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A Bernama Year-Ender

SPORTS: AZMI STEALS LIMELIGHT FOR WRONG REASON IN 1996

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KUALA LUMPUR: As the nation counts the days to the 1998 Commonwealth Games, sprinter Azmi Ibrahim's drug scandal overshadows world class performances by other sportsmen and women this year.

The 20-year-old sprinter, once ranked among the top five in Asia, fell from grace when he was found guilty of using furosemide, a banned substance, and is now serving a four-year suspension.

The Malaysian Amateur Athletic Union (MAAU), which have had its fair share of controversies, tried to save Azmi's skin by recommending a two-year ban but that did not go down well with the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF).

Azmi's premature departure from the track is a sad end but it highlights the urgent need to curb the increasing pressure, from the officials, the public and media, on young athletes to perform.

The intense rivalry between Azmi and Watson Nyambek in the 100m produced a new national record of 10.33s set by Watson. But in the end, Azmi paid a heavy price when he was caught for dope during the Malaysia Games (Sukma) in Kuantan in June.

Sukma was mooted with the aim of discovering new talents. But now, states are spending millions trying to outdo each other in organising the event. Kedah, under new Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Sanusi Junid, refused to join the bandwagon by withdrawing from hosting the 1998 games.

Selangor took over the job but is now involved in a "tug of war" with the Youth and Sports Ministry over the participation of Commonwealth Games trainees in Sukma. The latter has barred the athletes from 1998 Sukma.

Azmi was not alone with the drug problem. Eight bodybuilders were banned for two years for using anabolic steroid and the Malaysian Body Building Federation's effort in conducting random test is commendable.

While Azmi and the athletic scene gave a dim picture, badminton bounced back from their Thomas Cup debacle in Hong Kong in May to snatch two medals in the centennial Olympic Games in Atlanta.

There, Malaysia came close to striking its first gold. But Cheah Soon Kit and Yap Kim Hock settled for silver while Rashid Sidek, the 1996 All-England finalist, carved a name for himself by winning a bronze.

But the badminton arena was not spared from squabbles as the Badminton Association of Malaysia (BAM) and the professional outfit, Nusa Mahsuri, continued to be at odds, a result of personality clashes.

There were more drama when chief coach Razif Sidek resigned in September while upcoming shuttlers Roslin Hashim and Ismail Samad left the national body in a huff to turn professionals.

However, there is still some hope for the future as Jeremy Gan and Chan Chong Ming won the boys' doubles title in the World Junior Championships in Denmark.

Besides badminton, only woman walker Anastasia Karen Raj gave some good account of herself in Atlanta while the rest tumbled. She set a new national mark of 45 minute 47 seconds in the 10km, finishing 24 out of 44 walkers.

While badminton produced the Olympic medals, 1996 belong to bowling sensation Shalin Zulkifli. She set a new world record by dropping 1387 pins in the Asian Youth Championship in Genting Highlands in January.

Ten months later, she almost became the youngest keglar to clinch the world title when she finished runner-up in the World Cup in Belfast.

In soccer, the national team, stunned by the departure by high-profile Frenchman coach Claude Le Roy in January, made a remarkable comeback after years in the doldrums.

Under Wan Jamak Hassan, Malaysia did reasonably well in the pre-Asia Cup although they failed to qualify for the final round. In September, they finished runners-up to Thailand in the Asean Cup in Singapore.

And for the first time, Malaysia made an appearance in an international event at world level when they qualified for the Futsal Five-A-Side World Cup in Spain.

However, the ugly face of the Malaysian soccer still exists. Bickering among officials and poor management of Premier League teams continued to take centre stage while match-fixing seemed to have been eradicated.

The most distressing news in soccer came when Terengganu's Uzbekistan import, Alexander Kojukhov, committed suicide, allegedly frustrated with the late payment of his salary by the state team.

In Pahang, manager Tajuddin Nor and public relations officer Abdah Alif were sacked for spending about RM230,000 on Argentine footballer Alberto Naves who packed his bag after playing hardly one match due to an old injury.

Hockey continued to keep its Olympic appearance but finished a disappointing 11th out of 12 teams in Atlanta. However, their journey to Atlanta was not without controversy.

Canada claimed that Malaysia and India had fixed their match in the pre-Olympic round in Spain. However, the Federation of International Hockey threw out the case due to lack of evidence.

Squash, one of the most well organised sports in the country, continued to reap its harvest. In January, Leong Siu Lynn grabbed the women's singles title in the Asian Championship in Jordan while the women's team also struck gold there.

Financing had always been a major problem for sports bodies until the Rakan Sukan project was initiated. But problems continued to haunt the noble scheme when several associations had their sponsorships terminated.

Swimming, Lawn Bowl and the Netball associations parted company with their respective partners, while MAAU's deal with the Resort World has been suspended.

With less than two years to go before the Kuala Lumpur '98 Games, Sukom Ninety Eight Berhad is busy making preparations, including signing various sponsorship deals while construction of the National Sports Council and athletes training programme are full swing.

But a clash over dates between the KL Games and the 1998 Athletics World Cup in South Africa has put Malaysia in a spot. IAAF has refused to sanction the Commonwealth Games unless new dates are found.

Finally, Malaysia relented by delaying the opening day by a day with the new dates fixed from Sept 11 to 21 in an attempt to get the top stars to grace the Kuala Lumpur Games.

As the country strives to be a major sporting nation, more international events took place here. Among them, the World Motorcycle Grand Prix, Women's World Squash Championship, the RM1 million Tour De Langkawi and the soccer pre-Olympic final round.

And in 1999, Malaysia will be hosting the Formula One Race. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was instrumental in getting the event to Malaysia. -- Bernama

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