

27/07/2002

Tournament must reflect ambition

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AMIDST a backdrop of the Commonwealth Games, the Malaysia Cup kicks off today and it will, definitely, be robbed of some of its glamour as the nation awaits to see what the national athletes achieve in Manchester.

But this, despite continued claims of mediocrity and falling attendances, is a time of hope for soccer, which remains the number one sport in the country.

Even Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has expressed a wish to see the game regaining the lofty heights it used to occupy before.

A firm believer in the 'Malaysia Boleh' spirit, Dr Mahathir must obviously feel that if South Korea and Japan, who used to fear the national team before, can make an impact on the world stage, so can Malaysia.

So help, as Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein said in Manchester, is on the way as more Government agencies get involved in helping stimulate the game at the grassroots.

The much-maligned FA of Malaysia will accept the assistance gratefully for it has, to its credit, been trying hard to arrest the decline.

The success may have only been marginal thus far but progress, the silver medal in last year's Kuala Lumpur Sea Games being an indication, is slowly but surely being made.

But for the game to really explode, there has to be something to prod the imagination of the fans, especially the younger generation.

Malaysia's chance might come in the Busan Asian Games, that is if the team are allowed to compete, when they play South Korea.

But the game needs something closer to home and the historical Malaysia Cup is the one that can help revive soccer.

Reigning champions Terengganu brought some lost lustre back into the competition with their triumph last season and it was a victory achieved on hard work and commitment.

Unfortunately, this is a trait that is still foreign to both players and team officials alike as the majority don't seem to realise that if they don't have the right attitude, it is the game that will suffer in the long run.

One major reason why soccer is in a rut is because greed got the better of some promising players and this led to the bribery crackdown of 1994-95.

The national team is only now showing signs of revival but even then, too few quality players are coming through the ranks and this will further slow down the progress.

The majority, sadly, are content with the salaries they earn with their teams and there isn't much belief in self-improvement.

They are aided by officials only looking for short-term results and this further compounds the problem.

And this has to change for the soccer fraternity has to show that it genuinely wants to raise the standard of the game and it has to start with the Malaysia Cup.

Otherwise, there is no point in offering the sport any help.