

MY SAY: 'Flopping' for the new year

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Some 40 years ago, at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, a new record for the high jump was set — 2.24m or 7ft 4.25in. While the record now stands at 2.39m — held by Charles Austin since the 1996 Atlanta Games — it was no ordinary feat since it did stand the test of time.

What was unique about it was the way the record was set by one hitherto unknown Richard Fosbury, who invented the now famous "Fosbury Flop" — a revolutionary style of jumping. But a flop it is not; rather, it took the world of high jumping into another era of sportsmanship and achievement.

Long before the flop, high jumpers preferred the "straddle jump" — crossing the bar with the body horizontally facing the ground.

And before that, there was the "scissors cut", "Eastern cut-off" and the "Western roll", each with its fair share of world records.

Like all the other styles, the straddle came into the picture when the high jump reached its saturation point of about 2m. It was the straddle jump that set a new trend and more record-breaking events, foremost by Charles Dumas, who broke the elusive 2.1m (7ft) barrier in 1956. This was followed by 2.23m (7.3ft) in 1960, then 2.28m (7.5ft) at the 1964 Olympics, to name but a few. But then, before long, the straddle too reached a saturation point.

It was then that the flop entered the scene with its very distinctive style. It required one to cross over the bar with the body in a horizontal position but facing upwards at the sky instead. Despite initial scepticism, this unique back-first technique quickly gained acceptance and smashed even more records. It remains the most popular style of jumping until today.

By the 1972 Munich Olympics, 28 of the 40 competitors used die flop. Reportedly, in 1980, 13 of the 16 Olympic finalists used it whereas between 1972 and 2000, of the 36 Olympic medallists in the event, 34 used the Fosbury flop.

Forty years on, the signature flop is no longer just about high jumping and winning gold medals, in view of the many lessons that can be drawn from it in terms of creating change. In fact, it can be about revolutionary change, where major revamping is urgently required. Opportunities for these abound in the course of last year.

The first was the recent financial fallout where the old ways of doing business were no longer palatable, to say the least. The second had to do with associated "corporatocracy", where human greed seemed unbridled. Third was the hawkish politics of neo-cons and their allies, now that the lame-duck, incumbent US president has admitted, "I think I was unprepared for war" for relying on faulty intelligence reports.

The fourth was the way development had been pursued relentlessly in an unsustainable fashion for most of the time, causing Mother Earth to suffer untold consequences. The fifth was the archaic metaphor that helped fuel the stereotypical thinking of how excellence should be defined and promoted.

Last, and perhaps most important, were the outmoded benchmarks of the so-called "world class", while failing to recognise that it pointed to the very world that is today ailing as a result, needing urgent reforms on most fronts — economical, political, social, material and spiritual.

In short, there can be no other occasion in recent times that needed a "flop" so badly, by turning things on their heads, as it were. It is not just about the shifting of a paradigm, but rather returning to the basics — life!

For this to happen, there must be appropriate enablers, just like the new thinking that goes into a well-designed pair of high jump shoes, where they must enable sufficient take-off to overcome the barrier. To do this, high jump shoes, for example, are equipped with four additional holes in the heel, where the user can insert spikes for increased traction. And of course, all these will be of no benefit if the athlete is unwilling to unlearn the outmoded ways of jumping and learn anew.

While it may be a cliché to quote the wise Yoda of the famed Star Wars movies about the need to unlearn and relearn, it is an essential part of creating significant change. Added to this is the wisdom from Confucius, who said, "Learning is about being and not having."

It is undeniable that for the most part, our world has been fashioned to promote unsustainable consumption (read: to have and have) at the expense of being — even in the worst of times when the state of global humanity is fast tipping over.

Let the new year be the defining moment we hope for as we desperately try to forget the ugly experiences of 2008. For this to happen, we must do the flop again. And in all humility, here's wishing all of you a very Happy New Year.

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