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Gala finale to 11 days of sports spectacle

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - The 16th Commonwealth Games came to an official close tonight, a gala finale to mark the end of 11 heady days of sports which saw records smashed and new champions bursting onto the scene.

The closing ceremony at Stadium Nasional tonight, as grand as the opening on Sept 11, rode high on an exuberant spirit of celebration tempered with a touch of thankfulness for a successful Games.

Tonight was a time to celebrate, to bid farewell to Kuala Lumpur '98 and to look forward to the next Games in Manchester in 2002.

The medals have been won, the what-ifs are known and the burden of expectation has been lifted off the athletes, and off Malaysia which had proven beyond doubt its ability to run the world's second largest multi-sports event.

At 8pm sharp, the ceremony began with the arrival of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Ja'afar and Queen Elizabeth II, followed by the Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Najihah and Prince Philip.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali were also among the crowd which filled the 100,000-seat stadium, joining the festivities which were broadcast live over television.

Tonight, two national anthems were heard - God Save the Queen and Negaraku - followed by the inspection of the guard of honour by Tuanku Ja'afar and Queen Elizabeth.

The stadium lights dimmed and colourful lights lit the field as Manchester, the host of the 2002 Games, prepared to put up its countdown presentation.

Manchester made a tremendous hit when it had former soccer great Sir Bobby Charlton to introduce the city.

He congratulated Kuala Lumpur for hosting the 16th Games and said Manchester was very proud to host the next Games.

Manchester presented its show via video, beginning with Commonwealth Games Federation president Prince Edward welcoming all to Britain.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair also made an appearance to welcome everyone "to count themselves in".

Malaysia then presented its farewell cultural performance, several lively dances which ended with fireworks. The official closing began with the marching in of representatives of the 70 contingents, led by Canada which hosted the last Games.

Tonight's march past was more of a fun event than a protocol one. Athletes clowned around, marching in with balloons in hand.

The solemn moment came when the Commonwealth Games ceremonial flag was lowered and handed over to Manchester where it will be raised again in 2002 for the 17th Commonwealth Games.

Queen Elizabeth then declared the Games closed with the words: "I proclaim the 16th Commonwealth Games Kuala Lumpur '98 closed."

She called upon all athletes to continue to display cheerfulness for the next Games. Her declaration was greeted with explosions of fireworks, and confetti and streamers rained from the roof.

The royal guests and other dignitaries departed the stadium, leaving behind many excited spectators to party away the night.

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