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Our jewel in the crown

Randhir Singh

IN squash you don't hear of controversies. Only achievements. That is the criteria of progress. In that sense, squash has emerged as the jewel in the crown for Malaysian sports.

It is the only sport in Malaysia to have produced two junior world champions - Ong Beng Hee and Nicol David.

And that makes squash Timesport-Sport Toto's Man of the Year for 1999. It's a choice few would argue against.

Last year alone belonged to Nicol. The 16-year-old Penang schoolgirl won the Asian junior title and Asian Grand Circuit Finals crown in January. In August, she took the women's world junior championship in Antwerp, Belgium and the Sea Games individual and team gold medals.

In November, she bagged the Australian Junior Open Under-19 title and, the following month, she won the girls' Under-19 British Junior Open title in Sheffield.

A remarkable feat for one so young, yet precocious in talent.

Ong also did Malaysia proud by winning gold medals in the individual and team events in the Brunei Sea Games. He is also the 1999 champion in the Castellanza Open held in Italy and the National Open champion.

No one will dispute that Datuk Alex Lee was the man largely responsible for putting squash on a new plane.

When Tunku Imran Tuanku Jaafar stepped down as president of the Squash Rackets Association of Malaysia in 1990 to move up to the world body, he picked Lee as his successor.

Many believe that was one of the best decisions made by Tunku Imran.

"It not only changed the course of the sport but also ensured Imran's dreams of installing Malaysia as world beaters in squash came true," said Mej S. Maniam, now SRAM's director of coaching.

When other associations were losing their sponsorship under the Rakan Sukan programme, squash, together with tenpin bowling, retained the confidence of sponsors YTL Corporation.

YTL have been handing out RM500,000 annually to SRAM since 1995.

SRAM's budget for this year will come mainly from the National Sports Council (RM1.5 million), YTL (RM500,000), Milo and AIA (RM100,000 each) while SportExcel contribute RM60,000.

SRAM are planning to draw up a budget of RM4.2 million for this year from other sources as well.

In SRAM, too, there has never been a challenge for the leadership. The transfer has always been smooth. From the days of Hisham Albakri, founder-president in 1972 until now, with Datuk Nik Mohamed Din Nik Yusoff at the helm following the untimely death of Lee, it has been trouble-free.

"We usually have no contest for the presidency. There is no challenge and the candidate is usually picked on consensus," said Chris Foo, a qualified umpire and SRAM exco-member.

So when Lee died two months ago from complications after a scuba diving mishap, Nik Din, one of the pioneers of the association, was brought in.

Malaysian squash officials have also made an impact internationally. Tunku Imran was president of the world body for two terms until he stepped down in 1998. He was made Emeritus President of the World Squash Federation in 1996.

Foo and Maniam have been international referees and Prasad Pillai is secretary-general of World Squash Federation and Asian Squash Federation

(ASF).

Maniam is also president of ASF's coaching committee.

Mokhzani Mahathir has been president of the ASF since 1998.

SRAM also enjoy excellent rapport with the Olympic Council of Malaysia and the National Sports Council.

"They are one of the associations who are efficient and diligent," said NSC director-general Datuk Mazlan Ahmad.

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