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A kick in the right direction

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SPORTS runs through his blood and, although he celebrates his 72nd birthday today, there are no signs Sultan Ahmad Shah, the FA of Malaysia president, is going to slow or call it a day.

For, according to the Sultan, he has some unfinished business: to make Malaysia a soccer power house not only in the region but also in the world.

"I have a big task of reinventing Malaysian soccer and making it world class, and until I have either achieved that or set in place plans for it, I don't think it would be fair to FAM to consider something else," said the Sultan recently in declining the nomination for the post of Malaysian Hockey Federation president.

Unfazed by the criticism following the national football team's failure at the Busan Asian Games, the Sultan was even prepared to meet the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to discuss soccer's declining fortunes, seek advice and find solutions.

The national team's failure cannot be attributed to a lack of vision or planning on the part of the Sultan and his son, Tengku Abdullah, who is deputy president.

This is because they are the architects of Malaysian professional football, which today has become an important industry, giving employment to hundreds of players.

At the grassroots, the game is being developed with vigour. Players have been sent for training overseas and the Eintracht-FAM partnership shows their efforts are in the right direction.

But, as the Sultan said, a lot more remains to be done, which was why he would continue to serve FAM.

However, Sultan Ahmad Shah has no intention of remaining at the helm forever. For when the job is done, he will make way for new blood to take over as he did as president of the Asian Football Confederation.

"I have achieved what I set out to achieve and, as such, I will not offer myself for another term when the elections are held in August," said Sultan Ahmad Shah in March, when he announced his decision not to seek re-election for the AFC presidency.

The Sultan had accomplished his dreams over the last two four-year terms as president.

One was the construction of the AFC secretariat on a 1.8ha site in Bukit Jalil, Kuala Lumpur. It was the Sultan who was instrumental in obtaining land from the Malaysian Government in 1988 so that AFC could have a permanent home.

Two years later, the complex was officially opened, and in attendance were Fifa and AFC officials.

The Sultan's other dream was to bring the World Cup to Asia for the first time.

With South Korea's stunning performances in the World Cup and Japan's good showing, the Sultan can look back with pride and satisfaction that he had played a significant role in developing Asian soccer.