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Opening its doors to public

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IT HELPS a lot to have Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's presence and personal interest in the sport for that get things moving fast.

And those involved in the sport will readily admit that Dr Mahathir's presence is the single most important factor in the rapid growth of equestrian in Malaysia.

"When you have a PM and Deputy Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim) who are keen (in the sport), you see things move," said national rider and former television personality Wan Zaleha Radzi.

"Their love for horse-riding is genuine. That makes it more meaningful."

Not only has the sport enjoyed a high profile since but Malaysia, once in the back seat, have made tremendous headway in the region.

"In terms of infrastructure, participation, enthusiasm and happenings, Malaysia are miles ahead in Southeast Asia," said Thailand's national coach Swede Helena Gabrielsson.

Wan Zaleha said the sport is enjoying a "boom period".

"How else can you describe it. It is mushrooming. You see more equestrian centres being set-up. Everybody is jumping on the bandwagon."

"The more the merrier," said Mohamed Fathil Mahmood, who owns the 3Q Equestrian centre in Kuang, Selangor.

Equestrian also received a tremendous boost when Ibox Corporation switched their RM300,000 sponsorship from yachting to equestrian under the Rakan Sukan programme launched by the Sports Ministry.

There are enough events all year round to keep riders and enthusiasts busy. Last month alone, practically on every weekend, something was happening.

The National Horse Show at Selangor Turf Club in Sungai Besi, the 3Q Invitational in Kuang and the Premier Equestrian championships in Bukit Kiara were held then.

Equestrian is also slowly shedding its elitist image.

Serious efforts are being made to make it easier for Malaysians keen to take up horse riding to do so.

"There is this misconception that the sport is confined to a selected few - the rich and famous. But for RM30 you can ride a horse. You don't need to be member of a club," said Wan Zaleha.

"Sadly, few are aware of it."

Unknown to many, such places exist and one can walk in, pay RM30, and enjoy a thirty minute ride. Other than at Templers Park, the Selangor Turf Club in Sungai Besi, Ipoh and Penang provide such facilities.

Equine Council of Malaysia executive secretary Malik Jeremiah said the fact did not receive wide publicity due to shortfall in manpower.

"We cannot accommodate too large a number due to lack of trainers."

Yet in Penang last year, 60 lessons were conducted a week; in Sungai Besi 120 and Ipoh 50.

The Equine Council, chaired by Tun Hanif Omar, has made significant headway in promoting the sport. They started with the purchase of 68 horses costing RM1.6 million.

These horses were sent to Penang, Ipoh and Selangor Turf Clubs for public use.

"The idea was to provide easy access to the public, right at their doorstep, so to speak," said Malek.

Forty of the horses were given to the three riding centres. The balance performance horses - six dressage and 22 showjumpers - were given to the Kuala Lumpur City Hall, Police, Selangor Polo and Riding Club and Armed Forces.

The Equine Council have also allotted RM250,000 to Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (UPM) and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). Under the Seventh Malaysia Plan more money have been allotted to set up an equine centre in UPM.

Malek said the council will assist UPM and in return, the university will conduct research on equine.

UTM in Skudai, Johor, are even promoting the sport vigorously among undergraduates. Equestrian is recognised as a co-curricular activity at the university.

Students get credit units for overall performance. On top of that, the university give a RM250 subsidy each semester for students to pursue equestrian.

But there is the dark side to the equestrian boom.

Though the presence of the Prime Minister has attracted many to the industry, purists, like Fathil and Malek, are concerned.

Especially worrying is the increasing number of developers using equestrian as a selling point for their homesteads and resort living concepts.

"Some of them are cashing on it. It is sad. They hardly have proper facilities and in some instances, there are no horses," said Fathil.

"They know very little about horses and the sport. We fear that such people will give the industry a bad name," added Malik.

Then there are other problems that surface due to the dynamic growth of the sport.

The lack of trainers and dieticians are a major source of worry. According to Malek, right now the bulk of these personnel are foreigners brought in to assist the sport.

"But it is a costly affair. So we in the EAM are in the midst of training locals and it will take time before we can be self-reliant."

The free movement of horses, without quarantine restrictions, is another problem.

Efforts are being made to get the Veterinary Department from the various countries in the region to work together.

The co-operation among Asean countries, at least, was demonstrated in the 3Q showjumping competition held last month. There was a hassle free movement of horses as Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia veterinary authorities worked together.

Problems aside, equestrian are on a threshold and with the good support, it is set to go places.

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