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World stage too big for our athletes

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SIXTEEN records, a glittering cast of world greats and glimpses of future champions. What more could the Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Games track and field programme ask for?

There is more to it than just Ato Boldon's 9.88s record shattering run in the 100m and, perhaps there is more to it than Namibian sprinter Frankie Fredericks' participation in the meet.

Boldon came, so did Fredericks, to give the Games credibility in the wake of several big-name pullout.

Runners like Jamaica's Deon Hemmings, the world's best women's 400m hurdler, Zambia's Samuel Matete, Welsh 110m hurdles world record holder Colin Jackson, and Donovan Bailey, the world's fastest man, were absent.

Fatigue, they pleaded, and prior commitment to take part in the Tokyo leg of the Japanese Grand Prix circuit, were the reasons for their absence.

Money, apparently, was the lure.

But thanks to the likes of Kenyan long distance champion Daniel Komen, Barbados sprinter Obadele Thompson, Australia's rising star Matthew Shirvington, Mozambique's Maria Mutola and Australia's top pole vaulter Emma George, the Games came alive at the National Stadium over six days of competition.

There were stirring moments when Lesotho's Thabiso Moqhali crossed the finishing line first in the men's marathon to win his country's first ever medal in the Commonwealth Games.

And there were heart-breaking moments, like when New Zealand walker Craig Barrett's brave attempt to finish the 50km walk after suffering from dehydration.

Gold should have been his but his legs gave way a kilometre away from the finishing line.

For Malaysia, track and field has been an eye-opener from the start.

Of course, the gold from G. Saravanan in the 50km walk will go down into the history books as Malaysia's first ever athletics medal in the Commonwealth Games.

There was also a national record from N. Shanmugam in the men's 3,000m steeplechase, his time of 8:59.10 shattering a 13-year-old mark.

Elsewhere, there was no cheer. Sprinter Watson Nyambek could not get any closer to his 10.30s national record. Neither could G. Shanti in the women's sprints.

Yazid Imran was a disappointment in the javelin while Mohamed Zaki Sadri can jump no further than his personal best of 7.77m for the long jump and 16.29m for the triple, all done years ago.

The world stage is too competitive for the Malaysians. But then again, look at the Sri Lankans, Sugath Thilakartne, who won a bronze in the men's 400m in 44.64s, and Mohatti Kwawansha in the women's 100m hurdles in 12.95s.

They have Asian physique and humble beginnings. Just like the Malaysian athletes. Sometimes it's mind over matter, Sugath said.

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, building world class stadiums is easy. Producing world class athletes, that's more difficult.

Unless of course, there is a complete change of attitude from our athletes.

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