

12/09/1998

Let the Games begin (HL)

Carolyn Hong; Randhir Singh

THOUSANDS of dancers moving as one, hundreds of singers in one voice, myriad colours merging in harmony ... the unison of the Commonwealth Games' opening ceremony last night was a tremendous kick-off for an event devoted to sporting excellence.

It was not only a superb start to the 16th Commonwealth Games, the biggest ever and held in Asia for the first time, but also a triumphant moment for Malaysia which had fought a hard fight to make this a success.

The weather too was kind, the clear night forming a perfect backdrop for the Stadium Nasional at Bukit Jalil, beautiful when lit up by fireworks cascading from the skies in sparkling drops.

The new RM445 million stadium which seats 100,000 was full, packed with an energetic crowd, but many more, over 500 million people, watched the show televised live nationwide and in countries like Britain, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia.

There were many proud moments in the four-hour festival - the arrival of the Queen's Baton, the raising of the Commonwealth Games Federation flag among them - but the proudest was the opening declaration by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Ja'afar.

This is the first Games to be opened by the host country's own monarch. The King's declaration was celebrated with explosions of fireworks and a booming 16-gun salute, capped by thunderous cheers by spectators, many of whom had begun trooping in from 4pm.

The pre-show had begun at 5pm, stirring up the carnival spirit with performances by children, singers like Sheila Majid and Ella, and parachutists.

The show itself began at 8pm sharp with the arrival of dignitaries, including Commonwealth Games Federation president Prince Edward, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the King, announced by emcees Mahadzir Lokman and Kassandra Kassim.

The crowd rose for Negaraku, followed by the King inspecting the guard of honour mounted by the Royal Malay Regiment.

The 70 contingents of athletes then marched in led by Wira, the Games' mascot, and mascots of previous Games. The first contingent was from Canada which hosted the last Games, followed by other countries.

The Canadian group threw frisbees into the crowd while the Samaon athletes won cheers with their war dance.

Colour was added by 4,840 valiant volunteers continuously flipping coloured cards to form the flag and name of each nation, besides 217 other images throughout the ceremony.

Rousing cheers of "Malaysia Boleh!" echoed through the stadium as the Malaysian team marched in with their heads held high.

As the last athlete marched out, the stadium dimmed for a welcome cultural dance for our foreign guests. The stadium was awashed with the pale light of "dawn" as little "bumble bees" and "butterflies" flitted in, accompanied by warriors and maidens. The 2,000 dancers moved in harmony with intricate patterns of light on the stadium's half-roof.

The official niceties began with Sukom Ninety Eight Berhad executive chairman Jen (R) Tan Sri Hashim Mohd Ali's brief speech, after which all eyes turned to watch runners with the Queen's Baton which had travelled from London with a message from Queen Elizabeth II.

Badminton greats Razif Sidek and Sylvia Ng ran the last lap around the

track before handing the baton to Koh Eng Tong, 77, the first Malaysian to win a gold medal at the 1950 Games, and Nurul Fatimah Abdul Hamid, a 12-year-old gymnast.

The Queen's message was read out by Prince Edward. The Commonwealth Games Federation flag was brought in, accompanied by former athletes M. Rajamani, Daud Ibrahim and Yew Cheng Hoe, and solemnly raised.

The King then declared the Games open, striking the gong three times to a burst of fireworks, a giant bunga raya blooming and the gun salute, followed by the 70 flags marching in to take the oath led by bowler Shalin Zulkifli.

The niceties over, the celebrations began with a cultural showpiece of Malaysia's history from ancient Malacca to the Multimedia Super Corridor.

Told in dance, song, visuals and laser lights, the story was of a small country which had stood against foreign domination to achieve Independence and which had faced many challenges to become a global nation.

Thousands of dancers flooded the field to surround a giant silver half-globe which became whole as its pieces were fitted together, symbolising unity.

Brilliant fireworks lit the sky and cascades of sparkles showered upon the stadium, the grand finale. The noise died down as the show ended with the departure of the dignitaries.

But the Games itself has just begun.

(END)