

# *Singapore Government*

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Media Division, Ministry of Information and the Arts, 140 Hill Street #02-02 MITA Building Singapore 179369. Tel: 837 9666

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### **SPEECH BY DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER LEE HSIEN LOONG AT THE LAUNCH OF THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL ACADEMY 13 AUGUST 2000, NATIONAL STADIUM AT 3.25 P.M.**

1. I am very happy to join you here today for the launch of the National Football Academy (NFA).
2. Singaporeans are great football fans. The game ignites passion among Singaporeans of all ages and from all walks of life. It is a good example of the galvanising power of sports in fostering national pride and community bonding in a multi-racial and multi-religious society.
3. In the seventies, the "Kallang Roar" was synonymous with the National Stadium where Singaporeans came together as one to cheer their home team to victory in the Malaysia Cup. Similarly, Singaporeans stood stoutly behind the Singapore Lions in 1994 during the Malaysian League and Malaysia Cup. They collectively celebrated when the Singapore Lions won both tournaments. It was a shared triumph. The jubilation cut across cultural, religious and socio-economic lines.
4. It is therefore appropriate that the Football Association of Singapore (FAS) has made promotion of excellence in football its key mission, and set itself the ambitious goal of qualifying for the final rounds of the World Cup in 2010.
5. This target is bold and ambitious, but worthwhile. In sports as in all other spheres of human endeavour, we must always pursue excellence and strive to be

best. Even if we do not achieve the ultimate goal, in the process, we would have lifted the standard of the game to new heights.

6. To achieve Goal 2010 or come even close to it will not be easy. It requires innovative strategies, lots of hard work, plus planning, determination and perseverance. Given our small population and limited talent pool, gathering and nurturing talent will be a key challenge.

7. We will need to tap on foreign talent to supplement our local talent for football, just as we need foreign talent to strengthen our economic competitiveness and build world class companies. The FAS is thus recruiting foreign talent, putting the younger ones in the Prime League and fielding the older, more experienced foreign players in the S.League. They have helped the FAS to kick-start our own professional league. They bring with them skills and experience which our local players can learn from. Over time, they will help lift the quality of football in Singapore.

8. If some of these foreign players decide, after they have lived and played here for some years, that they want to make this their home, and they satisfy our criteria for citizenship, then we should welcome them. If they are selected by the national coach, and are prepared to wear the Singapore colours with pride, like the local-born Singaporeans, then we should accept them as full-fledged members of the Singapore team. When France won the World Cup in 1998, half of its team were born outside France, such as Marcel Desailly (born in Ghana), Patrick Vieira (born in Senegal) and David Trezeguet (born in Argentina) or were of immigrant stock, including Zidane, the outstanding player of the championships. Whether local or foreign-born, it is our dream that together the Lions can bring glory to Singapore.

9. But the FAS is not neglecting the development of our local talent. In fact, that is its first priority. For a start, the FAS is focussing on promoting football among our young. The idea is not to pressure-cook football stars from among our children, but to spread the fun and enjoyment in playing football to create as wide a base as possible. The FAS has thus launched the Snoopy Place Mini-Football Scheme for primary schools, and supported initiatives such as street-soccer and futsal promoted by grassroots organisations.

10. The establishment of the National Football Academy (NFA) will support FAS' efforts to promote general interest in football. It aims to take football in Singapore one level higher by providing the framework to identify and nurture those who show promise and interest in the game.

11. In collaboration with MOE, the Academy has set up 16 regional feeder training centres, called Centres of Excellence (COEs). Through these Centres, children aged between 12 and 18 with potential will be identified and given more

regular training by full-time coaches throughout the year. The best players will go for further grooming and more intensive training by FAS expert staff coaches and sports scientists from the Singapore Sports Council. Outstanding players from the Academy will be given the opportunity to represent Singapore in regional and international age-group competitions. Such competitions, both local and overseas, will provide the necessary training and exposure for them to develop into top-rate professional players in the years ahead.

12. Of course, the Academy is not only about football training. The FAS does not want its trainees to focus solely on football, neglecting their studies in school or their future careers after they leave competitive football. It wants to look after the overall well-being of the trainees and nurture well-rounded sportsmen.

13. Besides football training, therefore, the Academy and its Centres of Excellence will provide support schemes for its trainees, including tuition classes, scholarships for further studies and career guidance. It will also provide insurance and medical coverage, and guidance on proper nutrition. In addition, the Academy will focus on other areas of trainee development such as football coaching, general football education and sports research.

14. We fully expect trainees, when they leave the Academy upon reaching the age of 18, to be well-qualified footballers. The majority should qualify to play in the Prime League and some will make it to the S.League one or two years after they leave. Others would be well-equipped to help coach the next generation of footballers in Singapore.

15. Such youth development programmes to achieve Goal 2010 depend critically on sufficient funding. The support of corporate sponsors is critical. I am therefore happy to note that seven corporate citizens have come forward as Captains of Goal 2010 to share your World Cup dream. I thank you for your support.

16. Goal 2010 is a national quest for football excellence. It deserves our wholehearted support and the support of parents, teachers, students, officials, players and the media. I commend the FAS for its far-sighted plans. The road to Goal 2010 is long, and there will be difficulties and disappointments along the way. But I am confident that Singaporeans will support this endeavour, and together, we can achieve this goal.

17. Thank you.

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