



# Tokyo 2020: A tale of two cities

Games show indomitable human spirit amid the pandemic, but will remain mired in controversy for some time. **BY EUGENE K B TAN**

**W**HAT a bittersweet Olympics Tokyo 2020 has been. In many respects, the postponed Games demonstrated the indomitable human spirit not to let the pandemic cancel the 17-day sporting spectacle. Nevertheless, the Games will remain mired in controversy for some time; its legacy complex, if not uncertain.

The long-term financial viability of the world's foremost sporting festival is one. Originally forecasted to cost US\$7.4 billion, total spending on hosting the Games has ballooned to more than US\$20 billion. Behind the scenes, there was the sense that the International Olympic Council (IOC) had foisted the "Isolation Games" on an unwilling Japanese public.

The Olympic Games is clearly a huge business enterprise. The financial consequences of a cancellation could not be contemplated.

A surge in Covid-19 infections on the eve of the Games necessitated a fourth state of emergency in Tokyo. Spectators were banned from almost all competition venues. Three days before last Sunday's close, more than 5,000 new daily infections were recorded.

It is an open question whether the Games have put lives at risk and will hamper economic recovery efforts. The Japanese electorate will reckon the costs and benefits of hosting the event.

Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga may well pay a heavy political price with a general election months away, notwithstanding Japan finishing third in the medal tally, her best performance.

However, with audacity, creativity, and warmth, Japan showed she could hold the Games amid a resurgent global pandemic. If Tokyo's hosting the 1964 Olympic Games was Japan's "phoenix rising from the ashes" moment, the 2020 Games is about Japan's resilience and determination against the pandemic morass and the devastating 2011 Fukushima earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster.

Sports nationalism was never short in supply in the extraordinary quest for superiority of one system over another. The US-China rivalry took centre stage, with the US pipping China by one gold in the medal tally.

Despite the virus and doping cheats, athleticism and heroics, grit and determination were in full display in this made-for-TV sports bonanza. Exhausted by the pandemic, Tokyo 2020 offered not

only a respite from the quotidian pandemic anxieties, raising spirits across the globe and bringing people together.

The many displays of sportsmanship and camaraderie, such as the male high jumpers from Italy and Qatar agreeing to be joint gold medallists, were heartwarming.

Sport's power to uplift the human spirit was awe-inspiring. Not to be outdone was the absorbing quest to surpass one's previous best and reach the next pinnacle of excellence that underlined many of the impressive performances.

The competitors rose above training and competition disruptions to deliver sporting prowess that enthralled us.

Bringing the curtain down on the Games, IOC president Thomas Bach congratulated the athletes for giving the world "in these difficult times ... the most precious of gifts: hope".

The Olympics has had to reinvent itself to cater to the new and youthful audiences. Bicycle motocross (BMX) riders, skateboarders and sports climbers competed for honours.

As a change agent and social advocate, the Olympics is a powerful platform. Tokyo 2020 was the most gender-balanced, and the most diverse with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) participation.

The honour given to Japanese tennis star Naomi Osaka to light the Olympic cauldron at the opening was an important nod to gender equality and Japan's often marginalised mixed-race population.

Mental health issues were brought to the fore by American star gymnast Simone Biles, who had to pull out of most of her events only to return to competition at the tail end of the programme.

## TEAM SINGAPORE'S SUBDUED PERFORMANCE

Tokyo was the first Olympics since 2004 that Team Singapore returned home empty-handed. However, there were bright spots, with the debutant shuttlers, fencers, paddler, and sailors not overawed by the biggest sporting stage. Instead, they used it to turn in impressive performances, reflecting the hard work and commitment put in.

The key challenge is to ensure that their Olympic baptism would make them even hungrier for more success in subsequent Games.

Can we develop sustainable pathways that would enable our athletes to continue having competitive

Despite returning empty-handed for the first time, there were bright spots in Tokyo for Team Singapore, with the debutant shuttlers, fencers, paddler, and sailors not overawed by the biggest sporting stage. PHOTO: REUTERS

sporting careers into their late 20s and 30s?

It is trite, and almost a tired excuse, to lament that there is no future for sports in Singapore. Academic demands and national service are too often unfairly blamed.

For the amount that Singapore has invested in the sports ecosystem, especially in pursuit of sporting success on the world stage, the returns could arguably be richer in quality and quantity.

As in many other areas of human endeavour, success is predicated not on talent or population size alone; instead, talent and hard work must go together.

It is this quest for excellence through mastery and patience that sports has much to offer to Singaporeans. Adopting a craftsman-like approach to our endeavours is often not given the due attention it deserves.

Olympic success is certainly not beyond the realm of possibility for small nations. Jamaica, with a 2.7 million population, has consistently produced world-class sprinters, including the now retired Usain Bolt, and Elaine Thompson-Herah, who successfully defended her titles in Tokyo.

Other countries with a similar population size as Singapore include New Zealand which won 20 Olympic medals in Tokyo, including seven golds. Norway had eight medals, half of which were gold. Hong Kong earned six medals, half of which were either gold or silver.

One can add to this list the Bahamas, Denmark, Croatia, Kosovo, Qatar, and Serbia – all small nations with at least two gold medals each.

That sports can bring the nation closer was vividly demonstrated by Singapore swimmer Joseph Schooling's 2016 Rio Olympics triumph and our hosting of and good performance at the SEA Games and Asean Para Games in 2015.

Singapore needs to continue to grow a conducive national sporting culture, especially one that emphasises sports for all as a cornerstone for sporting excellence. Too much focus on trying to extract unadulterated value often leads to misplaced priorities, confused policies, over-exuberant expectations, and skewed incentive schemes.

Singapore needs to nurture more athletes in the years ahead who are not content with following the trail blazed by Schooling, but set out to chart bold ones of their own. For that, we need to nurture a genuine and sustainable interest in sports.

In the first two decades of Singapore's nationhood, sports was a means to build a healthy and rugged society.

Officiating at the National Stadium's opening in 1973, then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew remarked: "With a population of just over two million, let us not waste time going especially out of our way to produce gold medallists, whether for Olympic, Asian or Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games. There are no national benefits from gold medallists for smaller countries. For the superpowers, with large populations, superiority in sports is national propaganda to persuade other people of the superiority of their competing political systems. But it is foolish and wasteful for the smaller countries to do this".

That was a different and bygone era when economic priorities were more urgent for Singapore, but Lee's remarks provide a useful reality check. He had added that Singaporeans would "lead better and more satisfying lives if they are fit and healthy".

What sports has to offer remains steadfast whether one is an elite sports person, a sports enthusiast, or merely seeking to keep fit: healthy living and the imbibing of values, especially of surpassing one's previous best.

This is what the Tokyo Paralympic Games, if it goes ahead in a fortnight's time, promises to evoke – perhaps more so than the Olympics: People overcoming disabilities and obstacles in an invigorating expression of the human spirit.

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