were bound not for collusion but a collision with the SDB because they thrive on the sports creed whereas the Board subscribes to an administrative one – which is their antithesis. The tensions between the Associations and the SDB are like an elastic band that has stretched to the breaking, or snapping, point. There has to be a resolution of the feud so that the Associations can get back to cultivating their sports and the government can save the treasury money for the public interest. To perpetuate the conflicting dichotomy between the autonomous Associations and the intrusive Board would be folly. Sports cannot afford time and energy lost to the needless friction when they call out for unity and while Hong Kong goes on the quest for the Asian Games 2006.

The National Sports Associations

The Associations are allied to each other and come under the Sports Federation, their umbrella union, founded in 1949 and merged with the Olympic Committee in 1951. They have generally abided by the International Olympic movement credo of volunteers who sacrifice time and money for their sports and, thus, society. Not different from their peer organizations overseas, they have members who are the Hong Kong equivalent of American soccer moms and baseball dads. These sports enthusiasts give all to fulfill the athletic aspirations and hone the winning edge of their offspring. Their reward is mainly altruistic and, even when it is not, it is still predicated on the happiness and glory of their charges.

The Associations are, however, not appreciated enough and are too often denigrated. They are justifiably disgruntled and feel particularly slighted by the SDB, which seeks to dominate them through its hold on sports subsidies and at the same time eclipse them. The seething discontent is boiling over. The Associations haplessly watch the SDB not only misspend already scarce resources, supposedly allocated to sports, but also undertake questionable

programs more beneficial to bureaucrats clearing career hurdles than to true sportsmen in pursuit of a dream.

Then in the spring of 1999 the SDB claimed (falsely as it turned out) that the Independent Commission against Corruption had wanted to conduct a random audit of the Associations. The Board then demanded that the Associations submit to the audit, despite their already observing all the funding regulations, including the hiring of independent accountants to pore over the ledgers. Even after the Associations acquiesced, without even quibbling over the Board's misrepresentation of the ICAC decree, the SDB was not satisfied and the pestering of them continues apace.

The Sports Development Board

The Board allocates less than \$70 million of public money a year to the Associations whereas itself spends almost \$300 million, two thirds of which are direct government largesse. The SDB has institutionalized overspending (splurging, some say), being able to draw on, and draw down, the publicly furnished SDB, Sports Institute, and the Art and Sport Development Funds which are its to husband, not to hollow out.

The Board also has a large executive, augmented by its incorporating the SI in 1994. The SDB, with a staff of more than 350, hires two officers for every elite athlete the SI trains. About half of its annual expenditure covers staffing and administrative costs. The SDB on average spends more than \$500,000 per elite athlete. The Board also has a team of 28 marketing, promotion and advertising professionals, even though the revenue so raised does not cover the operating costs. The SDB chairman in his March 8th appearance before the Legislative Council Home Affairs Panel admitted to the deficit, which poses several obvious questions: "Does the SDB effect more hype than substance? Why is the SDB not generating more corporate income? Could the SDB be the wrong vehicle through which to tap sponsorships?"

The SDB has also declined to disclose its payroll, even after repeated requests from the media for it to do so and despite the government, its paymaster, being open and forthcoming with its budgetary information. (The Home Affairs Bureau, however, has agreed to produce such a payroll which, in any case, should be in the public domain.) Such secrecy has puzzled the press and stoked rumors about drastic pay discrepancy among coaches, some of whom now claim to being discriminated against and profess to being demoralized. Contrary to the SDB contention that it is damaging press exposes on its internal politics which has caused a furore within the Board, it could well be the lack of accountability, transparency, fairness and merits which has pitted staff against each other and poisoned the work ambience. Several SI employees have risked, according to them, “reprisals” to air their grievances to the Sports Federation and Olympic Committee.

The Board is an anomaly since its founding in 1990 at the suggestion of a consultant, Mr E.B. Jones, MBE. Mr Jones in his opus, “The Way Forward”, urged the government to “lengthen” its distance as much as possible from the sports scene. The Report was galling in that it ignored or papered over the views of the sports community. The Associations were satisfied with the government contributing to its development through the Council for Recreation and Sport of the Recreation Culture Department. The beauty of the prior arrangement was that the Legislative Council could hold to account the government for sports and that the costs to the public were minimal.

What has emerged since is a Board that is out of control and beyond direct scrutiny with swingeing expenditure at the expense of those – Associations and athletes alike – who are serious about sports and dubious about cumbersome, costly bureaucracy. As a quango, beholden directly neither to the public nor to the athletes it supposedly serves (yet exploits), the SDB now insists on a policy role, usurping what is the government and the sports experts by right. The Board’s executives have revealed their ambition in a faux pas as they customarily present themselves as “the Sports Ministry” in their dealings with the mainland authorities.

The Sports Federation and Olympic Committee

The Sports Federation and Olympic Committee (henceforth referred to as the Federation) on March 8th voted to delete “Amateur” from its rubric because the adjective conveyed the impression of not being earnest, serious or competent. Despite dropping that word from the standard, the Federation remains loyal to the Olympic ideal of the driven, self-effacing volunteer, to whom the glory of sports is the Holy Grail.

The organization’s constitution is clear on certain inviolable Olympic principles such as the autonomy of sports from any form of government tampering, commitment to fair competition, and dedication to peace and brotherhood (sisterhood too). Because the Federation abides by these tenets, its members have no choice but to resist the meddling and manipulation of the affiliated National Sports Associations by any outside agency. Everyone in the organization longs for cooperation between the Federation and the SDB but this can only be effected through mutual trust and respect, which are now nonexistent.

The Federation is especially disappointed that the SDB has not reciprocated the gestures from the Associations for a cordial working arrangement even after they have agreed to the random audit, whether or not that is necessary or is a form of harassment. The Federation also resents the SDB ignoring protocol by approaching the Associations directly rather than through their parent organization. All are upset with the SDB Chairman’s report conclusion that the Sports Federation and Olympic Committee should be split with the former becoming a de facto extension of the Board and the other a shell of its former self. Such a forced divorce of the SF&OC would result in perhaps the disenfranchising of the Olympic Committee by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which conferred on Hong Kong a separate sporting status in 1997 predicated on the status quo being preserved. To be specific, the IOC charter states that a National Olympic Committee is autonomous and cannot be subject

to any other organization or to government or political interference. The risking of that status also bodes ill for other Hong Kong institutions that are also recognized internationally on the basis of their indisputable autonomy.

The New Structure (See enclosed diagram)

The Federation has been mulling over a new, rational, lean, effective structure for sports ever since last October when the Chief Executive of the Special Administrative Region reaffirmed his resolve to disband the Provisional Urban and Regional Councils. The tentative plan has since been circulated among Federation members who have returned with minor suggestions for fine tuning the strategy based on five broad criteria:

1. Resources must go to athletes and their sports with bare minimal for administrative and staffing costs.
2. Government and the Federation must cooperate seamlessly without jeopardy to sports autonomy.
3. Elimination of duplicating services.
4. Ensuring that the facilities currently managed by the Urban and Regional Councils would be well run and managed – as well as accessible to the competition athletes.
5. Expanding the body of talent through infusion of sports into education.

The Federation, therefore, envisages a structure in which itself and the Home Affairs Bureau are of equal yet separate standing, with the former responsible for sports management and promotion and the latter responsible for funding, facilities and policy. The Federation would preside over a scaled down Sports Institute (SI) and contained within itself an administrative wing.

The SI, with its headquarters in Shatin, would continue with its present work, except that the discredited conditions laid down by the Cooper and Lybrand Consultant Report must be modified to reflect sports reality. There should no longer be discriminatory categories of

focus, non-focus, and the proposed new popular sports, which invariably end up with funds invested overwhelmingly in some sports just because of the success of a few athletes. The Federation recommends, instead, focus athletes – those with potential for medals, irrespective of their sports. In this way team sports would not suffer from bias of the kind, which nowadays sees the SDB dismiss off hand football, volleyball, basketball, and such team sports on the ludicrous premise that no Hong Kong team is ever going to clinch the World Cup or Olympic gold. This way gifted athletes even in such highly competitive sports as football, volleyball and basketball can have a chance to develop further with help from public largesse. This way, thus, Hong Kong may send a football talent to train in Germany, a volleyball talent ditto on the mainland, and a basketball talent to the United States. This way not only the individuals but also whole sports benefit, as they are not denied incentives to excel just because, as a team at the present, they are not yet world class.

The present regime is too costly. Hong Kong cannot justify spending more than \$500,000 a year to train one elite athlete, which has resulted in a paucity of support for sports per se. To some, the current system looks too suspiciously like a racket for the employment of coaches and an expanding fiefdom for the SDB. The Federation proposes giving more full sports scholarships to athletes to enable them to study and train with Olympic and world champions in overseas universities and mainland sport centers. This way the athletes would not only improve their prowess and sharpen their competitive edge but also acquire an education that would see them in good stead upon their retirement. This way some of Hong Kong's athletes would not have to concentrate on their sports today and fret over their future tomorrow as well as wangle with the SDB for scholarships that are easily promised but not always quite so easy to deliver.

The SF&OC administrative wing shall be constituted by sports officers, such as those to be culled from the future defunct SDB. They should be directly responsible for the Olympic Academy (OA) which would continue to oversee sports science, sports medicine, and sports

education, Olympic House (now Sports House) and cater for the needs of the National Sports Associations. The administrative wing should also either waive or charge only nominal rent to those Associations which wish to relocate to the Olympic House and expand rather than accept, as they must now, the SDB demand for exorbitant leases, such as \$28 a month per square foot. (At present the offices in Sports House are rent free for those Associations that agree to move to an area allocated by the SDB. Should they want more space, they would have to pay the SDB a rental fee.) The administrative wing should also be responsible for the slimmed down promoting, marketing and publicity unit, whose overheads must be slashed and earnings increased.

The Federation and Home Affairs Bureau are assured of close contact and cooperation through a joint Secretariat comprising envoys from the SF&OC Executive Council and representatives of the government. This way the Federation and Home Affairs shall work smoothly through a constant flow of opinions and advice from both sides with the former looking after the interest of sports and the latter those of the whole community as related to sports. The Secretariat should also liaise with the Education Department on sports development and promotion in schools.

Home Affairs Bureau would preside over the Sports and Recreation Council (SRC), a resurrection by another name of the Council for Recreation and Sport that was forced out of existence with the founding of the SDB in 1990. The SRD would be in frequent touch with the SF&OC Secretariat to coordinate sports programs. Home Affairs Bureau would of course take policy responsibility for the Department for Culture, Leisure and Sports (DCLS) which would fulfil most of one of the roles of the Urban and Regional Councils. The DCLS would oversee the training and competition facilities presently under the purview of the two Councils and should in turn be working in conjunction with the National Sports Associations.

The Advantages

Such a simplified structure should mollify the Associations long weary of wrangling ad infinitum with the SDB. The other advantages are:

- Overcome duplication, which at present sees the SDB offering services overlapping with those from the Urban and Regional Councils as well as the Education Department.
- Save costs by cutting expensive, executive jobs that the SDB has created in abundance, if not in excess.
- Phase out redundant coaching posts, especially those not justified by performance, and introduce a pay scale that is commensurate with that in the civil service, meaning it must be open to public scrutiny.
- Ensure the sanctity of National Sports Association's autonomy.
- Give more clout and influence on policy to those who have the elected mandate in sports through the Federation and also the expertise.
- Replace an administrative culture with a sports culture that is, however, properly administered for the sake of sports and not, as now, for the interest of bureaucracy or personal aggrandizement.
- Stop exploitation of sportsmen and women now thwarted by the tedious bureaucracy that seems to generate more politics than better performance.
- Improve communication between the government and the Associations through the Federation.
- Lift the bureaucratic buffer that is the SDB.
- Cull the most dedicated and able staff from the SDB and integrate them into the sports community.
- Preserve some aspects of the Urban and Regional Council sports facility management which, while not always tip top, is not too costly.
- Involve more of the community in competition sports by the savings that should be invested in sports and not in bureaucracy.

Conclusion

Having such a sensible structure would be a stride among many towards achieving a complete society in which youths especially can aspire for excellence through education, commerce, and the professions as in sports. The Federation believes unwaveringly that sports can build not just a community with its requisite sense of civic pride but also character. For the noble aim to be achieved, then some old habits and assumptions about sports being merely a diversion and a distraction have to be overcome.

The SDB is not an indispensable part of the sports scene but is rather an oddity, an interloper. The agency was founded nearly ten years ago on a false premise and has become a millstone to sports, causing anxiety and draining away resources. The Federation does not covet more than its share of the resources but it, being a part of the community, objects to wanton waste of funds which, when not used for sports, should be returned to the people in these difficult times. Those who love sports also love their society. They cannot stand in clear conscience, muffle their voices, or be oblivious to the flagrant misappropriation of public money. They have to speak up rather than hold their peace for sportsmen and women know their duty and crave justice too.

Cc. Mr. Tung Chee Hwa, Chief Executive; Mrs. Anson Chan, Chief Secretary; Mr. Leung Chun Ying, Senior Executive Councilor; Mrs. Nellie Fong, Executive Councilor; Mrs. Rita Fan, President of the Legislative Council and to all members of the Legislative Council Home Affairs Panel.