

Resolving NS-elite sports tensions through a paradox lens

Instead of viewing sports training and national service as naturally opposed, consider how each can complement the other with benefits for both

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For The Straits Times

For a country like Singapore with few natural resources, human capital is vital. It is reflected in its top ranking in the World Bank's 2020 Human Capital Index, which measures how well economies are investing in their people. Indeed, the importance of talent is reflected in Singapore's investments in education for children and adults, as well as in national policies on immigration and economic development.

These measures have worked out well, and we see the results not just in international test scores, but also in accomplishments of Singaporeans in fields ranging from the sciences (geography professor Brenda Yeoh), business (Secretlab co-founders Ian Ang and Alaric Choo) and international administration (International Monetary Fund chief information officer Shirin Hamid) to entertainment (singer JJ Lin) and sports (swimmer Joseph Schooling and shuttler Loh Kean Yew).

While we acknowledge and celebrate the success of Singapore's system for talent development, we need to continue addressing issues that could obstruct the talent pipeline, not just in strategic areas but also across the board, because talent diversity is critical for our society to adapt to unexpected circumstances.

One issue in talent development that has recently come to the fore is how national service (NS) obligations could potentially

interrupt the developmental trajectory of elite talent in sports.

Many athletes have voiced their concern that NS is particularly disruptive because it coincides with a developmentally sensitive window for elite performance. In domains such as the arts, the developmental trajectory is longer, with the peak occurring at an older age and sustaining for longer periods – like a good bottle of wine.

An athlete's developmental trajectory is more like ripening fruit with a shorter time to maturity, and for shorter periods. As the peak for athletic talent occurs at an earlier age, the concern is that an athlete's career could be derailed more easily by early interruptions in its trajectory. Europe-based footballer Iskandar Bjoern referred to NS as a "speed bump in my profession". Even Olympian shuttler Loh noted how he lost his "feel" during his time in NS.

THE DILEMMA

Such concerns have led to calls for the authorities to support sporting talent by expanding deferment of NS for elite athletes and including representation in international sporting events as part of NS.

While well intended, these suggestions go against the central principles of NS, which are the defence of our sovereignty, universality and equity.

Any proposal that can potentially infringe on these principles will be controversial, divisive, and will not be well received by the military establishment. As much as I value the benefits of public debate,

pushing such ideas in the public forum will be counterproductive as it forces the establishment to dig in its heels and take a firmer stance on these issues.

Considering these national priorities, is it possible for Singapore to develop a pipeline of male sporting talent at the elite level, given the potentially disruptive effects of mandatory NS?

I am optimistic that we can, but it requires a reframing of the relationship between NS and developing elite sporting talent.

A WAY FORWARD

This reframing involves positioning NS and developing elite sporting talent as complementary rather than competitive priorities. Management scholars refer to this approach as adopting a paradox mindset that emphasises a both/and approach towards contradictory positions instead of an either/or approach.

Researchers have found that a both/and framing allows people to see the mutual dependencies between contradictory positions, which can lead to more creative solutions. I suggest that adopting this approach could steer the conversation around NS and sporting talent in a different direction that paves the way for new possibilities.

For example, the conversation can be reframed to focus on how elite athletes can contribute to the operational capabilities of our military. Such a conversation surfaces the possibility of developing pathways in NS that tap the skills and experiences of

elite athletes to enhance the military's capabilities. This integrative approach is better than simply channelling talented athletes into vocations where they can get time off to train after hours.

For example, elite athletes could contribute to sharing techniques for building mental resilience, performing under pressure, and building high-performance teams. Former Nominated MP and national athlete Nicholas Fang recently highlighted similar schemes in the United States, German and Italian armed forces as examples of the synergistic relationship between the military and sports.

Adopting a paradox lens can also

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surface new possibilities for athletes to consider how they may leverage their national service experience as a doorway to new opportunities, rather than an obstacle in their athletic development. Here are three possibilities for how this lens can be applied.

First, NS could provide experiences that enable athletes to relate to their sport in new ways that could renew their motivation in the sport. With the strong emphasis that NS places on training and working as a collective, athletes in an individual sport could be inspired to infuse elements of team camaraderie to make their training in the sport more varied.

Second, elite athletes are usually hyper-specialised in a narrow field. NS could expose them to complementary new skills, or provide insights into new ways of applying existing skills. For example, techniques like breath control, calming the mind and mental focus are as important in marksmanship as they are in the moments before the start of a race or taking a penalty shot.

Third, attempts to maintain their physical conditioning amid imperfect circumstances could also develop athletes' adaptability skills, which could help them to maintain their composure and perform at their peak under a wider range of circumstances than their competitors.

DEFENDING ASPIRATIONS OF DIVERSE TALENT

Singapore is more than an island that people live on – it is a place where Singaporeans of all talents

can realise their personal and professional aspirations. For myself, and perhaps for many others, this is what makes Singapore the home that we will defend.

Thus, in areas where the interests of talent development come up against broader national priorities, such as in the case of elite sporting talent and NS, I suggest adopting a paradox lens to reframe these issues as complementary, rather than competitive, positions.

A paradox lens can help stakeholders – athletes, sports administrators, the military establishment and even the public – to see creative ways to move forward by emphasising the mutual dependencies between their positions.

If we truly value a diverse pool of talented Singaporeans, I foresee that tensions between Singaporeans' diverse aspirations and other national priorities will become more common. This need not be something negative because research on creativity has shown that contradictory positions can be generative – it depends on how the contradictions are synthesised.

Therefore, at a broader level, I hope this approach of adopting paradox thinking can be how Singapore progresses in its drive to nurture a diverse pool of talent.

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Singapore shuttler Loh Kean Yew playing in a first-round match at the Hylo Open in Germany last week. As the peak for athletic talent occurs at an earlier age compared with talent in other domains such as the arts, the concern, says the writer, is that an athlete's career could be derailed more easily by early interruptions in the developmental trajectory. PHOTO: BADMINTON PHOTO