

Mettle in mental welfare

THE Olympic Games are here again, and men and women at their peak physical state are now gathered in Tokyo to compete in their respective sport.

Besides their sporting prowess, another aspect of the athletes profile has gained attention at the Tokyo Games – their mental health.

When Simone Biles (*pic*), the gymnast representing the United States, pulled out of the individual final in the floor exercise to focus on her mental health, she was applauded for her decision. Her action told the world that taking care of her mental well-being was far more important to her than winning any Olympics medals.

Support for her decision also represented a shift towards a more accepting view of mental health and illnesses, something most mental health experts thought would never happen 10 years ago.

The same perspective is being seen across various other sports, including tennis after the current number two women's player Naomi Osaka withdrew from the French Open early this year to concentrate on her mental health.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) had acknowledged the importance of mental health in sports in recent years. In 2018, it convened a meeting of mental health experts in Switzerland and subsequently pub-



Photo: AFP

lished a consensus statement affirming the importance of mental health to an athlete's well-being and performance, and that mental health should not be separated from physical healthcare.

In Malaysia, a study on our athletes' perspectives on mental health acknowledged that there has been a shift in attitude towards mental health and illnesses. Published at the end of 2020, the results of the study showed that while it was previously viewed as a negative and taboo topic, mental health is now viewed as an essential aspect of the athletes' health and required the same attention

and care as their physical welfare. The study also highlighted how local athletes sought support for their mental health by working with experts in the field, their teammates and even spiritually.

Nonetheless, it is still not a rosy picture. The athletes also reported instances where they encountered resistance when trying to seek help for mental health issues. During those instances, they described a sense of distrust and apprehension towards and from their help-seeking sources. They also described cases during which they were dismissed from seeking help.

These descriptions are similarly

mentioned in the IOC consensus. It is an issue that needs to be addressed by the relevant stakeholders in sports.

Considering that elite athletes are already in top physical condition, any additional edge they have is an advantage during competition. Since mental health is an important aspect of the athlete's health, investing in and maintaining it will inevitably provide that extra advantage in their performance.

On the flip side, just like how an athlete knows when he/she should back out to prevent devastating physical injuries, the same can be said about mental health and illnesses. Knowing when to back out or slow down to look after one's mental health will reap benefits for the athlete's well-being and performance.

There is a strong need to destigmatise mental illness and increase awareness of the importance of mental health in sports. Let's use the spirit and courage of the Olympians in the 2021 games to encourage and empower all of us to move closer towards that goal.

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