

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. Strapping myself for yet another Sunday of being baked crisp, I cast my eyes towards the swarming panorama of a vast field filled in an afternoon with fans of blue and white with the vibrant green of the grass, darting here and there, while tiny white balls seem to whizz every which way. A smattering of makeshift canopies provides

relief from the unrelenting sun for clusters of people enjoying the activities taking place on the field. "Go, go! Go!" someone hollers with urgency. And then the shrill sound of a whistle rings out, followed by a raucous celebratory cheer. It seems, just like the weather, things are definitely heating up on the baseball field at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) in Serdang, Selangor, where it's 0-0 Day for Malaysia's women baseball aspirants seeking to etch their names in history by being selected for the country's first women's national baseball team.

"It's a really good turn-out today... quite unexpected," exclaims a tall, bespectacled man seated next to me under the shelter of one of the canopies just to the side of the field of play. The tone of contented pride influences Datuk Wan Azman Wan Omar, Baseball Federation of Malaysia's (BFM) President, as he speaks. Despite the lack of banners or publicity for this event, with the diamond call made only

through social media and by word of mouth, a total of 40 or so girls and women have turned up for this milestone try-out. Some from a registered list of 50 odd, with some travelling from as far as Penang, Johor and Klang/Sembilan. And they're all softball players (or ballers). They may be softballers but judging by the numbers, it shows you just how excited they are about trying out a new game," adds Wan Azman enthusiastically, before sharing that 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 games list. But baseball? It has yet to wedge itself onto the average Malaysian's radar, let alone garner the kind of fervent devotion enjoyed by the more conventional sports like football or badminton.

A lot of people are unaware of the sport's presence in the country. But believe it or not,

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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 travails with the men's team etc. why on earth is the Federation wasting its time on creating a women's national team just? "And the target is the 2011 Southeast Asian Games or SEA Games 2019 in the Philippines? Are they crazy? Oh, I didn't quite get it that way."

"So Datuk, who are you all forming a women's team? What's the goal? Next year's SEA Games, yes?" I pose to the kindly bespectacled gentleman, my questions coming out in machine-gun fury just 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 us to win a medal in next year's SEA Games. In this region at least, everyone's 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 country's "rising" baseball body, then 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 40 or so



BFM President, Datuk Wan Azman Wan Omar.



Coach David Hirofumi Sakamoto of Team Riders.



National youth hopefuls. PICTURES BY AZHAR BAHU AND THEA MADRIDA @HARD KAMAL



The girls, all of whom are softball players, need to change their mindset.

that has turned up, 30 will be shortlisted. His gaze travelling towards the field, he shares: "I've been here all morning and I'm encouraged by the spirit and commitment and of course, the skills these girls and women have shown. They may be softballers but it shouldn't be 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 hail from different parts of the country and have their respective commitments. "But I'm sure with good time planning and their undivided 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 a chance for "hope to float". Scanning my surroundings for any familiar faces from the baseball fraternity, I spot a welcomed sight. Moving off me from a sheltered area by the roadside 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 Riders, has been one of the top league teams in the country. Grabbing my rucksack, I head over to the waiting coach, eager to hear what he has to say.



If they make it, these softball players have to give up their sport and dedicate their time and energy to baseball.

WOMEN AND BASEBALL

"It's a great thing that's happening today. Certainly, this will fare better than men's baseball," begins Sakamoto, when asked about his thoughts on what's happening today. He's obviously relishing the more challenging undertaking that is the men's baseball team. "Women's baseball is still under development basically everywhere in Asia. In fact, the Philippines women's team, I believe, has just had its first training camp recently. So our women may have a good chance when they go out there."

Unlike Wan Azman, Sakamoto isn't an confident about Malaysia's fledgling women's team's medal prospect at next year's SEA Games. Not yet, he cautions.

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Former national player Sarah Hussain is the head coach for the women's national team.



The youngest participant was 11-year-old Aqiyah Muzammil Abdul Muiz.

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

But ask Hiroko Yamada, the director of international affairs for the Baseball Federation of Japan, who also chairs the women's baseball commission for the World Baseball Softball Confederation, which oversees both the Women's Baseball World Cup and the World Baseball Classic, and she'll have you 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 11-year-old's Schools Grassroots movement to increase the participation of girls in youth baseball had already begun as far back as 25 years ago. The movement it seems was successful that it inspired a group of five high-school boys to come together to host their own girls' team. Suffice to say, as the years went by, the group grew larger and today, there are many high schools with their own girls' squads.

SIGNING UP FOR SUCCESS

"Phewtttttttttt," the piercing sound of the whistle coming from the field reminds me that I have one more person left on my list to chat to before I take my leave. Thanking Sakamoto for his invaluable input, I clamber down from my perch to try and intercept Sarah Hussain, coach of Putrajaya Tigers softball team, former national player, and I've just discovered, the man selected to steer the newly initiated national women's team, a task he'll undertake with the help of his able team of fellow former national players and coaches.

"Azman Zaki, a word please," I holler to the sweet-drenched farm departing from the field ahead of me. He stops. 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, Sarah calmly replies: "Simple. They just have to choose — pick one and drop the other. It's 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 full commitment will be divided. Once they've chosen, we'll write in to Softball Malaysia to ask them to exclude these players from their programmes."

Just like the BFM President, Sarah is too heartened by what he's observed. There's a lot of potential here. And I'm 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'll have long term goals too. We'll do things in stages, lay 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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