

Deputy Minister of Youth and Sports, YB Senator Gan Ping Siew

“We Unearth Talent”

By Zul Izwan

When The Leaders was granted an interview with the Deputy Minister of Youth and Sports, YB Senator Gan Ping Siew recently, as in all meetings with Ministers or Deputy Ministers, we were waiting for him at the lobby of Amoda Building, expecting him to arrive in a gleaming, posh luxury car. We wrongly assumed!

For not only did YB Gan arrived at the interview venue by LRT, he looked simple, casual, just like any other man on the street, with no entourage, bodyguards, or even a PA. He looked fresh and alert, even if he professed to tiredness. “I haven’t played futsal in quite a while. It has taken quite a toll on me,” he said, laughing.

An avid futsal player, he is also a keen golfer, and is very much in love with badminton, very fitting for his new portfolio in the Youth and Sports Ministry.

What followed was a Q&A session with YB Gan, on such diverse topics as Michael Schumacher, to sports and youth culture in Malaysia, and to his boss [Minister of Youth and Sports Dato’ Ahmad Shabery Cheek] asking his staff about Cyber Games.

YB, as you know, we [Malaysia] are on a losing spree whether it is in the Thomas and Uber Cup, the Youth Games, and even football. What are the steps that the Youth and Sports Ministry is taking to halt this worrying trend?

Let us start from the very beginning. What are the principles for sports? The first element is sporting. Winning and losing is part of the culture of sports. No one will win forever, neither can one lose forever.

Let us take, for example, badminton. Our country is proud to say we have some of the fittest players in the world and the World Number 1 player all in our court. But it all came to naught at the Thomas-Uber Cup.

I have read the analysis from Institut Sukan Negara, which came to the conclusion that our strategies were wrong. Their studies came from detailed analysis of the games, of the condition of our players and their opponents, as well as a huge number of other factors.

Even the mighty Indonesians have acknowledged that the Chinese team is the biggest hurdle in modern badminton. This might be facetious but common sense would suggest that in a country of one billion people, the pool of potential players is far, far larger than our own pool of players.

But that may not be the reason.



Another theory is biology itself. The body build of a typical South-East Asian genetically predisposes us to excel at certain sports. For example, look at basketball. We can play basketball very well, but we can never compare to the Americans.

But don’t think that I am telling everyone to give up! On the contrary, I am telling people to go out there and try! Look at our sports icons - Datuk Lee Chong Wei, Nicole David and Sazali Samad. By and large, they do wonderfully. They do our country proud.

So this is what the Sports Ministry is keen on. We unearth talent. We give them a platform of opportunities in order to rise up to the challenge. And provided that we can create such a platform, I believe that we [The Youth and Sports Ministry] have done our part.

With the new allocation given to the Youth and Sports Ministry under the NEM and the 10th Malaysia Plan, what can YB tell us about where the taxpayers’ money will go?

In 2009, we employed foreign coaches in different sports, spending about RM7.8 million. This year, we expect to spend about RM13 million. You’re probably thinking that is a lot of money. But you’d be wrong.

Allow me to explain. I asked the NSC [National Sports Council] boss Datuk Zol [director-general Datuk Zolkples Embong] whether it is possible to engage foreign coaches in basketball, or in ping pong?

He said that we [The Youth and Sports Ministry] could, but we are limited by the budgets that we have access to. That is why we place emphasis only on certain sports. We could get a foreign coach on ice-skating, but is this what we really want for Malaysia? And that made me understand the process more.

We are not trying to alienate other sports, but we have to work within our budget. We have to be realistic. The Government will not spend so much money trying to develop everything all at once. It would not make sense. Either we can do everything mediocre, or we can do something that we love, and are good at, and excel at it.

Of course, we have our priorities as well. At the SEA Games and the Commonwealth Games, we have sports that will net us medals. So we focus on those a bit more. We look at it this way. If we win medals, our morale soars, which will win us more medals.

Now comes the gist of the story. The Ministry cannot expect the Government to use taxpayers' money and keep paying people, keep organising sports activities, keep paying foreign coaches and paying our athletes.

It is, in the end, a matter of returning our investment. It sounds callous, but this is taxpayers' money that we are using, so we must be prudent in spending it.

Ultimately, what the Ministry wants is to begin a transformative process. We will engage more corporate companies to invest in sports, like what Petronas and AirAsia are doing for F1.

Let's look at the England model, for instance. England has no need to build football stadiums. Private-owned clubs build them and maintain them. The English Premier league is, to me, the most successful marriage of sport and private corporations. And Malaysia can use that model in order to make Malaysian sports a viable career avenue for Malaysian youth, as well as allowing certain sports to finance itself.

If we do that, we can free up more funds to invest in skills training or in developing other sports.

The criticism has always been that Malaysia does not field new players. We always rely on the same faces in every tournament or competition we enter. What are your comments on this?

I think that many people do not see the entire picture. Sports icons do not appear out of nowhere, fully formed. A world class athlete requires a long grooming time. NSC has a very structured grooming program for our athletes.

For early secondary, we have the PELAPIS training program, where young prospective athletes undergo intensive training. We also have regional training, where young athletes are expected to undergo full-time training at one of our six regional centres. And finally, we will pick the cream of the crop, who will then attend our Bukit Jalil Sports School.

All of this takes time. And these programs that we have are already bearing fruit. What I am trying to say is that it takes time to build a new generation of athletes, to train them up to the level required, and to prepare them mentally and physically.

We are grooming the next generation of athletes to take on their successors' mantles. There will be a new crop of heroes for Malaysians to look up to in the future.

How is the Youth and Sports Ministry engaging the youth of Malaysia? Are we seeing a change in the works?

We are transforming ourselves. Back in the day, Hari Belia (Youth Day) is not well attended, from when I was a schoolboy twenty years ago to very recently. Attendance was dismal.

Dato' Shabery insisted that the Ministry made some changes in organising Hari Belia. We coordinated all the Ministries that deal with the youth, we updated our concept to be more in touch with today's youth, and people come voluntarily.



Attendance in 2009 was around 30 - 40 thousand people, with an investment of RM1 million. But this year, we spent the same amount of money, and we managed to get two hundred and eighty thousand people attending our Youth Carnival.

Next year, we are targeting one million attendees, and making Putrajaya a youth city during our carnival.

What we did was to look at the program from the bottom up. Dato' Shabery asked one simple question - what do the youth of today want? The landscape has changed, the youngsters have changed and thus, we must move on.

In fact, Dato' Shabery is also very interested in the Cyber Games competitions being held these days. That is something that the youth enjoy doing and the reality of modern life is that children play games. So why not promote that hobby in a safe environment? That is one idea that the Ministry is looking at.

Of course, that does not mean that we should abandon all traditional ways of engaging the youth. But what we should do is update them and make them more interactive. Our youngsters now want an opportunity to express themselves. And our mandate is to provide them with an opportunity to express themselves.