

# Fair play for Singapore's Paralympians

Scrap the cash payout gap with Olympic medal winners. A medal from either event is of equal value in achievement.



**Tommy Koh**

For *The Straits Times*

Like many Singaporeans, I was surprised to learn that the winners of the gold, silver and bronze medals at the recently concluded Paralympic Games are paid one-fifth of the amounts paid to the winners of the same medals at the Olympic Games. This is wrong and the difference should be done away with.

First, some background: Unlike the Olympic Games, which has ancient roots, the Paralympic Games began only in 1960 at the Summer Olympic Games in Rome. At those games, only 400 athletes from 23 countries took part. In comparison, 4,403 athletes from more than 162 countries participated in the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games.

It was only in 2001, that the International Olympic Committee and the International Paralympic Committee entered into an agreement that the two games should be held in the same host city, using the same facilities and following each other.

What is the objective of the Paralympic Games? It is to

showcase the achievements of the athletes and not their disabilities. It is also to send a message to the world that the 15 per cent of the world's population who suffer from some form of disability, should be treated with respect and dignity.

Watching the Paralympic Games on television earlier this month was an amazing experience. It should convince even the sceptical that disability does not mean no ability.

The competition also showed that the human spirit is truly indomitable. I could not help thinking that it is just as difficult to win a medal at the Paralympics, as it is to win one at the Olympics. There is therefore no rational basis for treating the Paralympic medal as inferior to the Olympic medal.

Currently, the cash payout for an athlete winning a gold medal at the Paralympics is \$200,000 – or one-fifth of the \$1 million reward for those who achieve Olympic gold.

I salute all our Paralympic athletes and, especially, our double gold medal winner, backstroke swimmer Yip Pin Xiu. She is an inspiration and should be accorded the same treatment that Joseph Schooling received when he won a gold medal for the 100m butterfly event at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games.

#### ISSUES OF RIGHTS AND VALUES

It is wrong to reward the winners of medals at the Paralympic Games lesser amounts than that



Swimmer Yip Pin Xiu celebrating with her coach Mick Massey after winning gold in the 100m backstroke event at the Tokyo Paralympics last month. Yip, who went on to win a second gold, is an inspiration and should be given the same treatment that Joseph Schooling received when he won gold at the 2016 Olympics, says the writer. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

for the winners of the same medals at the Olympic Games – and notably, it is also inconsistent with the letter and spirit of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability.

Singapore became a party to the convention in 2013. Two of its guiding principles are equality and non-discrimination. Our

current practice is unequal and discriminatory.

There is another reason to end the disparity. It is not about money. It is about respect and dignity.

Are we saying to our disabled athletes that they are worth only one-fifth of the able-bodied athletes? The answer must surely

be that they are as valuable to Singapore as other Singaporeans.

If we believe in this value, then I say, end the discrimination and reward the Paralympians the same amounts as what we reward the Olympians with.

#### A SIMILAR EXPERIENCE

I am reminded of an experience I

had when I was the chairman of the National Arts Council. I was negotiating with the Ministry of Education on the financial support it was prepared to give to our two arts colleges, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and the Lasalle College of the Arts.

The ministry was prepared to give the colleges financial support on the basis that each student would be granted 50 per cent of the per capita grant given to students at polytechnics.

I was advised to accept the offer by then Minister for Information and the Arts George Yeo. I rejected it as I could not accept the implication that our arts students were only half as valuable as our poly students. Instead, I worked hard to help the two colleges raise funds from other sources. Years later, then Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan reversed the policy of the ministry and agreed to treat the students at the two colleges on par with the poly students.

We should emulate the example of our neighbour, Malaysia, and also of Australia and the United States, which pay the same amounts to their Paralympians and their Olympians. It is the right thing to do, morally and legally.

It will raise the morale of our disabled athletes and citizens. It will make all Singaporeans feel better about our country and the values it stands for.

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