

Ma government not a good sport

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President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) often stresses the importance of heeding popular opinion, cautioning his officials and agencies to show consideration in all they do to avoid leaving a negative impression with the public.

The state-owned Taiwan Tobacco & Liquor Corp (TTL) has become the latest agency to have a hard time understanding Ma's words.

News that the company pledged 100 million yuan (US\$14.6 million) to sponsor the Asian Games in Guangzhou in November next year outraged many people.

So much for creating a positive impression with the public. A state-run company that ignored the World Games in Kaohsiung and gave just NT\$400,000 to the Deaflympics in Taipei is eager to hand over millions to support a sports event in China.

The company said the Asian Games deal was a cost-effective way to increase brand awareness of Taiwan Beer in the Chinese market. Premier Wu Den-yih (吳登益) was quick to approve the plan, saying "the tasty Taiwan Beer will sweep the mainland and the brand will promote Taiwan's excellence."

It is well and good to "promote Taiwan's excellence" at every opportunity, but where was the corporate and government support when Taiwanese golfer Yani Tseng (嚴妮) appealed to Ma earlier this year for funds to host a Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) tournament in Taiwan?

Tseng boosted the standing of Taiwanese athletes in professional sports no end with her win in the McDonald's LPGA Championship last year and another victory in the LPGA Corning Classic in May.

Many recall how Tseng appealed to Ma for the government to host an LPGA event. The LPGA had already expressed interest in the idea. While some critics were quick to claim Tseng just wanted to win money at home, she made it clear that she was willing to donate some of her winnings to make the tournament a reality.

Such a tournament would require US\$2 million. Tseng's hopes, however, were dashed by Ma, who after asking how much it would cost to sponsor a golf tourney here, said the amount would sponsor more than 10 marathons. The Sports Affairs Council also cited the "high cost" when rejecting the proposal.

Ma is better known as a runner than a golfer, so perhaps his uninterest is understandable. However, as a state-run company, TTL has a responsibility to support national sports development over sports in other countries. Its management stand condemned for promoting China while ignoring Taiwan's struggle for greater visibility on the international stage.

If the government is interested in promoting excellence in all areas, there should be no

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difficulty in appropriating suitable funds — as TTL's example shows. Given TTL's generosity in spending taxpayers' money to support sports in China, it appears that money is not the issue preventing Taiwan from hosting top-tier international tournaments.

The question is whether the government has the inclination and the backbone to promote Taiwan's profile in the international sports arena — or any other stage — rather than give lip service.

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