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Equestrian scene promises to get bigger

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THE equestrian scene is literally on the move.

After being hit by the Nipah virus scare two years ago, which restricted the movement of horses, and the economic problems of 1997, there has been a sudden emergence national events this year which will culminate with the three big ones this month.

These are the Premier Cup final at Bukit Kiara Equestrian Resort this weekend, the Merdeka Masters at the 3QE Club in Kuang the following weekend and the Selangor Turf Club (STC) Equestrian Champion at Seri Kembangan at the end of the month.

The Seri Kembangan event will be particularly interesting as Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will be competing for the first time in the carriage endurance category.

Two weeks ago, the equestrian scene became abuzz when the 76-year-old Prime Minister, who attended the TNB Equestrian International 2001 at the Selangor Polo and Riding Club (SPRC), declared Malaysia already have world-class riders and that he was glad with the pace of the development of the sport.

He also announced that Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB), a main sponsor for the Kuala Lumpur Sea Games, would hold a world-class endurance riding competition in Putrajaya.

TNB chairman Datuk Jamaluddin Jarjis confirmed this will happen before the end of the year, adding they were working with the Police Mounted Unit and world-class endurance rider Datuk Awang Kamaruddin Abdul Ghani, who would engage other international top riders for the event.

A week later, a Press conference was held to launch the KL International Showjumping (KLIS), which will be the first world Grand Prix event in Asia and outside the continents of America and Europe.

The next day, Awang Kamaruddin, who last month was ranked sixth in the world, announced a team of 15 locals for the first Malaysia-Argentine friendly endurance competition near Buenos Aires (last weekend).

He said among the main factors that have led to the growth was media interest, saying he kept a three-part feature on endurance riding which appeared in Timesport more than three months ago and the story had prompted Dr Mahathir to direct him to organise a world-class endurance event here.

Timesport's coverage of the National Polo tournament at SPRC three weeks ago - the first such media coverage of the game in years - also contributed to the current climate. Later, Dr Mahathir announced that another polo club would be opened soon.

The Sea Games next month will also see the return of equestrian as a medal sport. Equestrian was included in the Games only twice before - 1983 in Singapore and 1995 in Chiangmai - but this time, endurance riding is included for the first time ever.

But despite the rosy picture, National Equine Council secretary Malik Jeremiah cautioned against getting over-excited.

"I am afraid the current euphoria won't last beyond the Sea Games. But I sincerely hope the scene would go on and grow," he said.

Malik also advised organisers to pace their meets as too many, weekend after weekend, could 'kill the horses.'

"There are only so many riders and horses in the pool. Basically, we saw the same people at every meet because the organisers tend to concentrate

on the high-end events," he said.

Malik suggested that the main events be spaced in between smaller events which should only cater to beginners and novices. There should be no Grand Prix class in these junior meets, he said.

"That way, we can allow the top riders to rest their horses while giving the newcomers a chance to shine. This would increase our pool and make the sport's growth more meaningful," he said.