

Technology has effect on human endurance

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BY now, practically everyone would know who is referred to as the "Flying Fish". He is none other than Michael Phelps, the 23-year-old wonder-sportsman of the Beijing Olympics. He has won eight gold medals in a single Olympics, the most in modern times.

On top of that, he has broken at least seven world records. In one of the events, he scrapped by the slimmest of margins, 0.01 of a second to be exact, to beat his nearest opponent and clinch the 100-metre butterfly.

Such are the memories of what seems to be the world's most glamorous Olympics thus far.

Another unforgettable memory perhaps is when a top sprinter another favourite at the Games, sadly missed his opportunity by a mere 0.02 of a second.

Tyson Gay, finished fifth in the 100-metre qualification race and failed to make it to the final. Gay himself admitted "it was kind of devastating".

But there can be no harsher devastation than the one experienced by Liu Xiang and his country, when China's great hope for glory at the 110-metre hurdles had to suddenly withdraw from the event.

Millions of Chinese were shocked and disappointed so much so that Liu had to say sorry. "There's really nothing I can do," he was quoted in a televised interview. He had unbearable pain from a foot injury although expectations for him to perform remain high.

His previous success as China's first man to win an Olympics gold medal on the track in Athens four year ago had given him superstar status.

Faced with similar predicaments, some others are quite creative at uplifting their morale. A case in point is table tennis. When the players failed to command spectators to fill up the half-empty seats, they decided to spice it up by dressing unconventionally.

International Table Tennis Federation vice-president was suggesting that players should emulate their tennis counterparts and dress in style. No more wearing baggy shorts and shirts, but instead putting on those that showed their "curves".

All these casual observations go a long way to show how the Olympics have been forced to change with the times. As the competition gets tougher, winning medals becomes almost an obsession, fuelled by the torch of commercialisation.

Unlike the ancient Olympic Games, said to be part of a major religious festival honouring Zeus, the Greek god, the modern-day Olympics have somehow gradually lost their "spiritual" meaning.

In other words, all too often, it is becoming less and less about sports and sportsmanship, as the doses of commercialism increase, thanks to the sporting goods companies worldwide.

The commercialisation of the Olympics has been in earnest from 1996 in Atlanta where it opened its doors to the business community. It has become highly commercialised ever since. Sports has become a vehicle for development of international markets and sports is run like a business.

This time around, it is even more tempting given the market of more than one billion people in China alone, including their children who are potential targets in order to secure the future market.

What is more, today's companies can have access and exposure to a worldwide audience through television and broadcasting rights.

It is not surprising, therefore, that a leading sports company expects the sales in China for the company alone to surpass US\$1 billion (RM3.34 billion) by 2010 (WSJ Asia, Aug 20).

Already, for this year, China is expected to pass Japan, to be the company's No. 2 market, behind the US.

The Olympics are also used as a platform to push innovation for sports using the latest technology with the aim to enhance performance.

According to Nanowerk News (www.nanowerk.com), the Beijing Olympics will see revolutionary

nanotechnology shoes being churned out. By using the world's first asymmetrical 400m spikes, the shoes feature the first ever fulllength carbon nanotubes reinforced plate and the exclusive progressive compression spikes.

This, however, is just the tip of the iceberg in complementing the athletes' performance by instilling a higher level of confidence, stability and efficiency. This, hopefully, will translate into many more hard-won medals as well as world records.

This leads to the opening of another level of competition, not limiting it to just fellow humans but also competing technologies.

While this may be good in one sense, the real test of human endurance has in some ways been tampered with. This can have a lot of ramifications on the real meaning and purpose of sports, not only at the Olympics. At best, it will eventually be a measure of symbiosis of human power with that of machines and technologies.

When all is said and done, there is no doubt that the Beijing Olympics will create a lasting impression for a long time to come. But let us not just remember those who have made their indelible mark on the history of the Olympics.

Do spare some thought for those who are less fortunate. Let us not forget to pay tribute to the little known dancer who was injured during a rehearsal for the Beijing opening.

She reportedly fell on her head and back from a three-metre high platform, and could be paralysed according to the Games organisers.

The Games vice-president said: "It was a very heavy fall," a comment also apt for the future of Olympics, if it is allowed to fall from its pedestal of sportsmanship.

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