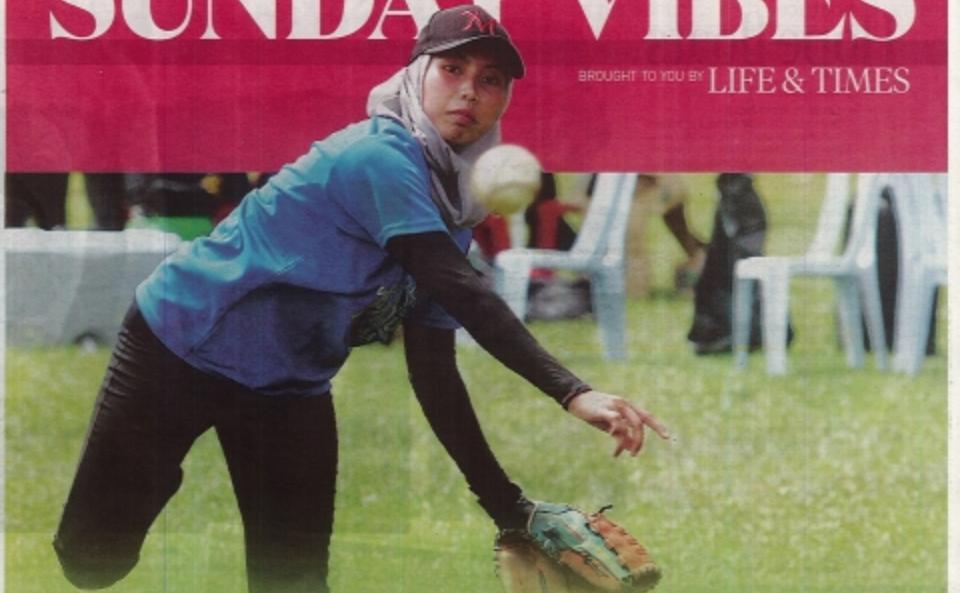


SUNDAY VIBES

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Creating history on the diamond

Young upstarts of Malaysian women's baseball are starting out as unknowns but are aspiring to finish, unforgettable, writes Intan Maizura Ahmad Kamal

It's only mid-morning but the air is thick with heat. Shaking myself for yet another stretch, I turn my eyes towards the recycling bin where a red, white and blue baseball cap lies on the grass, cowering here and there, while white birds seem to whiz every which way. A smattering of makeshift canopies provides

refuge from the unforgiving sun for clusters of people engrossed in the activities taking place on the turf.

"Go, go! Cover!" someone hollers with urgency. And then the shrill sound of inevitable ensue, followed by a raucous celebratory cheer. It's the end of the first set of soft ball games, and the girls are shouting, running and hollering happily across the field. The girls, all of whom are softball players, now need to change their shirts.

"They may be softballists but judging by the number of t-shirts you just noticed they are about trying out new games," adds Wan Azman, matter-of-factly before shrugging off the youngest person on the field today is only 11.

Softball, a variant of baseball, played with a larger ball and on a smaller field, enjoys a markedly higher profile in Malaysia. Thanks largely to the fact that most schools and higher learning institutions have it on their game-days, but baseball itself is far less popular than the average Malaysian's radar. In all, 11 teams, from local to national, are represented by the more conventional sports like football, badminton, etc.

Despite the lack of before or publicity for this event, with the claxon call made only

through social media and word of mouth, a total of 40 or so girls and women have turned up for this milestone try-out, today, marking the end of the 2nd BFM International Invitation Baseball Championship 2018, involving teams from India and Singapore, as well as a Malaysia-U.S.A. joint team, and of course, our local girls. The days of competition and fun have been planned out on UPM's hallowed baseball diamond.

Furthermore, there is a men's national team although I'd sum up that it's still in the "immature" stage. In 2007, at the Southeast Asian Games held in Thailand, the national team finished fifth in a field of six, just above Cambodia and below Myanmar, Host Thailand won the gold medal, followed by the Philippines and Indonesia, for bronze. Fast forward 11 years later, and our men's softball team aren't of that standard. They're not even close to the likes of Japan or closer to home, the Philippines, quite with fear just yet. But compared, the recently-revamped BFM is working hard to address that.

"It's a really good turnout today... quite unexpected," exclaims a tall, bearded man seated next to me under the shelter of one of the canopies just to the side of the field of play. He is one of the few who can lay claim to a record of success in the field. Dr. Datin Wan Azman Wan Osmar, President of Malaysia's BFM, President, is public.

A lot of people are unaware of the sports' presence in this country. But believe it or not, a smattering of makeshift canopies provides

baseball DOES exist here. There is a fairly active baseball scene around the country in the form of scattered leagues. In fact, today marks the end of the 2nd BFM International Invitation Baseball Championship 2018, involving teams from India and Singapore, as well as a Malaysia-U.S.A. joint team, and of course, our local girls. The days of competition and fun have been planned out on UPM's hallowed baseball diamond.

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SUNDAY VIBES /people

Hope floats

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LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

Set against that backdrop, i.e. players' transition into a new sport, low-awareness, the various trials with the men's team etc., why on earth is the Federation working its time on creating a women's national team just now? And the timing is the 30th Southeast Asian Games or SEA Games 2019 in the Philippines? Are they crazy? Ok, I didn't quite put it that way.

"Sir Datuk, why are you all forming a women's team? What's the goal? Next year's SEA Games, yes?" I pose to the kindly, if somewhat grumpy, gentleman, my questions coming out in machine-like flurry as I frantically try to subdue the tone of incredulity from creeping into my voice.

He smiles knowingly before replying:

"Because we can see the potential for it to become a medal sport in the SEA Games. In this region at least, everyone is just starting. Except for the Philippines who have a slight head start. The rest, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, they're just like us, just starting this year and working with a pool of players who used to play softball too. It will be competitive, certainly, but the good thing is the playing field is level. Not like in men's baseball where there are already so many countries far ahead of us."

Ever since its establishment in 1997, the Malaysian Baseball and Softball Board, known as the Malaysian Amateur Baseball Association, has never formed a women's team to represent the country. "This is history in the making," exclaims Wan Azman, smiling broadly. Of the 48 or so

players

that has turned up, 30 will be shortlisted.

His gaze travelling towards the field, he shares: "We been here all morning and I'm encouraged by the spirit and commitment and of course, the skills they've got. We'll work with them to show them more about what they don't know. It's not too difficult to convert them into baseball players. Now all we need to do is harness that spirit, refresh them with new skills, and streamline their training and preparations going forward."

He acknowledges that there'll be challenges and constraints—namely to assemble players at any one time especially when they fall from different parts of the country, and the respective tournaments.

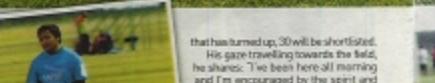
"But I'm sure with good time planning and the intended commitment, we'll overcome these issues," adds Wan Azman, before apologetically excusing himself to accommodate another interview request from a local TV station.

The President's words continue to linger in my mind long after his departure. I wonder whether there's an edge of hope to that. Scanning my surroundings for any familiar faces, I spot the Malaysian national team, in a well-organized septet, holding up a banner from a makeshift area by the entrance to an old friend, and one of the driving forces for the sport of baseball in the country, Coach David Hirofumi Sakamoto, whose own team, Team Raiders, has been one of the top league teams in the country. Grabbing my rucksack, I sprint over to the waiting coach, eager to hear what he has to say.

That he's swift to add: "Whether it happens that they come back with a medal or not, it doesn't matter. What's important is that players must always be given targets. If you just ask them to train hard without any target, they may not be as motivated. Once you give them targets, you can keep pushing them."

Sakamoto goes on to say that he believes the rise of the women's game can set the sport alight. He endears the idea that women should just stick to softball while they play baseball — as has been the case pretty much throughout the sport's history. "Look at other sports. You get men and women playing the same sport. This should be the case for baseball too."

Meanwhile, let's take baseball powerhouse, Japan, as an example. The country has established girls baseball tournaments at the youth and high school levels as well as a professional women's league.



Former national player Sazali Husain will be the head coach for the women's national team.



The Japan Women's Baseball League, which began play in 2010, I learn, was founded by the president of a health food company who was impressed by a girl high school tournament and wanted to create a dedicated space for women to make a living through the game.

But ask Hirofumi, the director

of international affairs for the Baseball, Softball and T-Ball Association, aka the women's baseball committee for the World Baseball Softball Confederation, which oversees both the Women's Baseball World Cup and the World Baseball Classic, and she'll know that baseball's rise in Japan hasn't just been the work of one person or a single organisation.

According to Yamada, even before the launch of the professional league, Japan was already focused on creating a pipeline for female players.

The changing Schools.

More and more participation of girls in youth baseball had already begun as far back as 25 years ago. The movement

itself was so successful that it inspired a group of five high schools to come together to host their own girls' teams. So far, as the years went by, the group grew larger and, today, there are many high schools with their own girls' squads.

SIGN UP FOR SUCCESS

"Please come to my office," he reminds me. "I have one more person left on my list to chat to before I leave my lesson. Thanking Sakamoto for his invaluable input, I clamber down from my perch to try and intercept Sazali Husain, coach of Putrajaya Tigress softball team, former national player, and as I've duly discovered, the man selected to steer the newly minted national women's team, a task he'll undertake with the help of his able team of fellow former national players and coaches.

"Waving Zal, I head over. "I have to go now," he informs me before departing from the field ahead of me. He turns and a broad grin of recognition crosses his face. "How can I help you, Intan?" he says, wiping the sweat from his brow, before leading me to a plastic chair under one of the canopies to escape the midday sun.

So how are you going to get these softballers to commit to the baseball cause, I ask, intent on playing the devil's advocate. Unperturbed by the question, Sazali can answer simply. "Simple. They just have to choose a kick and the other. The only fair for baseball Malaysia that if you decide to come on board, you give your full commitment. We want to compete and get results. We need talents but, most importantly, commitment. If they're still involved in softball, their commitment will be diluted. Once they've chosen, we'll write in to Softball Malaysia to ask them to include these players from their programmes."

Just like the BFM President, Sazali too is hard-pressed what he's observed. "There's a lot of potential," he says. "I am impressed by their attitude and commitment," he says, enthusiastically adding. "I'm not biased but I strongly believe that we're in a potential medal position for SEA Games. Of course, we have to bring them too. We'll do things in stages. By the foundation, run programmes, camps, and get the sport played in more schools and so on. But you know what? I'm really excited about this one!"

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