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Commentary

School sports: Football competition set-up needs fine-tuning to achieve goal



Singapore Sports School players (in red) celebrating on the way to beating Meridian Secondary School in the National School Games B Division final in April 2018. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

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Coaches, educators weigh in on how to balance encouragement and competition



Sazali Abdul Aziz Correspondent (<mailto:msazali@sph.com.sg>)

Simple tweaks to the National School Games (NSG) football competition format could curtail lopsided scores in future games, school coaches and educators told The Sunday Times.

A recent preliminary-round B Division game where the Singapore Sports School (SSP) beat Assumption Pathway School (APS) 32-0 sparked debate over fair play and the purpose of school sports.

Public outcry over the score prompted both schools to issue a joint statement on Thursday in which they stressed that the match was "played respectfully".

Nevertheless, such unbalanced contests are not uncommon. Between 2017 and last year, there were at least 30 occasions when NSG football games had double-digit scorelines.

Mr Mahipal Singh, a long-time sports administrator who had also coached school football teams from 1997 until last year, was so dismayed by these one-sided meetings that he drew up an 18-page proposal for a format change and submitted it to the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2018.

"My message is, 'please, in 2021 stop putting all the schools together (in the preliminary round),' " said Mr Singh, whose Yishun Secondary School side was trounced 22-0 by SSP in 2018.

"The worst effect these games could have is that some schools give up having football as a co-curricular activity, because they find it too challenging to compete."

He pointed out how Yishun Town Secondary, which suffered an 18-0 defeat by SSP in 2017, has dropped its football programme in recent years.

The school football competition begins with a preliminary round to classify teams according to their abilities. This year's B Division has 84 teams, which will be sorted into five tiers. They will then play at least another three matches each, in their respective tiers.

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This format was introduced last year with the goal of offering more matches and playing time. In the previous set-up, which did not have a tiered system, schools eliminated in the preliminary rounds did not play further matches.

While this overhaul has been praised, it still has fundamental flaws, noted former national footballer Aleksandar Duric, who is now the principal of the ActiveSG football academy.

"Sport is rarely equal, and many people understand that," said Mr Duric, a father of four. "But when children are involved, you should not have a situation like this. The system is wrong, and needs to be adjusted."

He suggested the best footballing schools - those finishing in the top four of the previous year's competition - be given a "bye" to the latter stages. This would help prevent potential mismatches in the early rounds that lead to lopsided games.

The SSP has won the B Division title eight times since 2007. Its football programme has also produced a number of national players since the school's inception in 2004, including Safuwan Baharudin and Fandi Ahmad's sons Irfan and Ikhsan.

APS, meanwhile, is a specialised school that offers vocational programmes for students who are unable to access or complete secondary education.

The Football Association of Singapore (FAS) said it has been working with MOE since 2018 with recommendations for the schools' tournament.

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However, FAS technical director Joseph Palatsides noted: "We need to realise that there has to be a balance between encouraging active participation amongst schoolchildren while also ensuring that they retain a sporting competitive edge. This is not always simple to implement in reality."

One head of football for a primary school in the west, who asked not to be named, said of MOE's balancing act: "As the competition organisers, they want to give every school an equal chance to win the national schools title.

"And in some cases, the strength of a school's team differs with newer cohorts. Perhaps that is why seeding (as raised by Mr Duric) has not been introduced."

But Mr Khairul Asyraf, who has coached five schools, disagreed: "For about 70 to 80 per cent of schools, the effort and investment they put into their football programme will ensure a very similar strength of team across most cohorts and C or B Division teams, because of how they train or the players they attract."

Such David versus Goliath clashes go against the spirit of school sports, noted former national sprinter C. Kunalan, 77, who was a teacher at Dunearn Secondary Technical School for 13 years.

"Even in track and field, we see it happening in some races like the 1,500m, where some kids are even lapped," said the multiple Asian Games medallist. "Some people try to justify allowing this to happen and saying the (losing) athletes have shown spirit... but I don't think so. To me, such incidents do not serve the purpose of sports competitions."

Sports psychologist Edgar Tham from SportPsych Consulting said a teenage student-athlete on the receiving end of a heavy loss could experience psychological adversity that may trigger a fear response if confronted with a similar scenario even years later.

"But this is also how sport builds resilience," said Mr Tham, who has travelled with the Singapore contingent to events like the Olympics and the Asian Games. "Those around the (APS) boys should help them process the experience, support them and encourage them, to build them back up again."

He also disagreed with using a "mercy rule", a proposal floated by some to prevent huge scorelines, saying such a move was an "artificial restriction" on how a sport should be played.

There should be no shame in losing, said Mr Ray Yong, who has been coaching APS for three years, adding that the thought of wanting the game to end early never crossed his mind.

Mr Yong, 28, said his players returned to training the day after the 32-0 loss in good spirits. "Our focus was to give our best effort, regardless of the score. Those 80 minutes (of football) were a good lesson for us, and our players showed they had character and the right values... They never gave up, and kept motivating each other till the end."

RULES TO PREVENT MASSIVELY LOSIDED SCORES

THE MERCY RULE EXPLAINED

Various policies have been implemented in youth leagues the world over to avoid having massively lopsided results. Here are some examples:

FOOTBALL

The Athletic Conference of Singapore International Schools, which manages sports leagues involving institutions like Dulwich College, the Singapore American School and United World College, records the score in any Under-16 match where one side scores more than six goals, as a 6-0 win.

A youth league in the United States, meanwhile, allows a losing team trailing by six goals to add a player until the deficit drops below six again. If a team leads by 10 goals, it must remove one player until the lead drops to below 10.

RUGBY

In the Singapore National Rugby League, a team trailing by 60 points is allowed to approach the referee to end the game. At the schools level, games are ended once the goal difference reaches 80 points.

AMERICAN FOOTBALL

Nassau County in New York has a policy which mandates that any coach whose team wins a game by more than 42 points must explain in writing how his team's strategy was adjusted to help keep the scoring down for the rest of the game, such as replacing his best players.

And until 2016, a rule in Connecticut saw an automatic one-game suspension slapped on any coach who won a game by more than 50 points.

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