

Chapter 9

Participant Perception of the Foreign Sports Talent (FST) Scheme

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ABSTRACT

This chapter seeks to understand the participant perception of the Foreign Sports Talent (FST) scheme in Singapore and the pivotal role of the FST scheme in Singapore's elite sports development, through the analysis of the impact of FST on Singapore's sporting achievements since its inception in 1993. To facilitate the above, a survey questionnaire was used to solicit responses from participants collected by a group of 3rd year students from Republic Polytechnic. The findings demonstrated diverse opinions on various aspects of the FST scheme. Towards the end of this chapter, it considers and recommends suitable measures to enhance the FST scheme, such as programmes to enhance social assimilation into Singapore, post-career opportunities for the FST athletes, and transference of skills and knowledge to the younger generation.

INTRODUCTION

The sports development in Singapore has always been linked to the Singapore government's political agenda of nation building, as well as economic progress for the country. After achieving independence in 1965, Singapore faced racial tension between the Chinese and Malays. To overcome this sectional communalism, the government's solution was to use sport to unite and harmonise Singaporeans (Horton, 2002).

Sport was seen as a catalyst to reduce racial tensions (McNeill et al., 2003), and was used by the government to foster social cohesion and national identity. From the promotion of the "Sports for All" policy throughout the 1960s to 1980s during the nation's economic building phase, to the 1990s where the government increased her funding for elite sports development, the government has always reiterated its support to promote the growth of "Sports for All" and "Sports Excellence" in Singapore (Teo, 2008).

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Since the start of the millennium, Singapore has grown from strength to strength in international sporting achievements. This is evident from the medal tallies Singapore achieved from the Commonwealth, Asian and Olympic Games (SSC Sports Museum, n.d.). These achievements were partly due to the implementation of the Foreign Sports Talent (FST) scheme, which aim was to improve the standard of sport in Singapore and to help fast-track the quest for medals at international competitions. This chapter explores the participant perception and support for the FST scheme. The chapter will also analyse the factors that influence the perception of the FST scheme, and provide suggestions to enhance the FST scheme.

BACKGROUND

In the early years of Singapore's Independence, the emphasis was to promote a policy of sport for all Singaporeans. This emphasis took the form of fitness programmes to achieve better health, communal integration and national defense (Horton, 2002). However, the pursuit of excellence in sport became the focal point with the initiation of the Sports Excellence 2000 (SPEX 2000) in 1993 (Horton, 2002). In the same year, the Foreign Sports Talent (FST) scheme was launched by the Singapore Sports Council (SSC) and was known as Project Rainbow.

This scheme was used by sports officials and organizations in Singapore to scout and facilitate the migration of foreigners with sports talent, to represent Singapore at sporting events. It enabled National Sports Associations (NSAs) to attract skilled athletes from abroad, giving them a fast track to Singapore citizenship. These foreign sports talent were also brought in to help improve the standards of local athletes by setting higher benchmarks, to act as role models and to enhance the image of the Singapore sport industry. In the long run, it was hoped that they would spur and motivate local athletes to strive harder and improve

their skills to international standards (Peh, 2012). Above and beyond sports achievements in the international arena, it was hoped that the FST would, in the short run, raise the overall sporting climate and competitiveness in Singapore (Goh, 2013).

Under this policy, the Million Dollar Award Programme (MAP) which offered a million dollars to athletes that win an Olympic Gold was implemented. Besides the monetary incentive, athlete support system, one of which was the Sports Excellence division in SSC was set up as a testament of the government's commitment in achieving Sports Excellence. Another significant milestone in elite sport development was the publication of the Committee on Sporting Singapore (COSS) report. This report encompassed 40 recommendations that covered the developmental strategies of the three pillars (Sports for all, Sports Excellence and Sports Industry) which were crucial for the achievement of Singapore's Sporting Vision.

The report highlighted the importance of importing foreign players, to raise the standard of play in respective sports, provide local athletes with a higher standard of sparring partners and to ensure that locals are given opportunities for development (MCD, 2001). In 2003, the Ministry of Community Development and Sports (MCDS) reviewed the FST scheme. Particular attention was placed on the immigration and integration of foreign athletes, as well as their subsequent citizenship. They proposed that NSAs adhere to a standardized set of criteria and process which included a long term strategic plan for the sport, an integration plan and education roadmap for foreign athletes (Shaping up, n.d.).

An online feedback by the MCDS showed that whilst people supported the FST scheme, they also felt that these foreign athletes should not deprive Singaporeans of the opportunities to shine for the nation. Suggestions also indicated that more needs to be done to "integrate foreign-born athletes into society, by getting them involved in community events or giving them more opportunities to mingle with Singaporeans" (Shaping

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