



"Sport associations, the National Sports Council and universities must work together for what is best for sports without compromising the athletes' responsibilities as students."

Mohamad Faithal Hassan,
UM Sports Centre
senior lecturer

Be a good sport

STUDENT ATHLETES: Sports centres at universities help them to juggle the demands of both sports and studies

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OLYMPIANS Dr Brian Jayhan Siva and Dr Calvin Fernandez were Malaysian hockey legends in the 1990s. They are proof that it is possible to achieve excellence in education while competing at the highest level. Brian is a kidney specialist and resides in Perth, Australia while Calvin is a medical doctor.

But it is generally not easy for student athletes to juggle both sports and studies. In a worst-case scenario, this may mean failing at university, sports or both.

So how do they manage the demands of sports and studies?

National bowler Nora Lyana Nastasia Norkamal, 19, who is pursuing a degree course in sports science at University of Malaya (UM), said she has to prepare for examinations in the midst of tournaments at times.

"Time management is important. Sometimes it's hard to make a choice. But at the end of the day, my passion for sports rules — studies can be deferred but not opportunities," said Nora Lyana, who has competed in the Malaysian Open (2014 and 2015), Asian Youth Championship (2015) and World Youth Championship (2016).

Support from her lecturers, coaches and peers makes it easy for her to juggle classes, assignments and training.

"The coaches and lecturers try to understand my situation as much as they can. They offer advice and encouragement. My coursemates and friends help me with my assignments and projects," she added.

Coursemate Savinder Kaur Jogindr Singh, 19, a middle-distance runner, also faces challenges.

"I stay at Majlis Sukan Negara Casa 1 hostel for athletes in Bukit Jalil. Every weekday, I commute between Bukit Jalil and UM for training and classes," she said.

Savinder takes a leave of absence from some classes when she competes in international tournaments.

"Although I miss classes, it is not an obstacle for me to learn. I refer to my lecturers to catch up on lessons. I also complete my assignments before I attend competitions," said Savinder who has competed in the SEA Youth Games, Asian Youth Games, Asean School Games, Sukma Sarawak and Kazakhstan Open as well as Perak Open, Pahang Open, Selangor Open and KL Open.

"My lecturers guide me in my weak areas. My peers help me with notes whenever I miss classes due to training."

FINDING A BALANCE

Most universities in the country have their own sports centres which provide assistance in the form of programme planning and timetabling, extensions

on assessments, deferred exams, alternate exam sittings and mentoring.

Such support is critical for student athletes dealing with the pressures of tertiary studies while training up to 30 hours a week.

To realise the vision of the university and country to achieve excellence in sports, Universiti Putra Malaysia's Sports Centre was established to support UPM's goals to nurture quality and competitive students by upgrading soft skills through sports programmes, without compromising on their academic achievements.

UPM has more than 100 national athletes studying various fields under the National Sports Council and Higher Education Ministry sports programmes.

The international athletes among its students include Olympian diver Cheong Jun Hoong, shooter Johnathan Wong and sprinter Zaidatul Husniah Zulkifli.

Sports Centre director Dr Hanafiah Ayub said: "We are focused on managing tournaments at the university, national and international levels. We prepare athletes for competitions, and plan and implement sports development programmes and training."

"In addition, certified coaches prepare athletes for high sports performance. We also do administrative work, manage finances and look after the facilities and sports equipment."

Various sections of the centre including the sports development department take care of the students' welfare to ensure that they are on track, be it in studies or sports.

"We ensure there is no overlapping of academic and sports programmes, especially when athletes represent the country overseas."

"We hold discussions with the university management to coordinate programmes and activities in the academic calendar," he added.

UM Sports Centre senior lecturer Dr Mohamad Faithal Hassan said time management is the most common challenge faced by student athletes.

Most athletes face difficulties in



National netball player Nurul Adha Abu Bakar trains every day.

dividing time between training, competition, classes and studies.

Moreover, it is beyond student athletes' control as sports associations determine the competitions and training programmes.

"Therefore, the sports associations, National Sports Council and universities must work together for what is best for sports without compromising the athletes' responsibilities as students," said Mohamad Faithal.

Student athletes at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) pursue courses at its Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation and its sports centre director Mustaza Ahmad said they have to achieve results set by the sport associations and do well academically too.

Mohamad Faithal added: "In UM, we have designed a special programme for student athletes in order for them to participate in competitions or overseas training stints and keep their studies on track at the same time."

"Notes are uploaded online. Even though the mode of study is slightly different from other students, the assess-

ment is the same. Student athletes are required to complete their projects and assignments and make presentations. "They sit special tests if they miss the examinations."

FLEXIBLE LEARNING

National netball team player Nurul Adha Abu Bakar, 23, finds being both a student and an athlete demanding, not only physically but also mentally.

"I am in my final year of a computer science degree course at UPM. In a normal scenario, I complete 12 to 15 credit hours per semester, but if I have to compete in a major tournament, the faculty advises me to take only three to six credit hours per semester."

"This flexible learning helps me to cope with my studies and I can concentrate when I am training," she said.

Her daily routine begins with training from 7am to 9am. Then she attends classes and trains again from 4pm to 6pm.

"During my spare time, I review lessons I have missed and at times my coursemates help me to revise. I meet



Pandelega Rinong Pamg (right) and Cheong Jun Hoong show off their medals at the recent Olympics. Pandelega is pursuing a degree in sports science at UM while Cheong is studying communications at UPM.

my lecturers to discuss lessons."

Muhammad Siddiq Amir Jalil, 23, a fifth-year process and food engineering student at UPM, said it was a bumpy road throughout his tertiary studies as he has to juggle classes and play rugby.

"I am a risk taker. I rarely plan my schedule and just go with the flow. I solve problems as they arise."

"My family members especially my mother and brother-in-law are my biggest supporters. My dad became more receptive of me playing rugby after I became a national player."

"We don't have a professional league yet in the country. But next year we will have a semi-pro league, so that's a good start for me to go further."

"It is more important to have an academic qualification. Playing rugby makes me want to become a knowledgeable athlete," he said.

Fellow UPM student Ahmad Luth Hamizan, 24, who is in his final year of

BEd (Physical Education), said he and most student athletes are focusing on the SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur next year.

"Since this is my final year, I don't feel the burden of classes, assignments and training so much as I am doing my practical teaching in school," said Ahmad Luth, a 3,000m runner, who has competed in the Asia University Games as well as Malaysia Games.

He loves competing locally and internationally but wants to make sure that he has paper qualifications too. He plans to pursue the master's in education programme and become a lecturer one day.

"I want to gain as much knowledge as possible and give back to my students and the community."

PROMOTE STUDENT ATHLETE LEADERSHIP

The nature of sports, which includes giving and receiving instructions, time management and self-discipline, exposes student athletes to leadership.

"Sports nurture leadership qualities," said Mohamad Faithal.

UPM Sports Centre offers a sports management course for students to learn to organise tournaments at its residential colleges and at university level.

"Residential college sports clubs are a good platform to acquire leadership traits for students especially those who play team sports such as rugby," said Hanafiah.

At UiTM, Mustaza said the sports centre offers students the chance to lead the university sports team in certain tournaments and encourages them to be volunteers at sports events.



Playing rugby makes Muhammad Siddiq Amir want to become a knowledgeable athlete.



Hanafiah Ayub



Ahmad Luth Hamizan



Nora Lyana Nastasia



Savinder Kaur Jogindr Singh