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Such sweet, sweet rhythm

COMBINING steely grace and undeniable charisma, Malaysia's rhythmic gymnasts toppled Canada and Australia enroute to winning the team gold at the Putra Stadium last night.

In a night of high drama and emotion, Thye Chee Kiat, Caroline Au Yong, El Regina Tajudin and S. Sarina worked their collective magic to earn a total of 93.023 points, pipping Canadians who earned 92.962 points.

Australia took the bronze with 92.937 points.

Pressure on the four young women ticked dangerously upwards when the near capacity crowd realised Malaysia were in the running for the top spot and insisted on thunderous cheers every time one of the Malaysians took their turn.

A similar, well-meaning show of support had rattled the nerves of the Malaysian artistic gymnasts last week, but the rhythmic gymnasts clearly used the shower of applause to spur themselves on.

Caroline Au Yong was the first to hit the floor, and the spritely lass showed the way for her teammates with her score of 9.312 for her hoop routine.

The four Malaysians committed no visible error for the next three hours, effortlessly plucking their apparatus out of the air in a show of precision and choreographic mastery.

Malaysia were in the lead after the first half of the competition with a total of 55.936 points gathered from their rope and hoop routines.

Australia were close at their heels with a score of 55.237, while Canada were third with 55.199 points.

But mistakes began piling up in the second part of the competition, which saw the gymnasts make a final run at the medal standings in the clubs and ribbon elements.

The first gymnasts from each of the three leading countries dropped their apparatus during their routines, but Australia's Shaneez Johnston emerged the least scathed from the mishap with a score of 9.325, thanks to the technical complexity of her clubs performance.

Malaysia were in very real danger of losing their lead to Australia when Sarina dropped her clubs twice during her turn at the floor.

El Regina subsequently missed a catch during her ribbon routine, a mistake made worse by her ribbon becoming entangled about mid-way through her performance.

It was up to Chee Kiat to salvage the team's bid for gold during her clubs routine, the Malaysian team's last for the night.

The pressure was intense but the 16-year-old went in like a true fighter.

Hers was a breathtaking performance, so on target that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was watching with his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, was moved to give her a standing ovation.

The judges responded with a spectacular score of 9.5 and Chee Kiat, now in tears, had to come forward to acknowledge the thunderous applause of an adoring crowd.

Australia's Shaneez Johnston was not able to haul her team score up high enough in one of the night's final performances, and the gold went to Malaysia.

Canada, who had been languishing in third place for much of the competition, surged to second place on the strength of Erika-Leigh

Stirton's clubs and ribbon performances, worth 9.6 and 9.5 points.  
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