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Awang to lead team for Argentina challenge

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FIFTEEN local endurance riders will compete in Argentina this weekend to prepare for future FEI (world equestrian body) circuits while promoting the sport and co-operation between the two countries.

Riding under the Malaysian Endurance Riding Society (MERS) banner, the riders will use their own pocket money to participate in the inaugural Malaysia-Argentina Friendly Endurance Race, an annual event offering the Malaysia-Argentina Challenge Trophy.

MERS vice-president Datuk Awang Kamaruddin Abdul Ghani said the riders would participate in a series of endurance races, culminating in a main race of between 100 to 120km, equivalent to an FEI Category B meet.

"This is to allow the less experienced riders to start with smaller distances of 40 and 60km while those who had done 105km races such as those held in Sabah and in Peninsular, in preparation for the sport's debut at the Kuala Lumpur Sea Games, will compete in the main race," he said in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Awang Kamaruddin, who is a regular on the international circuit, having won some FEI Category A meets for races above 130km, added the meet is also to groom other Malaysian riders for international events.

"So far, only Dr Nik Isahak Wan Abdullah and I (both will represent Malaysia in the Games) have participated in FEI meets. The Malaysia-Argentina race will give others the chance to feel competition at higher level and get them to compete on the world stage," said Awang Kamaruddin.

Actually, three other Malaysians have also participated in a FEI meet when they were invited by the United Arab Emirates for the 1998 World Championship in Dubai. But since then, they have been confined to local competitions of at most 80km.

However, Awang Kamaruddin was astute enough to find the financial resources to continue competing on the world stage to make the world's list of top 15 endurance rider last year and he said July's ranking puts him as the sixth best rider in the world.

The riders' list actually included two Singaporeans who are regulars on the Malaysian circuit and Awang Kamaruddin said the number might increase to more than 20 local riders as a Malaysian Airline pilot and the crew for their flight to Buenos Aires wanted to compete, too.

Awang Kamaruddin said the riders were willing to pay their own way for the week-long stint.

Then again, the overall cost is only around RM5,000 per person as the airline offered them a discount while a Malaysian who owns a ranch there have offered food and accommodation.

"We also don't have to worry about getting horses as the Arab Horse Society of Argentina, who invited us, have offered to lease their horses for free," he said.

MERS patron Tan Sri Azman Hashim said the meet would promote South-South ties and strengthen the relationship between the two countries paved by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

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