

Politics and sport: Do they mix?

By Michael Y.P. Ang

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Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean is also President of the Singapore National Olympic Council.

It is fairly common for Singapore's sports organisations to be run by politicians. We have Senior Minister of State for Trade & Industry and National Development Lee Yi Shyan (pictured below in white) serving as president of the Singapore Badminton Association,



MP for Toa Payoh East (Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC) Zainudin Nordin (pictured below) as president of the Football Association of Singapore,



and MP for Nee Soon South (Nee Soon GRC) Lee Bee Wah (pictured below in red) as president of the Singapore Table Tennis Association.



Nobody should be excluded from presiding over a national sports association simply because he is a politician. That would be discrimination.

However, if a person with no prior experience in sports administration or as a competitive athlete becomes the chief of a national sports association, primarily because he is a politician, it raises the question: is this in the best interest of the sport or that person's political career? (Being prominently involved in national sport raises a person's public profile.)

Politicians running sports organisations per se is not a bad thing. In fact, it can be a very good thing.

Politics and sport seem like a good mix in Japan



Seiko Hashimoto

Japan, a global sports powerhouse with 139 Olympic gold medals (of which nine came from the Winter Olympics), also has politicians running some of its sports organisations. For instance, Seiko Hashimoto, a member of Japan's House of Councillors (the Upper House), is president of the Japan Skating Federation (JSF).

However, unlike her Singaporean counterparts, Ms Hashimoto is a former Olympic speed skating bronze medallist. Clearly, she has first-hand knowledge of what her sport needs to flourish. This is perhaps why the JSF continues to produce Olympic medallists in both speed and figure skating.

The ideal sports administrator

China's Olympic and world champion Lin Dan recently told the AFP news agency, "Many people, including those from the BWF (Badminton World Federation), don't really understand what the main problems in badminton are, and what it most needs, because many officials are not competitors."

Former national athletes with an aptitude for sports administration are the ideal people to manage the sport in which they had competed.



Sheik Alau'ddin

A great example is Singapore's two-time world silat champion Sheik Alau'ddin, who went on to become the national team head coach and, eventually, technical director. Armed with experience as an athlete and coach, Sheik became the chief executive officer of the Singapore Silat Federation (SLF) in 2005.

Under Sheik's leadership, the SLF continued its proud tradition of producing world champions and South-east Asian Games winners. Singapore also won four gold medals at the inaugural Asian championships two years ago.

Is sport the best use of Singaporean politicians' precious time?

Not every former athlete is suitable for or interested in sports administration. Nevertheless, it is counter-productive for national sports associations to pick only politicians as their presidents, especially if they have more pressing national matters to focus on.

For instance, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean is also Coordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Home Affairs. These portfolios are in addition to the

six constituencies within the Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC he oversees. Given his full-time work commitments, is he really the most suitable person to be president of the Singapore National Olympic Council?

Unless a politician brings with him a wealth of sports experience, Singapore sport is better served by having qualified, passionate sports administrators who can commit full-time to running national sports associations.