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Man who made Malaysian boxing history

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ONE of the enduring images of the Commonwealth Games is of Malaysian light featherweight boxer Sapok Biki, 24, traipsing joyously around the ring in triumph after defeating Kenya's Moses Kinyua for the gold.

The wiry Sarawak boxer is drenched in sweat and holding aloft a poster of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, then off doing the jig again, gamely putting up his fists in the traditional boxer's pose for the photographers' benefit.

Malaysia's boxing fraternity had been banking on Sapok, a silver medallist in the Jakarta Sea Games, to bring in a medal, but against the bigger draw of boxers at the Commonwealth Games, they had only predicted a bronze.

But Sapok punched his way through each fight in the 48kg category until he found himself in the final.

He had come a long way from the longhouse to show "Malaysia Boleh".

Kinyua's coach seemed to have no doubt his charge would defeat the Malaysian to take the gold. Sapok was unperturbed. "Anything can happen," he said.

In the meantime, he arranged to have his parents flown in from Kuching to watch him at the big fight.

"I told them this is the best chance for me to win a medal as the Games is held on home soil."

The Games boxing competition had generally drawn scant attention from the fans, but Sapok's win attracted all the right attention drawing 8,000 cheering spectators on the day of the big fight.

They had come hoping to see him make history by winning Malaysia's first Commonwealth Games gold medal for boxing, and Sapok did not disappoint.

Punches flew thick and fast on either side as the two boxers went head to head in the ring, oblivious of the screaming fans.

Sapok, quick on his feet and precise with his jabs, managed to establish an early lead. By the third round he was six points ahead of his opponent, but a determined Kinyua fought back with a four-point rally in round four.

But Sapok stood his ground, circling his opponent and lashing out with deadly accuracy whenever he saw an opening, causing his points to tick ever up-ward until the final bell.

The judges had awarded him 19 points to Kinyua's 13, an emphatic lead that made Sapok the clear cut winner. As the referee raised the Malaysian's arm to signify his victory, Sapok congratulated his opponent and then was off doing his dance.

"The Kenyan was faster than me," he acknowledged afterwards, "but all his punches did not hit target, while I made most of mine count.

Athletes work hard to achieve those rare magical moments when they know they've bested everyone else, and for Sapok standing on the winner's podium and garlanded with gold, this was surely one of them.

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