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YOG'S LEGACY: THE BIG PICTURE AT GROUND ZERO

Why they helped on own time and money

HAVING sports advocated so passionately these past two weeks of the Youth Olympic Games (YOG), I had hoped that Singaporeans would come round to realising its importance to society, especially youth.

In Germany, where I grew up, sports is an organic part of life. It is not only about keeping fit, but also an education in different countries and cultures.

When Mexico City hosted the first high-altitude Olympics in 1968, it spurred me to learn all I could about Mexico. Ditto the other Olympics. My curiosity about Islam was sparked after world heavyweight boxing champion, American Cassius Clay, converted to Islam in 1964 and took the name Muhammad Ali.

Few Germans do not know names like Sergey Bubka (Olympic pole vaulting legend from the then Soviet Union, and later Ukraine), Bob Beamon (superhuman American long jumper) or Nadia Comaneci (Romanian scorer of the first Perfect 10 in gymnastics). Knowing sports was essential - it drove me to discover all kinds of activities from handball to cycling. Some of these I still do because I believe a healthy body enables a healthy mindset.

So, naturally, over these past two weeks, I was a YOG volunteer, and this role is even more important for this reason. As Olympic chief Jacques Rogge said, 'being a champion is much more than just winning'. It is about values like serving the community, being gracious hosts, and being able to give without requiring an immediate return. Such values could do with a boost in Singapore - and I include myself as a permanent resident, married to a Singaporean, living here for the past eight years.

Several Forum letters and reports have criticised the YOG for the wrong reasons - like the quality of food provided or traffic inconvenience. The YOG is a big, positive deal. It is more than just about sports.

The positive values I mentioned were in abundant supply, and they cut across all ages and ethnicities.

I am thinking of the two friendly elderly female volunteers in Toa Payoh, who guided foreigners from the train station to the sports complex and back. A third middle-aged mum recalled how her adult children were somewhat embarrassed that she was volunteering. But now they proudly proclaim her selfless contribution. And what about the students and teachers from Mayflower Secondary School and Temasek Junior College who manned the National Sailing Centre? Their spark and courtesy were priceless advertisements of a welcoming Singapore. Count as well the brigade of international volunteers like Alex, a Russian who took leave to be a translator. Or 68-year-old civil engineer from Canada, Mr Milan Fischer who signed up with his wife to volunteer as supporters - of Singapore, for no other reason than to uphold the Olympic spirit.

Many of these folk flew in on their own time and money to help out. They wanted to be part of the true story of sports: to serve, make friends and be part of the human connection.

I agree with Mr Fischer, who thinks the YOG is an even more important idea than the senior Olympics because it offers a greater chance to educate, influence and mould young athletes in a positive way about friendship, excellence and respect. These athletes are more open-minded and receptive.

If, like me, you were at ground zero, you would not have missed the deafening din of positive reactions from representatives of the rest of the world about Singapore. Why? Because Singapore has fleshed out an idea into reality - and belief. So, whenever I am asked about my origin, I answer unflinchingly and with pleasure: 'I am a Singaporean volunteer.' And by the way, I love the catered food.

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