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Pro league killing the game

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THE plan, when the idea of Malaysian soccer going professional was first thought of, was to make the country a powerhouse in the game.

The years before soccer went semi-professional in 1989 had been relatively successful, with Malaysia qualifying for the 1972 and 1980 Olympics.

Those were commendable achievements and an indication that Malaysia had a solid structure already in place and professionalism could only take the game to a higher stage.

In fact, even Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi can't believe how low soccer has fallen.

And after 14 years of "professional" soccer, it can be concluded that the Premier League is killing Malaysian football.

It has totally enveloped the minds of most of the State FAs, whose only real function is to buy as many players as possible in order to win honours.

These State FAs have totally forgotten their other responsibility, development.

Most State leagues have stopped churning out players simply because the officials are too busy with the Premier League and talent scouting is something that has been long forgotten.

How else can one explain the yearly process of calling for Premier League trials?

Some States have sound development programmes but in their bid to keep abreast with the top teams, they don't have the courage to use their own homegrown talent.

They rather buy and balk, as Perlis have done, when players start demanding five-figure salaries.

But who do we blame for mediocre players pricing themselves so highly? The teams, as they are the ones who have allowed this unhealthy trend to reach such epidemic proportions.

They prefer using the same players year in, year out and there are some players who have played for as many as five teams in a period of six years.

However, they still attract top dollar but the problem is, several teams are in deep financial trouble.

One State, it is learnt, is so heavily in debt that even if the FA of Malaysia was to advance next year's RM1 million Premier League subsidy, it won't be enough to cover that particular State's non-payment of salaries and other financial obligations.

There are some who have fallen foul of the Employees Provident Fund and one State owes the EPF almost RM1 million.

And the States are in debt mostly because they offer high salaries to mediocre players. Several have not paid salaries for the last four months and this prompted FAM to settle the unpaid wages of the national players who are preparing for the Tiger Cup.

That the majority of players are mediocre is something which cannot be denied, especially if the national team's results are an indication.

Last year's Sea Games silver medal was the first hardware the national team had won in the regional Games in six attempts. During that time, Malaysia had been beaten by the likes of the Philippines and Laos. And

this is only in South East Asia.

Malaysia's standard is so bad that on Sunday, FAM deputy president Tengku Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah told the national players that Malaysia is at risk of being lumped with the worse in Asia if they don't buck up.

To FAM's credit, it is trying to revive the game at grassroots but this will be to no avail if the State FAs, the ones really in position to breathe life back into the sport, continue to focus their attention only on the Premier League.

FAM, after years of giving, must start demanding dividends and must also be brave in executing punishment.

It has kicked a clubside out for non-payment of salaries and FAM must be willing to do the same with its State affiliates.

FAM must also stop giving the annual subsidy for, despite its good intentions, it has resulted in States getting lazy.

And it must ensure that the State FAs play a bigger role in the various development programmes for as long as FAM tries to do everything, nothing will be attained.