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No plain sailing

Sam Cheong

DATUK Azhar Mansor is a man of a few words. He was trained to face the high seas but certainly not fame.

The yachtsman returned to Langkawi on Aug 11 after successfully circumnavigating solo the globe on a new east-west-east route, a feat that took him 190 days.

What started out as a nominal media coverage turned out to be a massive media affair. Since his homecoming, the sailor has been hounded by newsmen wherever he goes.

And for good reason; such a feat has never been performed before. Even the most experienced yachtsmen had initially been sceptical about his attempt.

The 41-year-old father of three says: "They (the yachting community) laughed at me. Some said I would never make it in this 16-metre yacht. Just a load of hot air, they said." For the sailor, all he wanted was to get to the starting line and prove them wrong. "I am just living up to the tradition of the old Malay seafarers. Once upon a time, we were a maritime nation," he says.

To live out his dream, Azhar had to seek a sponsor for his attempt. He endured rejection after rejection. Azhar was frustrated but not beaten; he had given everything he had to see the blueprint of his ocean-going vessel come to live.

"I carried my proposal wherever I went. It was hard to prove things on paper when what people wanted to see was the actual craft itself."

Initially, Azhar's challenge was called "Malaysia Ocean Cross". He had intended to purchase a second-hand high-tech ocean racer from Australia for the job but faced financial problems. Then two years ago, Ahmad A. Talib, then assistant group editor of the New Straits Times, took to the task of campaigning for Azhar.

The sailor's plight became a topic of interest to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. With his personal support and interest, Azhar's project attained swift progress. It was also renamed the Jalur Gemilang challenge.

Dr Mahathir's intervention was a boost to Azhar's morale. Both men kept in constant communication with each other to see the commissioning of the RM2 million ocean racer, aptly named Jalur Gemilang.

Azhar sought the expertise of boat designer Scott Jutson and the experience of David Adams to turn blueprint into reality. The latter had won a round-the-world solo race in 1995 on his ocean racer, True Blue. Jalur Gemilang was accordingly built to True Blue's specifications.

Bit by bit, the ocean racer began to take shape at the McConaghy yard at Sydney. By August 1998, Azhar was ready to take the vessel to shore base in Langkawi.

Azhar conducted sea trials and sailed the Jalur Gemilang solo for 5,000 nautical miles from Sydney to reach Port Klang in three months.

"She was fast. I clocked 17 knots under gail wind conditions when I sailed her home." In late October, Azhar took the Jalur Gemilang from Port Klang to Langkawi. She clocked 11 knots in the Malacca Straits.

But sailing on this busy international shipping route proved a tough task for the sailor.

"Light wind conditions and fishing nets were my biggest worry. If the yacht's keel got stuck on fishing nets, I would have had to dive and

remove them. Can you imagine doing that alone?"

After 36 hours of zig-zagging around fishing nets under light wind conditions, Azhar arrived in Langkawi on Nov 2.

He spent four months resetting the ocean racer for its round-the-world voyage.

"When people viewed the yacht, they began to sense how serious I was about the task. Some gave me a pat on my shoulder." Azhar set sail on Feb 2 this year. The months which followed attracted much interest from the public. Azhar's progress was tracked daily by the local media.

Then on April 12, while navigating the Southern Ocean, the worst happened. The Jalur Gemilang's mast broke into three pieces after being knocked down by huge waves.

Azhar held on and decided to steer his damaged vessel to the Falkland Islands.

It took him weeks to arrive. Things looked really bleak, but for Azhar, it was not over yet. Eventually sponsors raised enough funds to send him a new mast and spare equipment.

The task to fly the Jalur Gemilang's replacement mast belonged to the Royal Malaysian Air Force. The RMAF despatched a C130H Hercules transport aircraft from its 20th squadron at the Subang airbase.

Seventeen men were handpicked by the RMAF for the job. Codenamed Jalur Gemilang, flight Alfa-622 left Malaysia on May 8 to pick up the mast from Australia. It reached the Falklands on May 12.

The mission was successful as Azhar resumed his attempt on May 26. His voyage was reclassified by the World Speed Sailing Record Council as "solo, east-bound assisted with a single stop."

Before leaving the Falklands, he left a parting message for the local populace: "Stay with me..." This poignant statement appeared in the newflash of every local newspaper.

On Aug 10, Azhar rounded the island of Sabang. He had crossed the Equator for the second time two days earlier. This was a personal achievement for the sailor.

In Langkawi, preparations to receive Azhar were being carried out on a grand scale. Some 3,000 people including the Prime Minister would welcome him home.

Three months earlier, the sailor had been conferred a datukship for his venture. Now, a fitting reception awaited him in Langkawi.

Finally, after 190 days, the solo yachtsman arrived home. Tired and overwhelmed by emotion, Azhar thanked the rakyat and his family for being the driving force in his voyage.

"My success belongs to the people," he cited. Admidst the media frenzy, he remained quiet, humble and obliging. He said he needed a rest to spend quality time with his family.

For Azhar, the seafaring adventure is over. It's time to pursue other dreams. Success and a title may change the way people look at him, but he remains quiet and unassuming.

Just the way he is - the man who has inspired the spirit of adventure in the hearts of every Malaysian.