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The day our rhythmic gymnasts shone and made us proud

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WHEN Thye Chee Kiat stepped onto the floor to perform her final routine in Saturday's rhythmic gymnastics team competition, the tension in the air was so thick it was hard to breathe.

A lot was riding on her performance, almost too much to ask anyone to bear alone. But the Malaysian team had already gone so far that night, and to fail now would have meant a lifetime of regret.

But like other Malaysian athletes, she went on to win, inspired by the Malaysia Boleh spirit.

Chee Kiat and her teammates Carolyn Au-Yong, El Regina Tajudin and S. Sarina had talent in abundance, but nobody had expected them to break past the formidable twin powers of Canada and Australia in the Commonwealth Games. Nobody that is, except their coach Irina Gabashvili.

"The girls have come very far and their skills are good enough to go against Australia and Canada," she had said. "It is up to them now, to be strong enough mentally to meet the challenge."

The four gymnasts themselves said they were more than ready. "We're excited, feeling confident and really looking forward to the competition," said El Regina.

The Australians, who had made an almost clean sweep of the rhythmic gymnastics medals at the last Games in 1994, had gone in this time determined to do the same, if not better.

And the Canadian team was being helmed by Erika-Leigh Stirton, one of the world's top-ranked artistic rhythmic gymnasts who was already tipped to win the individual all-round title.

So, it was against all expectations that the four young Malaysians had taken the lead on Saturday, giving flawless performances with the rope and hoop apparatus in the first half of the event.

But in the second half, cracks started to appear in their run for good, with the girls committing some costly errors in their club and ribbon routines.

Final judgment would depend on the top 10 scores of each team's 12 routines, so Malaysia's remaining efforts would have to be beyond reproach. The final bid for gold lay on Chee Kiat, who would perform the team's last routine.

The blaring trumpets of Benny Goodman's swinging music flared and Chee Kiat was off like a shot.

For the next 90 seconds she twirled, flicked her clubs in the air and caught them with ease, looking like she could do it all with her eyes closed.

And to top it all off, the girl actually looked like she was having fun.

When she finished, an ecstatic crowd showered her with thunderous applause, while Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad could not contain his excitement and gave her a standing ovation.

Nobody knew yet whether her performance was enough to salvage the team's golden hopes, but it didn't seem to matter at that moment.

Chee Kiat could not control her tears of relief and happiness as she waved to her captive audience.

Her routine, as it turned out, was enough.

Australia's final gymnast was not able to score high enough to topple the mighty Malaysians, and the entire stadium erupted in cheering when the scoreboard flashed the word "Malaysia" in first place.

It was a fairy tale climax to five long years of intense training,
endless ballet lessons and pushing their bodies to the limits.
And the girls, locked in a tearful group hug, knew it.

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