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PM loses race but sport wins

Radzi Sapiee

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad might have squandered the lead put by his team-mate, Selangor Turf Club (STC) master ferrier Dennis Kennedy in his first ever riding competition, the harness-driving competition at Seri Kembangan yesterday but it didn't matter.

The point is he would like more people to embrace equestrian sports as he had envisioned years ago and his presence did spark more interest, never mind that many present didn't even understand the sport.

Besides, the 76-year-old leader did compete with a handicap - other teams have at most two persons on the specially-made chariots for the inaugural while while the premier's had three including Kennedy and STC Equestrian Championship chairman Datuk Richard Cham.

Observers pointed out that it was better he didn't win. Kennedy chalked up a convincing lead when he won the first two parts of the harness-driving competition on Thursday and Saturday but Dr Mahathir's slow ride made them finish fifth overall.

"Otherwise, some might accuse the organisers or people involve of handing a hollow victory to the PM just because he is the VVIP. I'm sure he wouldn't want that as it would beat the purpose of him competing - to get more people to promote equestrian sports," one said.

Nevertheless, the Prime Minister's team did beat five other competitors or teams. Amir Zulkefle was the winner followed by Julie Barnicott.

The marathon phase which saw Dr Mahathir controlling the horse named Jake with Kennedy and Cham pointing the way is considered the most gruelling of the competition's three parts.

Dr Mahathir said equestrian sports in Malaysia has seen a fast development, with more people showing interest in taking up horse-riding.

If before this the sport was often associated with horse-racing and gambling, this was no longer the case, he said.

"It has become popular as people realise of its healthy aspect. Today, we see many equestrian clubs and competitions which goes to show that the public are showing more interest."

Earlier, Dr Mahathir opened the harness driving centre at the club.

He said he wanted to see more people try harness-driving or horse-riding in general and applauded STC for setting up the centre in a record 21 days.

National Equine Council secretary Malik Jeremiah had said harness-driving is one of the events they hope would get more people to embrace equestrian sports.