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By Invitation

# Lessons for Singapore from Schooling's win

Joseph Schooling's gold medal win at the Rio Olympics over the weekend highlights the achievements of human potential and the indomitable spirit of human nature



David Chan

For The Straits Times

Singaporeans shared a common experience as they went through emotions of anticipation, excitement and then jubilation on the Saturday morning of Aug 13 as they watched the final race of the 100m butterfly event, telecast live from the Rio Olympics.

Continuous "bings" from anticipatory mobile messages among friends went silent for 50.39 seconds – the new record time that Joseph Schooling swam to clinch Singapore's first-ever Olympic gold medal. Ecstasy erupted among Singaporeans, paused only momentarily as solemnity overcame Singaporeans as *Majulah Singapura* was played for the first time in Olympic history.

Like many Singaporeans, emotions welled up in me as I watched the Singapore flag being raised together with – and then above – the flags from three countries. Three because the silver medal was (for the first time) awarded to three world-class swimmers – the United States' Michael Phelps, South Africa's Chad le Clos and Hungary's Laszlo Cseh, who all clocked the same time in the race to finish second behind Schooling.

The historic moment was striking because one of the runners-up was Michael Phelps – the legendary American who just minutes before the race had won the 22nd Olympic gold in his swimming career. The celebrated athlete, 31, gracefully bowed out of his last Olympics the next day by winning his 23rd and final gold medal in the men's 4x100m medley relay.

Like in a good drama, Phelps is the swimming idol that Schooling has strived to emulate since he was a child. Many would have seen the two photographs that went viral in social media since Saturday – one showing Phelps and Schooling smiling in the pool in 2016, juxtaposed with an earlier photo showing the pair posing together eight years ago in Singapore when the then 13-year-old boy met his idol who was visiting after the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Schooling's achievement evokes

positive emotions, not only for those who have followed his journey over the last few years but also for the casual Singaporean observer. Many Singaporeans who experienced the defining moment when Singapore won its first Olympic gold are not swimming fans or even a fan of any sport. Some watched the telecast of an Olympic event for the first time.

The gold medal win brought common joy to Singaporeans, with all feeling extremely proud of Schooling. The spontaneous outpouring of emotions reflects the pride of being Singaporean and their attachment to the country. It is another milestone event in Singapore's young, increasingly rich history as a nation.

Schooling arrived home yesterday morning, in time to be present in Parliament when the House passed a motion to recognise his Olympic achievement and express support for Team Singapore in the 2016 Rio Olympics. The country is still in a jubilant mood and many more celebratory activities can be expected.

Of course, like all event-related human emotions, the intensity of public excitement with clinching the first Olympic gold medal will gradually dissipate with the passage of time. But describing the national reaction as merely transient underplays its significance. In my view, Schooling's achievement is striking for driving home two lessons.

## HUMAN POTENTIAL

The first is that it shows what working to reach one's potential can achieve.

Schooling wanted to show that anything is possible when one dares to dream big and is determined to make it happen. His achievement – beating world-class champions and setting a new Olympic record – is a testimony to his message. But his journey also demonstrates the greatness of human potential in different ways.

At a technical level, reaching one's potential is about working to improve one's performance by mastering skills in a domain. In this case, it involves Schooling's physical, mental and practical abilities to perform optimally in swimming a race.

The potential of skill mastery applies to other domains as well. Which is why the professional commitment that Schooling can inspire extends beyond swimming. Not only to other sports, but also the



arts, sciences and any professional domains involving specialised knowledge and deep skills.

Anyone who knows Schooling's story knows that it is not just talent but also plenty of passion, practice, perseverance, personal sacrifice and parental influence.

Schooling's accomplishment is consistent with well-established research findings on how experts acquire and develop their skills that translate into top performance. Regardless of domain, empirical studies have shown that top expert performers are not just natural-born talents. Experts' proficiency levels are arrived at

after many years of dedicated hard

work. The determination and effort progress alongside their confidence and courage.

Their interests develop over time and provide the intrinsic motivation that is not based on external rewards. Therefore, they have sustainable passion in the specific domain activity or task.

The lesson for parents here is that being child-centric means allowing time for children to discover and develop their interests and passion. Praise and focus on children's effort. Do not just highlight how smart or talented they are.

## HUMAN NATURE

Schooling's story is also inspiring

because it highlights the achievements of human nature in addition to human potential.

As Schooling himself made clear, winning the Olympics was not all about his internal drive and determination. A large and necessary part of his personal success can be ascribed to external factors.

One important external factor is the role model in Phelps. Schooling looked up to Phelps from his childhood. Meeting him for the first time, he was star-struck. Over the years, the two met at swim events and cemented a camaraderie that became evident in Rio, when Phelps gave Schooling a congratulatory hug.

As Schooling went from distant fan to swim-mate to competitor, he would have been motivated by a desire to emulate his idol – and then to become better than him.

Schooling succeeded in beating Phelps in the Olympic pool in one race – the 100m butterfly. But he has yet to better Phelps' many other stellar achievements – in other swim races, in the number of Olympic gold medals achieved, and in Phelps' remarkable ability to inspire others.

Now, Schooling has not just become an Olympic champion himself, with star power to convince fans and create collective action. He has also become an influential role model who many others will look up to when considering issues and making decisions.

Here is an excellent example of how role models can truly change one's life which, in turn, can have positive multiplier effects. It is human nature to look up to idols and want to be like them – and even to surpass them. It is such instincts and drive that propel human progress.

Perhaps the most important external factor underpinning Schooling's success is the unwavering support from family

and friends. Colin and May Schooling rearranged their lives – spending years apart from each other – so that one parent would be with Schooling when he was studying in the United States, where he went for training.

Parental behaviours that put the child's interest above self were clearly critical. There were also other people who believed in Schooling and supported him in various ways, including his past coaches, friends in the sporting field, the sports associations and the various officials involved in helping with grants and making arrangements to give him the best possible training available. Those who believed in him before he became an Olympics star would be the most influential.

When children see parents and others making sacrifices for them and they experience being raised by a village – and if they are raised with the right set of values – they will recognise that victory did not come as a result of their own effort alone.

They grow up to be grateful individuals with a generous spirit. Individuals who accomplish but also inspire. They are likely to find meaning in helping others and giving back to society.

Some specific issues have emerged and more will emerge from Schooling's journey to achievement. Their implications go beyond his individual career and will affect current and future generations of youth. The issues may have to do with the principles and procedures for supporting sports and other non-academic domains such as the arts – early identification and systematic development of local talent in different domains.

Then, there are issues concerning the functioning of sports agencies and associations. There are issues about national service and whether, and in what circumstances, to allow young people to defer serving NS so they can train full-time for world-class competitions. There may also be issues of politics and personalities.

How we approach and resolve these specific issues may reflect the way Singapore is or should be governed and the kind of society we want it to be. The issues are not academic debates or trivial gossip – they affect people's lives in significant ways, and can go towards building cohesion or creating rifts.

Issues that are more complex will need time to clarify and resolve.

It is wise to be patient and press on. Reflect and review the issues based on the evidence of human potential and the principles of objectivity, fairness, transparency and the collective good of the nation.

There will always be disagreements on some issues, but the differences can be approached calmly and constructively.

Meanwhile, lessons about human potential, human nature and the Singapore Spirit are fundamental to individual development and nation building. They are good lessons that all Singaporeans can learn and pass on to the next generation.

• The writer is director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute, Lee Kuan Yew Fellow and professor of psychology at the Singapore Management University.