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There's more fun in kampung football

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WHEN Laos beat Malaysia 1-0 on Tuesday in the Sea Games in Jakarta, my mind went back to a football match I saw the previous week. It was a match played between two youth clubs in Kampung Jerangau, Terengganu.

Kampung Jerangau is located along the Jerangau-Jabor highway in interior Terengganu. The highway is one of two normal routes between Kuala Lumpur and Terengganu.

The highway reduces the travelling time between Kuantan and Kuala Terengganu by at least an hour. The coastal road is more scenic as it passes towns near the South China Sea. One is often tempted to make several stops along the way to quench one's thirst with fresh coconut water accompanied by some otak-otak, satar or keropok lekor.

But if one is pressed for time, the Jerangau-Jabor highway is the logical choice. One can enter the highway at a turning between Kuantan town and the port. One can't miss this as there's a big signboard showing the way. The route offers endless scenes of oil palm estates with small villages in between.

Small towns have sprung up following the opening up of land for oil palm cultivation. Most are one-street towns serving the needs of the local population. Many stalls have also been erected to sell fruits when they are in season.

A colleague and I had taken this road for an assignment to cover Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's two-day visit to Terengganu. As we were running a little late, we took the internal road which made it possible to reach Kuala Terengganu in time for maghrib prayers.

The two teams were obviously enjoying themselves. The boys shouted to each other, calling their team-mates to pass the ball around instead of dribbling. It wasn't long before a goal was scored. One team was in yellow jerseys and the other in red.

The team in red appeared more aggressive and better organised. One of the players in the yellow jersey was a bit of a dribbler and it was his carelessness that led to the red team scoring a goal.

There was a small crowd watching the match. The field was properly fenced and a small grandstand was full of shouting fans. But as in most football matches played in an open field, there's more crowd lining the touchline egging the players on.

Some of the older kampung folk had also come to watch the game. In their sarongs and on bicycles, they watched in silence and left much of the cheering to the younger ones. I guessed these older fans were just there to while away the time as they wait for the azan for maghrib prayers.

I was sure that a few of the players harboured some ambition to play football at a higher level, probably in the semi-pro league. I wasn't sure if there were any talent scouts watching the match, but I saw a couple of boys showing some fine skills there.

We didn't stay till the end of the game but what I know for a fact is that the two teams, their supporters and the kampung folk enjoyed the game very much. More than a match, the game enabled kampung folk to meet and socialise.

Which brings me to the infamous, humiliating national team defeat at the hands of the minnows, Laos. How could this happen? How could this be allowed to happen? How could a team paid to play, and paid well too, lose to a team who play more for fun and pride?

I know that the ball is round, and that anything can happen on the field. But reports from the Indonesian capital doesn't seem to suggest that Malaysia played well at all. Football fans later learnt that the team had gone shopping the day before which I assumed was to help players take off the pressure from the big match.

No amount of criticism can help the team. And no amount of excuses can soothe the hurt which fans felt. I'm quite sure the players must feel as bad, but the manner in which the team lost suggested that they played with very little pride, if any.

I remember getting more thrill in watching football games at the Selangor Club padang and the Brickfields railway ground. There were many good teams who played their hearts out to win matches. I was even encouraged to manage a small team made up of schoolboys and dropouts.

Many national and State players came through teams like Hong Chin, Cholan Youths, Pantai Youngsters, Belia Sinaran and Cheras United. Their jerseys were supplied by well-wishers and most games were played on fields which later became sites for buildings and highways.

Today's national players came from teams equipped with sponsorship money, foreign coaches and foreign team-mates. They play according to systems, quite like robots sometimes, lacking passion and style. There seems to be no more fire in their belly, only fistful of dollars and fat bank accounts.

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