

Light on a dark continent

Sport in Asia



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Unusually slim sumo wrestler.

The land of the rising sun may have brought the Olympics to the East, but to the world at large, Asia still remains something of a Dark Continent in international sport.

Excluding Japan, which hosted the 1964 Olympics, and India, which has dominated world hockey since 1928, very little is known or heard about Asian sport or sportsmen outside this continent. A continent whose sporting worth and traditions are as much a mystery to fellow-Asians as they are to the outside world.

The fault isn't necessarily the absence of communication. In the jet age in which we live,

there are enough sporting exchanges between these countries, and all in a matter of hours, for them to be able to share of each other's talents and experiences. Yet, if enough is not known of each other's rich potential and sporting heritage, the blame for this lies in the approach to sport in recent times. In Asia, no less than with the rest of the world, sport in the modern context has come to be equated with success at competitions, with medals won and lost, and with the almost insane pursuit of world records.

To win appears to mean everything because the stakes indeed are very high. The stakes these

days is "national prestige." Governments which subsidize sporting delegations to international meets expect as a matter of right the best returns for the investment. This is particularly true of countries like India and Pakistan where enormous sums of money are lavished on potential medal-winners and medal-winning teams, the world champion olympic hockey side in particular.

As a result, the approach to competitive sport at the international level in Asia has become hardened as well as coarsened. Whether it is a competitor or a team, both appear to share one common and fixed obsession: success. Conversely, a fear of failure. Joy has gone out of competition for sport's sake. The flag or the national anthem is the ruling force.

Then, there is to be expected the inevitable aftermath of state subsidy of sport — politics.

Not only has the competitor to win, but he also has to make doubly sure that in so doing he does not give offence to the peculiar likes and dislikes of the government which paid his way. So it came about that, in 1962, the Indonesian hosts of the Jakarta Games could not go against the dictates of the government which sponsored the event and two countries, Taiwan and Israel, were kept out of the meet on purely political considerations. All hell broke loose thereafter and Indonesia was suspended from membership of the International Olympic Committee. Though reinstated in good standing just before the Tokyo Olympics, the issue is far from settled. The politicians will not admit defeat and neither will they leave sport well alone.

Gloomy as this picture might look, it merits scrutiny by reason of the light it throws on an aspect of sports promotion not wholly peculiar to Asia.

In the West, where sport, like professional boxing or soccer, is big business, the situation

isn't much different. Perhaps, even worse. Promoters, be they government or private businessmen, do not seem able to resist the temptation of what might be called a quick kill. They can't help placing their interests above those of sport or the sportsmen they are sponsoring. By the simple processes of the cash-register and economics it follows that the sport that is less of a draw at the box-office must bow out to one that is, in a business sense at least, a good investment or a money-spinner.

Comparable to the slack promotional interest and dwindling enthusiasm for sports like fencing or weightlifting in Europe, there are games in Asia one never hears about except in the country or, in some cases, the city of origin.

For instance, who, outside of Malaysia and Thailand has heard of *sepak raga* ?

Mention that name to an Indian and he would think it was a musical note. Repeat the words to a Filipino and he would know no more about it than would a German or a Dutchman.

Yet, if *sepak raga* has since been saved from extinction, some credit for this must indeed go to the Malaysians who were bold enough to introduce it as one of the events at the last Southeast Asia Peninsular (SEAP) Games. *Sepak raga*, the sport, is a kind of volleyball played with a ball of woven rattan. The ball is kept in play over a net and the players



use their feet instead of their hands to manoeuvre it in place during a rally.

The game, indigenous to Malaysia, is inexpensive and should have been the ideal source of recreation for the low-income groups which constitute the majority in Asia. But *sepak raga* hasn't caught on yet because nobody has come forward to promote it in the same style and manner as soccer or *ten-bowling* that are the rage in Malaysia.

What is true of *sepak raga* is equally true of Chinese *shadow-boxing*, one of the finest and cheapest of body-conditioning exercises there is in sport today. Unlike any of the conventional games which would need a playing field or a covered arena, Chinese shadow-boxing can and

Sepak raga is not a tune...

countries, India notably, where the focus has been shifted from the urban to the rural, from the big cities to the small villages with recreation as the sole attraction of sport.

An illustration of this is the "Rural Olympics" that has been growing from strength to strength in the tiny village of Kila Raipur in the northern Indian state of Punjab. Here, once each year, assemble the men, women and children who till the soil and

endurance are among the events they contest, some 5,000 of them with upwards of 50,000 for spectators camped around the festival site in their gaily decorated ox-carts. The difference between them and those in a competition arena is that they have the time of their lives doing whatever they set out to do and just for the fun of it. Victor or vanquished makes not the least difference because here there are no titles at stake, no medal table to top and just no

is still practised in any open stretch of land and there are enough Chinese practising it in Hong Kong, mainland China and Taiwan. But that is as far as the sport has ever advanced. The fact it is not in the competition calendar of international sport has proportionately reduced its life-expectancy.

Everybody has either heard of or seen Japan's mountainous *sumo* wrestlers. But just how many know of *Thai boxing*, a sport that demands split-second timing and co-ordination and fantastic agility? Thai boxing which calls for the use of both hands and feet has the ingredients of a first-rate spectator sport. Yet, outside Thailand the sport commands little or no following.

One can keep on adding to the list, but it would be needless because the point has been made already: whether one recognizes it or not, there is indeed a wealth of unexplored sporting interests and talent in this continent. The pity is that nobody has found the time, interest or patience to promote and develop them. But this is not to say it won't happen. The time will come when these events and games will at last come into their own. That time will come when the emphasis shifts from sport-for-profit and sport-for-success to sport-for-sport's-sake, for the sheer joy of it for both participants and spectators.

Already there is a move along these lines in some of the Asian

Shadow-boxing
—anywhere out or indoors.



work on farms. For one week each year, they forget their work and let themselves go in an extravaganza of sporting and cultural events as rural and down-to-earth as themselves. Men, strong as mountains, hoist sacks of wheat as though they were barbells. Wrestling matches, bullock-cart races and feats of

medals, in fact. This is the closest anybody has come to the Olympics as the Greeks conceived it and there will be others who will follow before long. Take away the medals and the fanfare of victory ceremonies and national flags and sport will be back again at ground level and not merely in Asia... V.R.