

Taiwan Needs a New Sports Policy

| Ming-juinn Li

Taiwan's performance at the Asian Games has been poor in recent years, but a number of individual athletes have been able to shine in international tournaments and competitions.

There are not only baseball stars Chien-ming Wang and Hung-chih Kuo. Ultramarathon runner Kevin Lin has run across the Sahara desert, professional tennis players Yung-jan Chan and Chia-jung Chuang reached the final in the Women's Doubles at the Australian Open and the U.S. Open in 2007. Professional pool player Po-cheng Kuo finished as first runner-up in the WPA World Nine-ball Championship in 2005 and 2010, while the tug-of-war team from Taipei Jingmei Girls High School won the World Indoor Championship this March. Taiwanese players have rewritten Japanese Go history, with Hsu Chang becoming the first ever player to hold five major men's titles and Yi-min Hsieh becoming the first to clinch the three major women's titles. And then there is Taiwanese tennis wonder Yen-hsun Lu who defeated U.S. tennis star Andy Roddick in the quarterfinals at Wimbledon. Professional golfer Yani Tseng, the first Taiwanese player to win the Women's U.S. Open, this year went on to win the Women's British Open, gaining her third LPGA title. These Taiwanese heroes inspire people across the island and make Taiwan

known around the world. But virtually all of them rely on their own individual efforts. Leaving aside support from the Taiwanese public, what has the government done for these athletes or the entire Taiwanese sports world all these years?

Eight years ago the Soccer World Cup held in Japan and South Korea triggered a soccer craze in Taiwan. Back then the government declared that the following year would become Taiwan's soccer year and allocated funds for a massive soccer promotion campaign. But now that eight years have passed, have we seen any effects of this campaign? After Taiwan's baseball team fared poorly in the World Baseball Classic (WBC) tournament, the government once declared that it would revive baseball. Yet the question is, did it take the right direction? Late last year another game-fixing scandal hit Taiwan's professional baseball league. Subsequently Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou declared that 2010 would mark Year One for the revival of professional baseball in Taiwan. Ironically Taiwan's professional baseball is still in a precarious state, so that Year One is more likely to become the final year of the Chinese Professional Baseball League. It's not that Taiwan doesn't have any sports talent. But the Taiwanese government has ignored sports

for a long time and does not know how to cultivate athletes for the long term. It will only praise athletes as “Taiwanese heroes” when they perform well in international competitions. But during the long years of hard training and struggle, the government is always giving too little. No wonder that some athletes angrily threaten to adopt another nationality and say that they are no longer willing to speak up for Taiwan.

How a society values sports is certain to be reflected in the development of that country’s physical culture. If a government values the worship of sports stars, but neglects sports as a vocation or special skill, then sports will become thoroughly dominated by speculative thinking. In Taiwan sports are the exclusive turf of a small number of business groups with vested interests. In nearly all disciplines prize money is used as an incentive, while there is no clear, long-term and reasonable sports policy. The government’s only policy is to readily take advantage of the situation when another “Taiwanese hero” emerges and to allocate sports resources based on results, which amounts to gilding the lily. In the end this will leave Taiwan's sports environment in a disastrous state and athletes to their own devices.

It is public knowledge that sports bolster national pride. And due to globalization small countries can use sports to gain international respect. For Taiwan it is probably impossible

to have a large pool of athletes like the United States or China who can win dozens of medals in Asian Games or the Olympics. But we could at least learn from South Korea, which picks certain disciplines that suit South Koreans for reinforced and focused development. South Korea has thoroughly reformed its sports development ranging from the selection of talented athletes to training and competitions by emphasizing grassroots development in every discipline. We need an integrated set of long-term planning and approaches to be able to produce more “Taiwanese heroes.”

At the same time the government needs long-term planning and approaches to be able to attract more private companies to invest in sports. If it habitually only follows the current trend and only acknowledges the successful athletes, but fails to understand that Taiwan’s sports environment requires thorough reform from the grassroots level, then the development of Taiwan’s physical culture will remain in an abnormal state for good. If Taiwanese sports is supposed to develop, then we do not only need to overcome its innate adverse conditions, make good use of Taiwan's strength with regard to software and hardware equipment as well as its sound integrated sports administration. Taiwanese society must also change its abnormal, contradictory values regarding sports. Only that would be a fundamental solution for turning Taiwanese sports around. **BT**