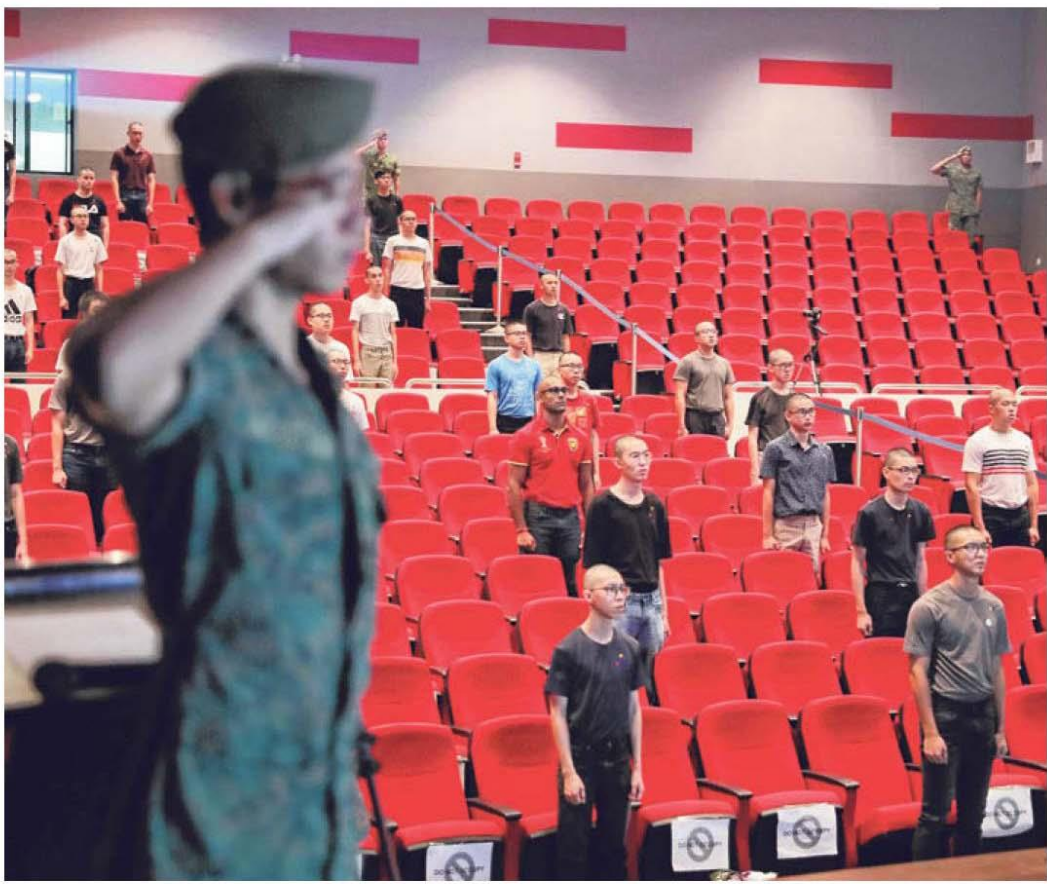




Olympians Joseph Schooling (top), 26, and Quah Zheng Wen (above), 24, had deferred NS for seven and six years respectively. Each year, tens of thousands of full-time and operationally ready national servicemen (right) serve with pride and commitment in the SAF, police force and Singapore Civil Defence Force.

ST FILE PHOTOS



Sporting excellence and NS: Abiding principles for rite of passage for S'porean sons

Strict criteria for long-term NS deferment are necessary and fair to preserve universality and equity for all national servicemen and must be applied without fear or favour

Eugene K.B. Tan

For The Straits Times

The national service (NS) pre-enlistment process has begun for Olympians Joseph Schooling and Quah Zheng Wen. Their long-term deferment from NS ended on Aug 31.

Schooling, 26, and Quah, 24, had deferred NS for seven and six years respectively.

On social media, there are suggestions that there be different forms of NS, including civilian service and even exemption from NS on account of exceptional service to the country such as

sporting achievements.

Might the peace and stability enjoyed and the established nature of NS make us take lightly the onerous decision made in 1967 requiring Singapore male citizens and permanent residents to serve NS at the earliest opportunity on reaching 18 years of age?

Or is it the case that “deep in his heart the average Singapore citizen knows the dangers he faces are real and not hypothetical, and that there is a need to defend ourselves”, as Dr Goh Keng Swee, Singapore’s first defence minister, had observed in 1984 just before he retired.

A brief examination of the core principles that undergird NS is pertinent.

PRINCIPLES UNDERGIRDING NS

First, as it extracts a high price, NS must fulfil a critical national need. For Singapore’s citizen army, the imperative is to defend the nation and to protect our sovereignty. If not, there is no basis to compel a person to serve NS. National servicemen form the backbone of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), given Singapore’s small population and a declining birth rate.

Second, NS must be universal. Simply put, all who are fit to serve must serve. This accords with fairness. Whether in peace or war time, the morale and the will to defend Singapore would be severely weakened if some are conscripted but others are not through exemptions or alternative forms of service.

Third, the equity principle entails equality of treatment of national servicemen in like circumstances, regardless of background or status.

NS has strong public acceptance and legitimacy because the

principles of universality and equity are stringently upheld, and NS serves a critical need of national security for a young nation state.

Should exceptions or flexibility be given to elite sportsmen, especially if the person was an Olympic medallist?

In announcing that Schooling’s and Quah’s long-term deferment had ended, the Ministry of Defence (MinDef) reiterated on Sept 16 that such deferment “is granted very selectively for exceptional sportsmen assessed to be potential medal winners at international competitions like the Olympic Games and who are able to bring national pride to Singapore”.

These clear expectations are laid out each time deferment is granted. Only three sportsmen – Schooling, Quah and sailor Maximilian Soh – have met these criteria in the last 15 years. The swimmers failed to make the cut for the semi-finals (top 16) in their events at the Tokyo Olympics. Hence, a long-term deferment till

the 2024 Paris Olympics would be hard to justify.

Notwithstanding their performances in Tokyo, some argue that Schooling and Quah should be granted deferment for another three years so as not to impede their development and ability to fulfil their sporting aspirations. They contend that the policy on long-term NS deferment is transactional – “you do well, you may get deferment”. This is an inaccurate caricature of the policy.

On the contrary, MinDef and the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth have every interest in elite sportsmen succeeding and bringing glory to Singapore, especially those on long-term deferment. They also recognise that elite sportsmen go through peaks and troughs in their training and competition performance. Had the authorities adopted a transactional approach, the brakes on Schooling’s long-term deferment would have been applied even before the Tokyo Olympics.

STRICT CRITERIA ARE NECESSARY

The strict criteria for long-term NS deferment are necessary and fair. All male Singaporeans liable for full-time NS put aside personal pursuits and ambitions to serve NS. Given the paramount importance of NS and the need for universality and equity in NS, there is no alternative to an impartial and rigorous approach in considering long-term NS deferment applications.

Long-term deferment cannot be open-ended and/or unconditional, especially when such deferments are exceptional and could be abused if not judiciously enforced. In a 2017 ruling on NS defaulters, a special three-judge appellate High Court endorsed the principles of universality and equity for NS.

The court noted that those serving full-time NS should do so “at around the same age” and when required to enlist, must do so “without regard to his personal convenience and considerations”. Otherwise, there will be “strong feelings of unfairness and resentment in those who have made personal sacrifices to serve NS and over time, lower their morale and eventually also erode public support for NS”.

It is noteworthy that the swimmers’ response to their imminent enlistment has been commendable. They have stated that they are ready to fulfil their NS obligations, as they had agreed to when they were granted deferment.

Schooling said he was “very grateful” for the Government’s “non-wavering support” in his swimming career. He acknowledged that he would not have achieved the results he did without NS deferment.

Quah also expressed his gratitude for “the privilege” of deferments and said he was “always thankful for the opportunity to represent Singapore – whether it is through enlisting or swimming”. He said enlistment would not disrupt his plans to continue representing Singapore.

NS AND ELITE SPORTS

Can sporting excellence be

achieved alongside fulfilling NS duties?

In Parliament in 2018, when explaining why footballer Ben Davis was not granted long-term NS deferment, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen duly recognised that NS required personal sacrifices but that “performing one’s NS duties and pursuing national aspirations for sports excellence need not be mutually exclusive”.

Indeed, over the years, many talented sportsmen have served NS while displaying exemplary commitment, discipline and grit in pursuing their sporting dreams. These include several athletes who had competed in the Tokyo Olympics without deferring full-time NS. Among them were diver Jonathan Chan, 24; paddler Clarence Chew, 25; sailor Ryan Lo, 24; and shuttler Loh Kean Yew, 24. They demonstrated that while full-time NS may not allow one to train and compete at the same level, it is not impossible to improve their sport performance after NS.

For example, shuttler Loh, whose gutsy performance in Tokyo impressed many, was ranked 112th in the world when he enlisted in 2016. His ranking was as low as 346th during NS as he could not compete at the same level as pre-enlistment. However, his ranking climbed to 127th within months of his completing NS. His current world ranking is No. 40.

Similarly, Laser sailor Lo won an Asian Games bronze a few months after completing NS in 2018. For several years now, he has set his sights on winning a gold in Paris and had put his university studies on hold. Chew is the first Singapore-born paddler to qualify for the men’s singles event at the Olympics. Likewise, Chan is the first Singaporean male diver to qualify for the Olympics.

MinDef has longstanding arrangements to support national servicemen in their sporting quests. These include short postponement of enlistment and time off or additional leave for training and competition, subject to the exigencies of service.

OVER 1 MILLION HAVE SERVED NS

NS, as a responsibility of citizenship, is integral to Singapore’s security and defence. Since 1967, over a million Singapore men have served NS. Each year, tens of thousands of full-time and operationally ready national servicemen serve with pride and commitment in the SAF, police force and Singapore Civil Defence Force, contributing directly to the security and defence of Singapore and its people.

Strong support for and trust and confidence in NS are anchored in the strict implementation of universality and equity as foundational principles. NS will come unstuck if these abiding principles are not applied without fear or favour.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Eugene K.B. Tan is associate professor of law at Singapore Management University. He was a team manager at the 2002 Busan Asian Games and 2004 Athens Olympics.