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Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

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SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER GOH CHOK TONG AT THE TIMESPORT 50 GREATEST ATHLETES
PRESENTATION CEREMONY, THE CASUARINA ROOM, TOWER BALLROOM, SHANGRI-LA HOTEL,
SATURDAY, 18 DECEMBER 1999 AT 3.00 PM

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It is not too difficult a task to identify a group of great athletes who had performed well and brought significant honours to the country. But to rank them and to pick the greatest amongst them is not easy. For one reason, the athletes came from different fields of sports. For another, they shone at different periods with different training facilities, resources and competitors. It would be like comparing apples with oranges. Therefore, I thought it bold, maybe even a little reckless, for the Sunday Times to undertake this interesting but academic exercise. It is bound to spark off debate, arguments and controversy. I am happy to be only giving out the awards this afternoon.

The Sunday Times tells me that its main objective in undertaking this project to identify and honour some of the greatest athletes Singapore has produced in the past 100 years is to celebrate excellence. It wants to remind its readers that it is not beyond our tiny nation to produce world-class athletes.

The Sunday Times believes that since Singapore wishes to become a
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world-class city, it should also aim to excel in sports. It is confident that Singaporeans can rise to the challenge. If a Singapore with much less resources could in years past win the Thomas Cup and an Olympic silver, there is no reason why it cannot again produce a world-class performance in certain carefully selected sports.

I endorse this positive thinking. Once Singaporeans set their minds to achieve a particular goal, they will not stop striving until it is achieved.

Our very existence as a nation is powerful testimony to this will to succeed. When independence was forced upon us, even our friends did not think we could survive for long on our own. Well, we did. Not only that. We outperformed the expectations of friends and neighbours as well.

We have not only survived but also prospered because we dared to achieve - and to excel in whatever we do. It is because I believe that we have this can-do spirit that I had earlier set three challenges for our sportsmen and sportswomen. These are: an Olympic gold in sailing, a place in the Thomas Cup finals and qualification in the Asian Group for the World Cup soccer finals.

Many people think these are near-impossible targets. A tiny nation, with most of its three million people bespectacled, simply cannot produce the required talent, they say. Their scepticism is not surprising.

But if it is all down to raw numbers, then New Zealand, to name just one example, should not have produced world beaters in middle-distance running, rugby, yacht racing, to name just a few areas in which the Kiwis triumphed over others from bigger and more populous countries.

I think we can follow the New Zealand example - provided we apply ourselves intelligently and passionately. If at first you don't succeed, try and try again, as the saying goes.

How did we get to build and operate what the world acknowledges year after year as the best airport? Or one of the best airlines? Or the busiest container port?

There is no great secret about it. We set ourselves a clear target, picked the best team available, threw in the resources and worked single-mindedly towards achieving what we wanted.

This is the Singaporean way - whether in building an airport, the MRT, or wiring up the entire island for the Information Age. So it must be for the task of winning international sporting honours for our country.

I have set clear targets. Sports associations, which know what the competition is like at the international level, might be able to identify a few other fields in which we stand a reasonable chance of making it in the big league.

What our sports community needs to do now is set up a task force to plan and work systematically towards the desired objectives. It will have to go about this task exactly as the SAF would plan and carry out a campaign. It will have to build up the necessary infrastructure, buy the most appropriate equipment, and design the best training programme. Even more important is the inculcation of the fighting spirit and the determination to win.

Like any campaign to win a battle, someone has to take charge, to see to every detail and, if necessary, to knock heads together. We will not get through even the first round of the Thomas Cup if no one takes ownership of the idea that Singapore can and will succeed, and everybody thinks it is somebody else's job to get things going.

This is what it takes to win at the international level now, that is, dedication and professionalism, both on the playing field and in the backroom, where the crucial planning and organisation is done.

Of course, funding is vital. But nobody funded Tiger Woods until he became famous. I think, in our case, picking the right people to lead the quest for international honours is more critical. We need fresh thinking, boldness and management expertise as much as the continuing support and dedication of the many volunteers who have given so generously of their time to sports associations. We have renewed our leadership in politics, the civil service, grassroots organisations and many other sectors. It is timely that our sports associations review themselves. Where necessary, look for new blood to rejuvenate their management and activities. We owe it to the energetic sportsmen and sportswomen to give them good leadership and preparation for international competition.

Athletes need to be rewarded. Fortunately, the corporate sector has become more generous and willing to recognise and reward world-class athletes who do Singapore proud.

Our corporate citizens are very forthcoming and supportive of sports in Singapore. With creative and innovative ideas from the sports associations, corporate sponsors are surely willing to do more. Perhaps the corporate citizens can be persuaded to identify with a particular sport in which Singapore is not handicapped by lack of physique, and adopt some of its most promising exponents, funding and encouraging them.

Endorsing a Tiger Wood after he has won one major title after another is easy. But it is also expensive. Far harder is picking the next big winner when he or she is still a nobody - and nurturing him or her to glory.

There is thus plenty of hard work ahead for our entire sports community. We can attain world-class standards in some sports. The struggle to win a medal in the world arena will bind us closer as a nation. Our achievements in sports will add to the pride of being Singaporeans.

In closing, I want to congratulate all the athletes recognised this afternoon. We are proud of their respective achievements. For those who are not in the top 10 rankings, I also would like to extend my thanks on behalf of all Singaporeans for the wonderful moments of triumph they had brought to Singapore. We are proud of them too.

As for the greatest Singaporean athlete this century, as I expected, there is bound to be disagreement. The Singapore Sports Council's monthly magazine, SPORTS, featured Tan Howe Liang as Singapore's athlete of the century. The same issue (Nov/Dec 99) also ran a story on Wong Peng Soon because its editorial board felt that Peng Soon was "a very very close second".

Well, the Sunday Times has picked Wong Peng Soon as Singapore's greatest athlete so far. What does it prove? It proves the unscientific nature of this exercise. The fact is we have two very fine sportsmen who have brought honour and glory to Singapore and given us tremendous joy with their exploits. What is my own choice, subjective as it may be? I would choose Tan Howe Liang as the greatest apple for his crunchy strength and Wong Peng Soon as the best orange for his fluid mastery of the game. But as a former schoolboy swimmer, I remain fascinated by Neo Chwee Kok.

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