

08/08/1999

Global odyssey set to end

AS the day skipper Datuk Azhar Mansor returns to Pulau Langkawi draws closer, a sense of pride and achievement has been reached by the man who spent more than 180 days at sea alone.

What next Azhar? Upon the return from his global odyssey, the sailor would be rained with a million questions from his loyal legion of followers.

For the skipper, the Jalur Gemilang dream is yet to end. In solitude while he was steering the ocean racer across the blue yonder, Azhar made his plans for the future.

While mending his battered ocean racer at the Falkland Islands, the skipper shared some of his thoughts over a cup of coffee at the Upland Goose hotel in Port Stanley.

Azhar briefly mentioned the proposal of hosting the Langkawi Cup, a single-handed yacht race from South Africa to Malaysia.

"This is an exciting idea. It will promote the sport of sailing and at the same time expose our country to the rest of the world.

"I know that many Mat Sallehs would be interested to sail in this race. There will be plenty of work to do and we have to plan ahead for such projects," he said.

Azhar maintained that he will only reveal most of his plans after taking a break for a few months following his return home.

For every explorer, there is a story. Azhar has his. The voyage would not be complete without one from the start.

Three years ago, the sailor came up with the noble idea of circumnavigating the globe on a new East-West-East route.

He topped the odds by adding another bold idea - to break the world speed sailing record of 105 days held by French solo yachtsman Christophe Augin.

But the task to get the "Jalur Gemilang" project fully financed was a difficult one. Sponsors were aplenty, but were highly sceptical of Azhar's ability.

Every attempt to get the project financed was literally turned down but Azhar held on. He did not give up and kept on trying.

Two years ago his proposal was brought to the attention of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The Prime Minister was impressed with Azhar's proposal and agreed to be the patron for the Jalur Gemilang challenge.

"Dr Mahathir understood what the project was all about. He gave his blessings personally and encouraged me to go ahead.

Finally after a two-year wait, Azhar took off to Sydney, Australia in late August 1998 to take delivery of Jalur Gemilang.

From Sydney, he sailed the RM2 million ocean racer across the high seas and logged in 5,000 nautical miles to reach Port Klang on Oct 25, 1998.

At the Selangor Yacht Club, Azhar said : "This is a Malaysian effort. I was all alone in the beginning but when I took Jalur Gemilang home from Sydney and showed her to the people, I realise that I wasn't alone anymore."

People, according to the skipper, began to realise the magnitude of the project and how serious he was in getting to the starting point.

For Azhar, he had succeeded in achieving his goal - commissioning Jalur Gemilang and submitting her as an entry for two record attempts to the

World Speed Sailing Council.

On Feb 2 this year, Azhar bade farewell to Langkawi when he cruised away from the Star Cruise jetty at Awana Porto Malai resort.

At that point, there will be no turning back. Charting a new East-West-East route, he said was not an easy task as it has never been attempted before.

In his daily e-mail despatches to shore base, Azhar constantly maintained that the voyage would never be an easy one.

He encountered light wind conditions from Langkawi to the Christmas Islands near Australia. It took nearly one month for him to reach Cape Leeuwin, Jalur Gemilang's first waypoint.

On April 12, fate took a hand on Azhar's voyage. The yacht's main mast broke into three pieces after being knocked down for the third time on the treacherous Southern oceans.

Jalur Gemilang was badly damaged. The skipper steered her to the Falklands to carry out repairs. Azhar reached there on April 25.

Relief efforts were stepped up. On May 8, an RMAF C130H Hercules transport aircraft took off from the Subang RMAF base to deliver a replacement mast.

Azhar greeted his Malaysian compatriots with a sigh of relief. No time was wasted in assembling the new mast which was flown in from Australia.

When it was time for Azhar to part with his fellow countrymen who had to leave the Falklands, the yachtsman left a message to his loyal followers: "Stay with me. The Jalur Gemilang dream will never fade away."

After spending more than four weeks at the Falklands, Azhar was ready to resume his voyage. He left the island on May 26.

With the global odyssey drawing closer to an end, Azhar has achieved what he had set out to do.

After a good break, Azhar said he would resume working on a whole new chapter in his maritime career.

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