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Malaysia get top billing

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MALAYSIA have been accorded top billing for the inaugural Head Asia Cup 2000 squash tournament starting at the NSC squash centre in Jalan Duta tomorrow.

As top seeds, Malaysia will start as favourites, followed by second seeds Pakistan while Hong Kong have been seeded at No 3 for the five-day tournament, which will feature the top eight teams in Asia.

Malaysia have included newly-crowned Malaysian Open champion Ong Beng Hee to lead the mixed event challenge that will be played on a best of three singles format - two men's singles and a women's singles.

However, the format of play will only be decided during the team managers' meeting today.

Besides the three seeded teams, Japan, Singapore, Jordan, Sri Lanka and Korea complete the field.

"This inaugural tournament is in collaboration with Mulpha International, distributors for Head sporting products, who have been a loyal supporter of squash in the country. They have agreed to sponsor the event for three years," said Asian Squash Federation president Mokhzani Mahathir in Petaling Jaya yesterday.

The sponsors are offering a total of RM25,000 in prize money for the championship.

Mokhzani also released the draw and seedings for the tournament and witnessed the handing over of the Malaysian flag to the national squad.

On plans to increase the number of teams, Mokhzani said for the time being, ASF were happy with the number as they wanted to ensure that only the best teams were invited.

"These are currently the top eight squash countries in Asia and ASF have no immediate plans to change the structure of the tournament."

Malaysia are in Group A with Japan, Singapore and Korea while Group B comprises Pakistan, Hong Kong, Jordan and Sri Lanka.

Malaysia are optimistic of their chances and even the absence of top women's player Nicol David has not diminished their determination to win the title.

"Winning the title will be a great way to end the year and give us reason to celebrate," said Ong.

Ong feels Pakistan and Hong Kong will be close contenders for the title but is confident the team will rise to the occasion with home ground advantage.

Malaysia start their campaign against Korea tomorrow.

Fixtures - Tomorrow: Malaysia v Korea, Japan v Singapore, Pakistan v Sri Lanka, Hong Kong v Jordan (3.0pm).

Thursday: Malaysia v Singapore, Japan v Korea, Pakistan v Jordan, Hong Kong v Sri Lanka, (3.0pm).

Friday: Malaysia v Japan, Singapore v Korea, Pakistan v Hong Kong, Jordan v Sri Lanka(3.0pm).

Saturday: Losers' pool: 3rd Group A v 4th Group B, 3rd Group B v 4th Group A (10.0am); Semifinals: Winner Group A v Runnerup Group B, Winner Group B v Runnerup Group A (3.0pm).

Sunday: Playoff matches (10.0am); Final (3.0pm).

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