

04/12/1997

Americans give Gilmour's Nippon Challenge a shock

Sharanjit Singh

THE inaugural Malaysia Challenge 1997 International Sailing Grand Prix got underway with a shock off Langkawi yesterday.

The Nippon Challenge team, led by world champion Peter Gilmour and widely tipped to win the event, were blown away by the American team skippered by John Kostecki from California, in the first and second elimination rounds.

The event was earlier launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

However, all is not lost for Gilmour as his team still stand a chance of qualifying for the finals on Sunday owing to the unique format.

The race has been arranged in such a way that only two boats will try to outdo each other at any one time, leading to daily eliminations in stages until the finals where the best two teams will pit their skills on the final day.

The set up is unique because any team who loses in the daily elimination round can still qualify for the finals if they win enough points the next day.

In the first elimination round yesterday, Gilmour - who was given a bye in the first round, drew Kostecki's team in the quarterfinals.

Kostecki's team, who had earlier beaten a German team led by three-time Olympic gold medallist Jochen Schuenmann, then beat Nippon Challenge in an exciting race.

In the finals, Kostecki's team drew the Young America team skippered by World Number Two Ed Baird.

Young America won the race but the result was annulled because the sailors complained they could not see the finishing spot as the marking buoys were submerged owing to high tide.

The jurors decided to run the race again and this time Baird's team were beaten by Kostecki's.

In the second elimination race, Kostecki's team again drew the Nippon Challenge - this time in the semifinals.

Kostecki's team won the race again and, as luck would have it, drew Baird's team in the finals of the second elimination again.

This time, however, Kostecki's team were beaten.

Meanwhile, the Malaysian team, competing under a wild card entry, fared badly.

Led by Jakarta Sea Games participant Hamdan Yahya, the Malaysians were easily beaten by a Danish team skippered by Olympic gold medallist Jesper Bank.

Hamdan's team also lost the second elimination, this time to Gilmour's team.

Event director Henri G.C. Van Der Aat said all teams have a chance to redeem their chances of qualifying for the finals today.

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