

PAID TO PLAY

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Does it still boost national pride to win when your athletes are from another country? By Karen Gwee

When Singapore's table tennis team clinched silver and bronze medals at the Olympic Games in Beijing and London in 2008 and 2012 respectively, you'd think they would've returned home to national praise and acclaim. Especially when those medals were the first Olympic medals Singapore had seen in over 40 years.

Unfortunately, Li Jiawei, Wang Yuegu and Feng Tianwei's achievements met mixed reactions from the Singaporean population. The primary reason? They were naturalized citizens, having been born and raised in China.

In a three-day poll conducted by Yahoo! News Singapore during the London Olympics, 77 percent of 17,227 respondents said they were not proud if a "foreign import" won an Olympic medal for Singapore. While the poll was ongoing, Feng won the bronze in the singles category.

Disapproving comments and complaints buttressed the numbers. "They're just there to win medals!" "They're only competing for Singapore because they're too poor to represent China!" Online forums rang with disdain and vitriol that could ultimately be boiled down to one statement: "They aren't truly Singaporean."

The issue of foreign talent in Singaporean sports, which came to the public's attention once the Foreign Sporting Talent Scheme (FSTS) was introduced in 1993, became especially controversial at the height of Olympic fever. However, it has also loomed over Singapore's participation in smaller sporting events, such as the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games. The SEA Games are held once every two years and were most recently hosted by Myanmar last December.

"Instead of rallying the people like sports should, a win by a non-'true-blue' Singaporean has so far served only to divide the nation, and even foster a loss of faith in the sport itself," opined Yahoo! Singapore writer Justin Ong in a piece reflecting on the difference in Singaporeans' reactions to local athletes' achievements in Myanmar and to foreign talents' achievements in other sporting events.

Concerns about the legitimacy of sporting triumphs and the unity of the nation seem to stem from a place of patriotism in many Singaporeans' hearts, but they slant towards mild xenophobia that degenerates into outright bigotry thanks to a vocal minority in online local forums such as HardwareZone.com.sg.

Bigotry in sports is hardly a uniquely Singaporean issue. Racial politics have intertwined with sports everywhere in the world, whether in Tommie Smith and John Carlos' black power salutes at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City or in the deep-seated cricket rivalry between India and Pakistan.

However, the issue of foreign talent in Singaporean sports is a hot-button issue in a professedly-multicultural, economically-successful and geographically-small nation that has in recent years seen significant increases in immigration and thus a noticeable change in population demographics. The proportion of foreigners in Singapore jumped from 14 percent in 1990 to 36 percent in 2010.

Unfortunately, the Singaporean public has not been entirely welcoming of the government's foreign talent policy. The increased visibility of foreign labor, particularly in construction and service sectors, and the notion that foreign talent was displacing Singaporeans in the workforce, contributed to a rising tide of xenophobia, buoyed by feelings of suffocation in an increasingly crowded country and fear of economic downturn. With naturalized citizens representing the country on the most prestigious sporting platform in the world, the anti-foreigner sentiment unsurprisingly bubbled over into the issue.

Assistant Professor Eugene Tan of Singapore Management University wrote in an email, "That FSTS athletes, as immigrants, could help raise sporting standards in Singapore and contribute to Singapore's hunger and quest for sporting success had many parallels to the foreign talent policy for professionals, investors and other types of talents valued by Singapore." As a Nominated Member of Parliament, Tan raised the FSTS issue in two Parliament sittings last February.

Raising the bar for Singaporean sports and "contributing to Singapore's hunger and quest for sporting success" has been the official government stance on foreign sporting talent for a long time. "If we want to win glory for Singapore and do well not only in sports but in many other areas, we cannot merely depend on the local-born. We need to attract talent from all over," said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in the country's annual National Day Rally in 2008.

Foreign sporting talent improves the standard of Singaporean sports by acting as a catalyst for internal competition, says ex-national athlete Dylan Ban. Ban was part of the national table tennis team from 2008 to 2011.

"The issue with training with locals within the national team set-up is that the local pool is limited and that you almost always end up sparring with people of the same skill level as you," he wrote in an email. "The diversity was very beneficial for our personal development because we were exposed to the many different playing styles and methods of training."

The limited local pool due to Singapore's small size and population - 5.4 million people in 2013 - is a key reason why importing foreign

talent is essential for Singapore's sporting success, Ban says.

"Singapore is simply too small to build a whole sporting eco-system capable of producing interested budding athletes, coaches and the whole range of backroom staff essential to supporting the performance of the single elite athlete," Ban wrote. "So I would say the FSTS is essential because we really do not have any other choice at present."

Government priorities also impact the nation's athletic performance. Economic success and security has been a bedrock of Singaporean society for the 49 years it has been a nation. This has translated into a culture that prioritizes educational excellence.

"Much of it is down to our way of bringing kids up to think that studies should be focused on to the exclusion of all else," said Neo Seh Woon, a member of the national water polo training squad since 2011. "However, while the government clearly prioritizes certain sectors over sports, it wants to have fingers in multiple pies, raising national prestige and possibly inspiring a new generation of sportsmen, hence the FSTS."

The emphasis on educational excellence in Singaporean society has resulted in a robust education system - 2012 numbers indicate a literacy rate (of residents 15 years and over) of 96.4 percent. And although the government has been making progress in improving its sporting institutions for youth - the Singapore Sports School was opened in 2004 - their efforts still fall short of standards in other countries.

"The Sports School only covers athletes from Secondary One to Four, sometimes Secondary Five [8th to 12th grade]. With the new International Baccalaureate program offered this year, the Sports School holds onto its students for six years at best," wrote Ban.

"In China, athletes start training between the ages of three and five, and they peak at ages 21 to 26 for table tennis. There is an obvious gap. Local athletes haven't been able to wrest representative rankings from foreign talents simply because the locals aren't good enough."

However, observers of the last SEA Games might disagree. The media spotlight was trained this time on local athletes such as swimmer and five-time gold medalist Joseph Schooling and rower Saiyidah Aisyah, Singapore's first rowing gold medalist since 1997.

Evidently, Singaporean-born athletes are no slouches, and they need to show it, expressed Ban. "If local athletes are really so afraid of competition from foreign talent, then it's up to them to work harder and outdo the competition so they can lay sole claim to the top."