

Can small countries win medals at the Olympic Games?

A close-up look at the medal tallies offers hope and potential lessons for Singapore.



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For *The Straits Times*

The 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, which played out before an audience of mostly empty seats, ended on Sunday in a ceremony that echoed the restraint of the two-week event. We must thank the government and people of Japan for delivering on their promise to hold a safe and secure Games.

Singapore sent a team of 23 athletes to compete in 12 events at the 32nd Summer Olympics in Tokyo. All the athletes did their best. They deserve our gratitude for their sacrifices and best efforts. However, Team Singapore did not win any medal, prompting some Singaporeans to ask: Can small countries win medals at the Olympics?

I have decided to look at the final medal tally of the Tokyo Olympics for an answer.

First, I should explain that one does not have to be a member of the United Nations to participate in the Olympics. Thus, Puerto Rico (part of the United States), Bermuda, Hong Kong (part of China), Chinese Taipei (Taiwan) and Kosovo (not a member of the UN) were allowed to participate.

By small countries, I mean countries whose populations are below 10 million. This is the criterion used by the Forum of Small States, an informal grouping established by Singapore at the UN in 1992, to define who are eligible to join the grouping, which has 108 members today.

A SURPRISING DISCOVERY

I was surprised to discover that 25 small countries and territories had



At the recently concluded Tokyo 2020 Olympics, Bahamas (389,000 population) won two gold medals – coming from Steven Gardiner (above) in the men's 400m and his team-mate Shaunae Miller-Uibo in the women's 400m. There were five medal winners from countries and territories whose populations are below one million. PHOTO: REUTERS

won a total of 113 medals in Tokyo.

I decided to dig deeper and separate them into three divisions:

- (1) those with a population of below one million,
- (2) those whose populations are between one million and five million, and
- (3) those whose populations are between five million and 10 million.

If size is destiny, the countries and territories whose populations are below one million should have no chance of winning any medal. I am vindicated in my belief that size is not destiny. There are five medal winners in this division.

Bahamas, with a population of only 389,000 people, won two gold medals. Sprinter Steven Gardiner won the gold in the men's 400m, while Shaunae Miller-Uibo took the gold in the women's 400m.

Fiji, with a population of 889,000, won the gold in rugby, defeating New Zealand in the final. Bermuda has a population of 63,000 people and still managed

to win a gold medal in the women's triathlon. Grenada, with a population of 112,000, won a bronze medal in the men's 400m. San Marino, a tiny landlocked European country surrounded by Italy, has a population of only 34,000 and yet won a silver and two bronze medals.

There are 13 countries and territories in Division 2.

The most successful country is New Zealand. With a population of 4.9 million, it won seven golds, six silvers and seven bronzes, a total of 20 medals.

Jamaica has a population of 2.9 million. It won four gold, one silver and four bronze medals, a total of nine medals. We will remember for a long time the astounding sight of three Jamaican women, winning the gold, silver and bronze medals in the women's 100m.

Slovenia has a population of two million. It took three golds in canoeing, cycling and sport climbing, a silver in judo and a bronze in cycling, a total of five medals.

Ireland (4.9 million population) won two golds in rowing and boxing and two bronzes in rowing and boxing.

Qatar (2.8 million population) went home with two golds and one bronze medal in Tokyo. Qatar's famous high jumper Mutaz Essa Barshim graciously decided to share the gold medal with his Italian rival Fianmarco Tamberi, in one of the most emotional and heartwarming moments in Olympic history. Qatar's weightlifter Fares Elbakh, also known as Meso Hassouna, won the country's second gold medal.

The other medal winners in this division were from Kosovo, Latvia, Puerto Rico, Bahrain, Lithuania, Namibia, Botswana and Kuwait.

In Division 3, there were six countries and one territory: Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark, Jordan, Finland and Hong Kong.

Norway (5.3 million population), won four golds, two silvers and two bronzes for a total of eight medals. Norway won gold in the triathlon,

men's 400m hurdles, men's beach volleyball and men's 1,500m. Norway's Karsten Warholm smashed his own world record and set a new record for the men's 400m hurdles. Another Norwegian, Jakob Ingebrigtsen, won gold in the hotly contested men's 1,500m.

Sweden (10 million population) won three golds and six silvers, taking a total of nine medals. Sweden's gold medal winners – Daniel Stahl in men's discus and Armand Duplantis in pole vault – were much admired. The third gold was won in the equestrian team jumping event.

Switzerland (8.5 million population) won three golds, four silvers and four bronzes, making a total of 13 medals. The three gold medals were won in cycling (mountain bike), shooting and tennis. Swiss tennis player Belinda Bencic won the gold medal in the women's tennis singles. The more celebrated tennis stars, such as Naomi Osaka (Japan) and Ashleigh Barty (Australia), were eliminated in the early rounds.

Denmark (5.8 million population) won three golds, four silvers and four bronzes, making a total of 11 medals. The gold medals were won in sailing, cycling and badminton. China's world No. 1 badminton player, Chen Long, was defeated in the final by Denmark's Viktor Axelsen. After losing the match, Chen Long graciously told Axelsen that he deserved to win.

Hong Kong (7.5 million population) gained one gold, two silvers and three bronzes. It won a gold in men's fencing, two silvers in women's swimming, and three bronzes in women's cycling, table tennis and kata (a karate form). Hong Kong's Grace Lau put up a very good performance, winning a bronze medal in the women's solo kata match.

SMALL COUNTRIES CAN WIN MEDALS

From the results of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, the answer to the question which I posed at the beginning of this article is a resounding "yes". The lesson for Singapore is that small countries can win medals in the Olympic Games.

What can Singapore learn from the successful medal-winning countries? I urge the Singapore National Olympic Council and our Sport Singapore (formerly Singapore Sports Council) to set up a committee to look into this question.

I offer the following three hypotheses for discussion.

First, we should have an ecosystem which systematically spots talent among our students. Second, we should offer talented students, if interested, a programme of training, coaching and mentoring, for free. Third, our society must truly value excellence in sports and make it possible financially for talented athletes to pursue their passions.

We must also develop a culture of supporting our athletes, in good times and in bad times.

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