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Games-Wrap-up

MALAYSIA SURPRISES, AUSTRALIA ADVANCES MOST IN TRIUMPHANT GAMES

By: Ian Telford

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 22 (Bernama) -- Malaysia bravely defied Asia's economic crisis to stage the 16th Commonwealth Games and surprised itself by putting on its best ever competitive performance in the history of the Games with a haul of 10 gold medals.

Although Malaysia was never going to challenge the dominance of the Games' Big Three -- Australia, England and Canada -- its haul of 36 medals confirmed it as an emerging force in the world of sport.

But it was a gold-hungry Australia that advanced to be fairest of them all. So often was the Aussie national anthem "Advance Australia Fair" played at medal ceremonies that it virtually became the unofficial theme tune of the Kuala Lumpur 98 Games.

And as a green and gold tide engulfed almost every sporting venue, the Australians amassed 199 medals, including 80 gold -- more than twice as many as their nearest rival, England.

But perhaps of even greater significance was the fact that the multi-million dollar event achieved the rare distinction of further unifying a multi-cultured and multi-racial nation, instilling a palpable sense of national pride.

All 70 Commonwealth countries turned up for the 16th Games. It was the first ever full roll call.

With a rallying cry of "Malaysia Boleh" ("Malaysia Can"), Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad galvanised the country and eventually confounded the doom merchants both at home and overseas.

In the six-year leadup to the Games, the skeptics had sniped constantly about almost every aspect of the preparations, from the cost and progress of the main infrastructure project to the potentially lethal effects of the forest burn-off smoke haze that earlier this year blanketed much of South East Asia.

But the organisers ultimately had the satisfaction of hosting, with near unqualified success, the largest and most sophisticated Commonwealth Games yet, made all the more memorable by the natural warmth, charm and good humour of the people.

In the sporting arena, the only notable downside was the absence of a number of leading medal contenders in a variety of sports.

Hardest hit was track and field, especially without the likes of Olympic champion sprinter Donovan Bailey, hurdles favourite Colin Jackson, world triple jump champion Jonathan Edwards and 400 metres world champion Cathy Freeman.

Consequently, the standard of competition in some events at the centrepiece 100,000 capacity National Stadium was below expectations, inevitably devaluing a few medals.

Despite Malaysia's pre-eminence in its traditionally strong sports of tenpin bowling (4 medals), shooting (eight) and badminton -- where it enjoyed unequalled success with three golds -- Saravanan Govindasamy's win in the 50 kilometre walk proved to be a major surprise, especially when the team was not given a ghost of a chance to win anything.

It was Malaysia's first ever Commonwealth Games athletics medal and Saravanan reckoned he surprised even himself...and his coach.

But the two golds that most captured the nation's hearts were boxing hero Sapok Biki's in the 48kg division and air rifle shooter Nurul Hudda Baharin's, who landed in hospital only a month ago after a motorcycle

accident which saw her shooting arm broken in two places.

The only thing the Australian swimmers broke were the 4x200 metres freestyle record, and the spirit of their rivals.

In six days of competition the Aussies totalled 23 golds out of a possible 32. And Olympic butterfly champion Susie O'Neill was crowned queen of the pool after claiming six to boost her Commonwealth Games haul to a record-breaking ten titles.

Australia's traditional Commonwealth swimming rivals, Canada and England, barely got a look in -- the Canadians salvaged four golds and England just two.

Against the odds, the Australians also emerged the top nation in track and field, collecting 13 gold in a total of 34 medals, one more than the English. As in all fields of sporting endeavour there were innumerable tales of triumph and inevitable tragedy, none more distressing than the collapse of New Zealander Craig Barret from heat exhaustion just a kilometre from the finish of the 50 kilometre walk.

The highlights of the six-day athletics programme were Ato Boldon's sizzling men's 100 metres win, the overwhelming dominance of Kenya's male and female distance stars and the triumph of age.

Boldon clocked 9.88 seconds, a mere four hundredths of a second outside the world record, while the Kenyans broke several Games records between 1,500 metres and 10,000.

But the age-defying performance of an Australian mother made the sports news pages world-wide.

At 38, an age when she should have been watching the Games at home on television, Heather Turland, who has four children, amazed just about everyone but herself by winning in only her third marathon.

Three English veterans -- shot putter Judy Oakes, 40, high jumper Dalton Grant, 32, and discus thrower Robert Weir, 38 -- also struck gold.

Oakes has now picked up a medal in each of the last six Commonwealth Games

-- including three gold -- spanning 20 years.

Meanwhile, Canada's traditional grip on the gymnastics competition was loosened, with the underrated Australians picking up nine gold medals.

But the Canadians still managed to produce the star in the rhythmic section, Erika-Leigh Stirton, who swept four gold medals on the final day.

There was also a multiple medal winner on the shooting range where Englishman Michael Galt snapped up four individual air pistol golds.

A knockout final day in which it collected all four gold medals on offer confirmed an unlikely England as the top boxing nation.

A crack Australian cycling team scooped up eight of the 13 golds on offer, leaving Canada, England, New Zealand and Malaysia to fight over the scraps.

The team games introduced here -- seven-a-side rugby, field hockey, cricket and netball -- proved notable successes.

Two of the three debutant nations won medals -- Mozambique a gold and a silver while Cameroon got three silver plus three bronze.

England was runner-up to Australia on the medals table with 136, followed by Canada's 99, including 30 gold, while Malaysia's 36 medals (10 gold, 14 silver and 12 bronze) earned it fourth place, ahead of South Africa, which has 34 medals.

But the overwhelming majority of the 5,000 athletes who took part will leave with memories that can't simply be equated with the colour of a metal disc hanging from the yellow ribbon around the neck.

English hammer throw silver medallist Michael Jones summed it with simple eloquence on the final day of his third Commonwealth Games.

"The thing I enjoy most above everything in my athletics career is the

Commonwealth Games," he said.

"I have been to the Olympics and it's great...but I love the Commonwealth Games." --BERNAMA

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