

Spielberg's pull-out from the Beijing Olympics shows how big sporting events can be politicised



► Teo Cheng Wee

LIKE oil and water. That is how Singapore National Olympic Council secretary-general Chris Chan describes sports and politics.

"While sports aims to bring people together, politics pulls them apart," he notes. "The two cannot and should not mix."

So it is clear where he stands in the latest political episode to hit international sports: The recent decision by American director Steven Spielberg to pull out as artistic adviser for the Beijing Olympics' opening and closing ceremonies.

The director, who came on board in 2006, issued a statement more than a week ago saying he made the decision after failing to convince China to do more to help end the civil conflict in Darfur, Sudan. The violence there has killed more than 200,000 people since 2003.

China is believed to have influence over the Islamic regime that runs the country because it buys two-thirds of the country's oil exports. In turn, it sells weapons to Sudan and defends it in the United Nations Security Council.

"When he withdrew from the Games, he was taking a political stand on something not related to sports. It hurts the event, it's a loss to the Olympics and it's not something he should have done," says Mr Chan, referring to Spielberg.

That politics and sports should not mix is a statement echoed by many sportsmen and administrators.

Yet even the most idealistic of them must concede that to keep the two spheres completely apart in today's sporting world is wishful thinking.

"Oil and water" is not the right analogy in this instance. Oil and water do not mix – but sports and politics are inextricably intertwined.

Athletes, after all, are mostly funded by their respective governments. Large-scale sporting events cannot be hosted if a country does not pledge funds. And infrastructure for sporting events cannot be put in place without political backing.

When Singapore hosted the 117th International Olympic Committee (IOC) session in 2005, as many politicians as sportsmen were in town. Then British prime minister Tony Blair and former US first lady Hillary Clinton rubbed shoulders with David Beckham and Alexander Popov.

But one should be careful to distinguish between governmental support for an event and political interference, Singapore's IOC executive board member Ng Ser Miang points out.

"It's impossible to say that there can be absolutely no politi-

cal involvement in sports. If a nation is investing a lot of money and resources, the government definitely needs to be involved.

"But the country's sports associations and National Olympic Council (NOC) should remain autonomous and not have to make decisions under political pressure."

It crosses the line when, say, a new sports minister comes on board and unilaterally sacks the elected NOC members, replacing them with his own people. Such cases have happened before and are against the Olympic charter, says Mr Ng.

Political involvement does not mean there will be a political agenda, says Parliamentary Secretary (Community Development, Youth and Sports) Teo Ser Luck, who has been a key member of the Republic's winning bid for the 2010 Youth Olympic Games (YOG).

He acknowledges that he is a politician drumming up support for a sporting event, but asserts that the bid was not for the ruling party but for the country – in particular, the social benefits it can bring in bonding its citizens.

"We didn't bid on the YOG for economic benefits. We didn't bid on it for political mileage," he tells The Sunday Times.

"If we really wanted to score political points, we won't pick a

► When politics invades the arena

A LOOK at politics and the Olympics:

► 1906: At the Athens Olympics, Irish athlete Peter O'Connor scaled the flagpole to tear down the British Union flag that was flown for his second place in the long jump. In its place, he waved an Irish flag.

► 1936: German dictator Adolf Hitler used the Berlin Olympics as a propaganda tool as well as to showcase what he believed was the supremacy of the Aryan race and the inferiority of ethnic Africans. Famously, he did not shake the hand of African-American runner Jesse Owens – who won four gold medals at the Games – although later stories surfaced that Hitler did not shake the hands of many other athletes as well.

► 1968: Americans Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the gold and bronze medallists in the men's 200m race, stood on the medal rostrum barefooted and wearing civil rights buttons.

As the national anthem played, they lowered their heads and raised a black-gloved fist each to protest against unequal rights for blacks in the United States. They were dropped from the team, packed home and banned from the Mexico Games.

► 1972: A group of eight Palestinian terrorists belonging to the Black September organisation broke into the Olympic Village in Munich and killed 11 Israeli athletes.

► 1976: Twenty-eight African countries boycotted the Montreal Games as they were upset with New Zealand for continuing to play rugby against South Africa, which was under apartheid rule.

► 1980: To protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the US led a boycott of the Moscow Games. In all, 64 nations sat out the competition.

► 1984: In retaliation, 14 Soviet-led countries boycotted the Los Angeles Games.

► 2000: Australian and aboriginal runner Cathy Freeman celebrated her win in the 400m race in the Sydney Games by draping herself with the Australian and Aboriginal flags.

► 2008: Director Steven Spielberg pulls out as artistic adviser for the Beijing Olympics' opening and closing ceremonies, saying that China has not done enough to stop the conflict in Darfur.

project like this, where we have little experience and success is so uncertain."

Politics on the podium

POLITICIANS aside, what should one make of individuals, groups or athletes who use sports meets to make a political point?

Spielberg's stand on Darfur is neither the first nor the last time that such an event will be used to publicise political issues, particularly at the mother of all meets, the Olympics.

The mass appeal of sports and the resulting media focus make it a useful platform to publicise issues and concerns, says Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan.

Older sports fans will remember the two American runners raising their black-gloved fists at the rostrum in the 1968 Mexico Games in support of the Black Power movement in the United States; or the tit-for-tat boycotts of the 1980 Moscow and 1984 Los Angeles Games, among others (see other story).

Since then, there has been relative quiet for two decades at the Seoul, Barcelona, Atlanta, Sydney and Athens Olympics.

But with China's emergence on the global stage, the Beijing Games have proved to be a light-

ning rod for activists who want to take the country to task not just over Darfur, but also Tibet and Taiwan, among other issues.

Since the Spielberg incident, sports ministers from several countries have hit out at critics calling for a boycott of the Beijing Games, insisting it would be counter-productive.

They especially want the sportsmen to be kept out of it.

The Olympics are "about sport, not about human rights. It is up to politicians, NGOs and the like to pursue this matter, not athletes", Slovenian Sports Minister Milan Zver points out.

The Olympic charter states that there should be "no kind of demonstration or political, religious, or racial propaganda permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas" from athletes.

For those who feel politically inclined, however, the charter does not forbid them from expressing opinions elsewhere – a point picked up by political analyst Terence Chong.

"You can raise political issues and champion the purer ideals of sports at the same time. The two need not be mutually exclusive," he says.

Still, for the time being, athletes appear to have little interest in getting involved. Already, there have been reports of sportsmen resenting being called on to challenge China's human rights record or even to follow Spielberg's footsteps in quitting the Games.

Italian kayak champion Josefa Idem, who will be competing in her seventh Games in Beijing, was initially against the awarding of the Olympics to "an undemocratic country like China".

"But now that they've decided to go there, I'm against applying pressure for political goals using the skin of the athletes," she says.

Similarly, reigning Olympic tennis champion Justine Henin from Belgium reiterated to journalists that she was going to the Olympics "to play tennis, not play politics".

What is most important to sportsmen like former national swimmer Ang Peng Siong is that politics should never hurt the sportsman.

When speaking to The Sunday Times, he brought up a name – Craig Beardsley – that most people would not have heard of.

The two met when Ang was training in the US in the early 1980s. A butterfly specialist, Beardsley was one of the American swimmers who did not get to go to the 1980 Moscow Olympics because of the US boycott.

There is no way of knowing if Beardsley would have won the 200m butterfly gold in Moscow, but on July 30, 1980, he set a world record at the US Nationals. The time was more than a second faster than that set by Sergei Fesenko of the Soviet Union, who won the Olympic gold 10 days earlier in Moscow.

Four years later, Beardsley missed making the 1984 Olympic team by 0.36 of a second.

"For athletes like him, it was heartbreaking," Ang recalls.

So for the sake of unwitting victims like Beardsley, there may be another cause worth campaigning for in Beijing: If it is not possible to keep politics out of sports, we should at least keep it away from sportsmen.

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