

SPORTCHECK

TAKING THE QUANTUM LEAP

Experts give their views on juniors' path to senior level

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MALAYSIAN sports have often done well at international youth level, and the latest success was winning the Asean Football Federation (AFF) under-15 title. Also in another tournament, the AFF Under-18, striker Luqman Hakim was such a revelation that there is talk he should be fast tracked into the

senior team.

However, from past experience, many potential athletes could not find success in their later years at senior level.

This has happened in sports like football, badminton, athletics, hockey and squash, to a certain extent.

Malaysia finished fourth at the Junior World Cup in 1979, 1982 and 1983 and were also Asian junior champions in 2012. Sadly, at senior level, the national team struggle on the international front.

In badminton, Malaysia produced world junior champions in boys' singles and boys doubles, and shone at Asian youth level. But many of these young stars did not live up to expectations at senior level, leaving BAM officials scratching their heads.

In squash, Malaysia tend to rule at Asian youth level. We also usually do well at similar level in athletics and rugby.

What should Malaysian sports do and what should be the best path from youth to senior level?

Timesport speaks to former international coaches, technical experts and academicians on the issue.

DATUK YAP NYIM KEONG
(Former FAM assistant secretary and Fifa Technical Consultant specialising in development and women's football)

The gap between players after school and before they find a club to play for is detrimental to development of football in Malaysia.

Generally, we do well in schools' age groups because there is proper training programmes, sports science, sports schools, academies and organised competitions.

It was for this reason way back in 2004 when Negri Sembilan organised the Malaysia Games,

I suggested that the Games should be for Under-19 (Malaysia Games is for Under-21).

There were a few players, who at a young age (between 15 and 17) who made the cut for the national team. Among them were the late Chow Chee Keong, Roshidi Shaari and Zainal Abidin Hassan and Singapore's Fandi Ahmad. They were a rare and talented breed.

But credit to the present batch of Under-15 and Under-18 players. Through the National Football Development Programme (NFDP), they have become better players. Lim Teong Kim has instilled systematic play into these players and they know the demands of the game.

I saw the Under-16 boys defeat the Kelantan President's Cup Under-20 team soundly, and that does not happen under normal circumstances. The team played with a definite style and intensity.

But I worry what will happen to these players when they return to play for their states. Will these players get adequate and proper training to continue to improve? Will they find a place in their state or club team? Will they get enough playing time?

It is good to note that with all the teams needing a licence to play in the M-League, the emphasis on development is better as many teams are adopting schools for their grassroots programmes.

Development programmes will see results. Remember the late Datuk Ahmad Basri Akil's long term development programme with Kedah and how it bore fruit for them.

As FAM have good relationship with Qatar and Japan, we should use it for exchange programme to expose our youngsters to a higher level of training and competition.

Development and competition go hand in hand. Development will not happen with just training. Competition breeds development.

Just look at Thailand and Vietnam who have risen to great heights and their key to improvement is development on a wide scale with the best facilities and coaches with the latest knowledge.

We should not jump with joy over early successes at youth level, but nurture our players with proper and professional guidance because this age group is most vulnerable to temptations and distraction.

DATUK AHMAD SHAFIE
(Former coach of the national Tigers team in the 1980s and technical/development official with Kedah FA)

Malaysia's youth players are still far behind European players.



National Under-18 striker Luqman Hakim

Physique is not the issue. It is that the Europeans and even Asian players in Korea, Japan and China mature faster, "grow faster" and are exposed to better training.

Facilities like training grounds are lacking in Malaysia. Clubs and communities do not play a key role in grassroots development because training grounds are scarce unlike in Europe or even Asia where they are in great numbers and easily accessible.

In Malaysia, youth level training is usually confined to weekends and not daily because of the unavailability of training grounds.

Even a majority of our top clubs

and state teams do not have proper training facilities.

But the pathway to youth development in Malaysia is good because we have sports schools, the Mokhtar Dahari Academy and state development programmes. However the end product is still lacking and we need to address this.

When I was in Leipzig Germany (for a coaching course), even the remote areas, which were villages, had many training grounds for the community.

I hope that with FAM now having a department for grassroots development, things will improve.



Datuk Ahmad Shafie

Every state should have their own academy with quality coaches to nurture young talent. Many good young players eventually disappear due to lack of guidance, proper training and competition exposure.

Football academies are mushrooming in Malaysia but they are not monitored for their quality in training and management. Most of these academies are just money-making ventures and not serious about proper development on a long term basis. Also the knowledge of many local coaches and ex-internationals is not well utilised to develop players.

JOERG TEICHMANN
(Sports therapist and athletics coach, with 22 years of experience, who worked for the National Sports Council and National Sports Institute)

For Malaysians to improve and be on par with the rest of the world, they have to uproot themselves from the comforts of home and go overseas for long term attachments. They have to make sacrifices and be prepared to work hard and face adversities.

Lee Chong Wei is probably the only one who has reached world standard, staying at home. That is simply because he had the desire to be on top, the discipline and the willingness to make sacrifices. Many youth athletes do not have the discipline or the desire.

Just look at Nicol David, Azizulhasni Awang, Nauraj Singh



Joerg Teichmann

and Josiah Ng. All are or were overseas-based where they trained. Look at their progress and achievements.

Young footballers need to be sent to top clubs overseas, be it in Europe or even Japan, China and South Korea for attachments if we are to reach higher standards and match world class teams.

DATUK JAMES SELVARAJ
(Former national badminton player in the 1970s and ex-BAM high performance director)

It is the fear factor which does not see our junior champions rise to the occasion and make the mark when they graduate to senior level.

It is not a question of too early or lack of ability to perform when they move up to the senior ranks but basically they freeze and do not believe in themselves. They are easily intimidated by the presence of seniors.

The fear factor has to be overcome by the young players themselves. They have to be mentally strong and believe in themselves.

Two-time world junior champion, Goh Jin Wei is a fine example of one who adapted well to the se-

nior ranks. But sadly she is suffering from a mysterious stomach ailment and may miss the Tokyo Olympics next year due to health reasons.

However, more junior players should emulate Jin Wei and show they can perform at senior level. They should not blame the coaches if they can't keep up with the training in the senior team.

MAJOR (RTD) S. MANIAM
(Squash Racquets Association of Malaysia director of coaching, former national champion)

At junior level, it is a level playing field because the athletes are school going and spend almost the same number of hours in training and studies. With talent, they may be able to become champions.

However, after school it is no more a level playing field as in Malaysia many want to concentrate on their studies, especially when parents do not see a future in sports.

But those who take the plunge to become professionals have done well. However, the numbers may be small. Thus it is during the cross-roads period that we lose many of our top players.

Those who stay on but divide sports between work and studies will definitely be at a disadvantage against professional players who train six to eight hours a day. Those who juggle between work and studies, will only be able to give one-third of their time to training.



Datuk M. Karathu



Datuk James Selvaraj

SHEIKH KAMARUDDIN SHEIKH AHMAD
(Associate Professor with Physical Education Department Universiti Putra Malaysia)

Many young talents at junior championships are lost because there is not enough monitoring of them. National and state bodies must keep track of them, and bring them in for weekly or monthly training programmes.

There is also no monitoring of talented players or follow-up at sports schools, Malaysia Games and inter-university events.

MAJOR (RTD) S. MANIAM



Major (rtd) S. Maniam

It is only when the next competition is around the corner, the teams will start looking for players and even pinch players from other states.

There needs to be more work done on a year round basis from grassroots to university level for us to progress and keep up with the other nations.

State sports executive council members should also help in developing sports on a continuous and long term basis, and not just be interested in organising one-off programmes.

DATUK N. SRI SHANMUGANATHAN
(Former national hockey team captain from 1970-1976)

Junior players are quickly promoted to senior teams after their early success. But more often than not, they are not ready and they fail to make an impact at senior level.

Many of them just fade into obscurity or end up playing at only state or club level.

A longer dedicated programme is needed to realise the full potential of players who excel at Asian or world junior tournaments.

Some team officials and players are content to do well at Malaysia Games and Sea Games level, and there are no higher goals.



Datuk Yap Nyim Keong