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European stints for juniors

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THE SRA of Malaysia (SRAM), after some encouraging results by the national players in the British and Scottish Junior Opens two weeks ago, will be exposing them in more events in Europe in order to become a force again in the junior scene.

Malaysia won the Scottish Junior girls' under-12 title through Tan Yan Xin while Low Wee Wern finished runner-up in the girls under-15 event. Wee Wern was the best performer in the British Open when she reached the under-15 semi-finals while several other players also enjoyed good outings.

SRAM president Datuk Mokhzani Mahathir said development is the association's main focus as there is a major gap between Malaysia's leading professionals Ong Beng Hee, Azlan Iskandar, Nicol David and Sharon Wee and there is a need for the junior players to gain sufficient exposure to make the grade.

"We will expose them, especially in the European junior circuit where our players will be able to play among the best. The players' ranking in the European circuit helps them in the world, British and Scottish Juniors and this is where our players are at a disadvantage," said Mokhzani in Petaling Jaya yesterday.

"We need to give emphasis on the under-15 group who are making an impact.

"The only setback at the moment is the rise of European currencies, mainly the Euro and pound sterling, which has reduced our capacity to send a bigger pool of players to compete and train in Europe.

"However, we have made sure that the professionals based in London and Amsterdam are not affected while we are trying our best to seek more funding to aid the juniors."

It will be an important year for SRAM, as the Asian and world championships will be held in Hong Kong and the Malaysian women are expected to do well in both events.

Nicol will be aiming for her fourth consecutive Asian individual title and Malaysia will also start as the favourites for the team event.

Ong Beng Hee is likely to clinch the individual event while Malaysia might make a clean sweep if they can upset Pakistan for the team title.

Nicol reached the semi-finals of the World Open last year and with a favourable draw, she could become the first Malaysian to reach the final this year.

"We need to have a balanced side to do well in the Asian championships. We will be having a special programme for the back-up players so that they can close the gap on the elite players.

"Some of them were sent for training stints in Amsterdam and Ikley, England last year but did not bring in the desired results.

"We will be looking for other arrangements to get prepared for the Asian and world championships."

Among the second stringers who are vying for places in the national senior squads are Kelvin Ho, Timothy Arnold, Nafzahizam Adnan, Delia Arnold, Lim Yoke Wah and Sally Looi.

Besides considering them for overseas training stints, the players will also compete in professional satellite tournaments in the Asian region.