ROGGE BACKS YOG CONCEPT

IOC boss says event is about education and sport at the highest level

By Leonard Lim

CAPS on the number of athletes from each National Olympic Committee, and an emphasis on educational activities, have led to concerns that the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) will be more about fun than serious competition.

But International Olympic Committee president Jacques Rogge spoke out on the issue for the first time yesterday, defending the concept behind his brainchild.

“This is not a mini-Olympic Games and this is not a Junior World Championship,” the Belgian, who is in Singapore until tomorrow, told The Straits Times.

“The Games are about a good combination of sport and education.

“The youngsters are going to be able to have athletics at the highest level, and there will be time for fun and leisure, and there will be time for education.”

Culture and Education Programme activities, which have been planned for the 3,600 teenagers competing at the Aug 14-26 YOG, include workshops and forums on issues such as how to live a healthy lifestyle, and visits to venues like the Marina Barrage to learn about Singapore’s water conservation methods.

The athletes will also get to interact with American Olympic swimming star Michael Phelps, spend a day at the Outward Bound School on Pulau Ubin, and be treated to cultural performances like dances in the evenings.

“We want to give these young athletes the tools that will enable them to have successful careers, a successful re-integration into society after a sports career... and social skills,” added Rogge, who is here to get an update on preparations for the inaugural event.

This is the first time a major Games has a culture and education component built into it. Rogge feels it is essential the YOG – for athletes aged between 14 and 18 – has a fun element to engage the iPod generation.

“It cannot be too serious. There should not be a gravity that you have at the traditional Games. That’s for later,” said the 67-year-old.

The United States’ decision not to send its swimmers contributes further to the view that the YOG’s competitive element is diluted.

Unlike the Summer Olympics, each of the 205 NOCs can send a maximum of 70 athletes and one team.

So, powerhouses like the USA, Russia and China cannot field athletes in all 26 sports – a restriction they do not face at the Summer Games.

Rogge was speaking at the launch of the YOG Young Ambassador Programme, which engages 30 people nominated by their respective NOCs to help promote the event.

They include 2008 Beijing Olympics gold medallist sailor Elise Rechichi of Australia and Ukraine’s Irina Merleni, who won the women’s Under-48kg wrestling event at the Athens Games in 2004.

Rogge also toured several YOG venues yesterday, including Bishan Stadium (athletics) and the Games Village at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), which will house the athletes and officials.

He held a short dialogue session with about 200 students from the NTU, National University of Singapore, Singapore Management University and SIM University at the Village.

The youths asked questions ranging from the passing on of Olympic values at the Games and whether the cultural education aspect will be continued, to the steps taken to include athletes from developing countries and how the religious needs of the athletes will be satisfied.

“I have a magic measure, it’s through the eyes and smiles of the athletes,” Rogge said when asked how he will measure the success of the Games.

“The Games is not for the country nor the international committees, it’s for the athletes.”

Rogge will meet Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong today.

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