

FromTheGallery

An inclusive ecosystem with strong public and private support for sports



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When it was announced yesterday that Paralympian swimmer Yip Pin Xiu would be the inaugural recipient of a new President's Award for Inspiring Achievement, the House burst into applause. From a child who was often bullied and stared at, to becoming a five-time gold medallist and former Nominated MP, Ms Yip has shown Singaporeans that nothing is impossible. Amid the bouquets that have been sent her way since she won her second gold at the Tokyo Paralympics this year, one

question has been asked: Can more be done to reduce the disparity in cash awards between the Major Games Award Programme (MAP) for able-bodied athletes, and the Athletes' Achievement Awards (AAA) for para-athletes? Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh, in an op-ed for this newspaper last month, noted that the cash payout for an athlete winning a gold medal at the Paralympics is \$200,000 – or one-fifth of the \$1 million reward for those who achieve Olympic gold. The MAP and AAA are private award schemes managed by the Singapore National Olympic Council and Singapore National Paralympic Council (SNPC) respectively, with the awards funded entirely by private sponsors. Professor Koh had argued that this disparity is inconsistent with the letter and spirit of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, two of whose guiding principles are equality and non-discrimination. Equalising cash awards is not

new. The United States Olympic Committee adjusted the prize money for Paralympic athletes in 2018 to equal that of Olympians. While retroactive payments had been made, this year's Olympic and Paralympic games in Tokyo marked the first time they were paid equally from the start. In his motion yesterday, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and Second Minister for Law Edwin Tong stressed that the difference in cash quantum does not reflect how the Government values para-athletes vis-a-vis able-bodied athletes, and that the SNPC is working on enhancing the cash awards for para-athletes in major games. Mr Tong said the value which disability sports has in Singapore lies in how it builds social inclusivity – not just elite high performance, but also the difference that mere participation can make. It was the kind of message Singaporeans needed to hear in this strange season, when children find their co-curricular and

sporting activities cancelled, and sedentary adults have put on pounds in the pandemic equivalent to the "freshman fifteen". For many, following Team Singapore's efforts on the world stage has been a form of national bonding. Mr Tong outlined how support and funding of the entire disability sports ecosystem have been stepped up, and the emphasis placed on grassroots development under the Disability Sport Master Plan. For example, the country is on track to making every single ActiveSG Gym an inclusive one by 2026. On funding, it may be unrealistic to enforce parity. But some form of equalisation may not be a bad thing. Ms Denise Phua (Jalan Besar GRC) noted that, at the very least, it makes for powerful public messaging on inclusivity. But the responsibility should not be laid solely at the Government's feet. There are ways for those in the public and corporate spheres to step in and close the gap in monetary disparity.

Nominated MP Mark Chay called on government-linked companies and agencies to adopt national sports associations, by financially supporting their activities. Ms Poh Li San (Sembawang GRC) noted that the recurring millions needed to invest in grooming an Olympian could make it hard to justify from a public funding standpoint. A possible solution? Relinquish total management control of national athletes. This means working with bigger commercial corporations that require endorsements and branding; and in return, have them support the cost of training and provide financial assistance. She also proposed that the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth and the Ministry of Trade and Industry work together to start a sports representation programme, to recognise the participation of big corporations in the support of top-tier national athletes who are keen to turn professional.

When Mr Sitoh Yih Pin (Potong Pasir) spoke of how some Japanese companies hire elite athletes as full-time employees on flexible work schedules, I was reminded of professional services firm Deloitte's Ignite programme, which offers job opportunities for Team Singapore athletes. Perhaps there could be a network of such employers in Singapore. Public agencies and the media, too, will have to continue communicating – across a range of stakeholders – the value proposition of sports and rally support behind our local sporting heroes. Mr Tong yesterday spoke of "reimagining" the authorities' response to the issues that MPs highlighted. If this can ensure that Singaporeans are better able to participate in sports at all levels, and allow local athletes to realise their full potential, then it is a worthy ambition to get behind.

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