Sporting Life: When a small island is big on sporting inspiration

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SINGAPORE - Martin Luther King was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez by Ernest Hemingway, singer Billy Joel by The Beatles. Everyone looks up to someone, is partially sparked by someone, and this power that a stranger can have on another person, to lead them forward, is a very poignant and human thing.

This capacity to inspire is essential to sport. The great deed rouses a boy and leads him to dreaming. A girl switches on a TV and feels compelled to play. Autographs are sought of New York Yankees players even by Bruce Springsteen and his son. Influence travels across sports and Chris Plys, a curler, once said he had a blown-up photo of Michael Phelps on his office desk.

At The Straits Times sports desk we appreciate this. It's why our Athlete of the Year award, sponsored by 100Plus, has never been interested only in the colour of a medal but also the inspiration attached to it. It's not just the size of the feat but the effect of it.

And few people affected us last year like our winner, whose smile appears as fast as he moves. Inspiration is Loh Kean Yew's calling card. The world badminton champion has people talking, kids watching and parents investing in rackets. A single, glorious week can start a movement.

To hand Loh his award, a small group of people collected in a Straits Times studio. This annual ceremony, where the nominees and wider sports fraternity usually gather, has always been noisy and joyous, but Covid-19 has quietened the world. Gatherings are still a little modest but it can't dilute their meaning.

Earl Warren, the former chief justice of the US Supreme Court, once said: "I always turn to the sports section first. The sports section records people's accomplishments; the front page nothing but man's failures." The ceremony was to salute those who adorn the back pages of a newspaper and to remember the history-writers of 2021.

In 2048, we might ask a young bowler, what brought you to this sport. She might say two words. Shayna Ng. Winner of the International Bowling Federation Super World Championships in 2021 and one of our nominees.

It's the same for Maximilian Maeder, kitefoiler, and Aloysius Yapp, pool player, who both got to world No. 1. And Kimberly Lim and Cecilia Low, sailors, who reached the medal race at the Olympics. And Yip Pin Xiu, swimmer, winner of two more Paralympic golds. And Yu Mengyu, table tennis star, who was fourth at the Olympics.

As this list was read out, Singapore had to feel a little proud. Small population, but a long list. Only one city, but a range of heroes. People who had shone on various tables, who mastered lanes in water and in halls, and who deftly wielded cues, rackets and bats. The youngest was 15, the eldest 32, and once again the women outnumbered the men.

In an unrelentingly competitive world, nations use sport as a weapon to show off, invest millions in a single victory, put academics aside and dip into large pools of talent. In this planet, Singapore shouldn't even register on the sports map and yet it does.

Why play, local athletes are often asked. What's special about the Olympics? Drop this dream. Chase a degree. Still, thousands of local athletes push on, inspired by the idea that their journey will be fulfilling. But everyone needs hope and in a Singaporean environment which is often suspicious of a life in sport, every act of excellence from Loh, Low, Lim, Maeder, Ng, Yapp, Yip and Yu has weight.

Even though there was only one trophy at the ST Athlete of the Year ceremony, it felt like a larger triumph. All year we scrutinise the system and evaluate officials and criticise missteps, but this was a day to acknowledge progress.

It might be said these athletes were aided by parents, assisted by officials, pushed by coaches, tuned by trainers, freed by psychologists, all of them together straining to make history. And yet for all that truth, every athletic journey is also a solitary one.

For all the cheering from outside and the flag on a shirt, Loh and his peers compete alone under the lights. And each bold step taken is akin to a stone tossed into a pool. It sets off lovely and large ripples of inspiration.