

Royal with a cool head

Pahang Prince known to take criticism in his stride

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Comment by ERIC SAMUEL

"IF YOU have a son ... buy him a pair of boots and a ball!"

I remember vividly this call made by Tengku Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah some 30 years ago.

This was the keynote by the Pahang Prince when he addressed the Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) affiliates as they ushered in the Semi-Pro League in 1989.

Then, being a rookie reporter, I had no idea what the former FAM deputy president was talking about at the press conference in Kuching.

It eventually unfolded as an important day in our football history.

The birth of the Semi-Pro League introduced foreign players to Malaysian football. It was a move to raise the standard of football.

Then, FAM president Sultan Ahmad Shah and Tengku Abdullah were instrumental in promoting professional football. And after five years, their "dreams" came true when the FAM launched a full Professional League in 1994.

But it was not just sweet dreams ... it came with "nightmares" too - in the form of media backlash.

As a reporter, meetings with the royal family became a regular feature. And to be honest, most of the time, the meetings were confrontational as we questioned the decisions of the FAM executive committee on so many aspects - from their failed football academies, ineffective domestic league, dwindling standard of the national team to the hiring of national coaches and stunted youth develop-



On the ball:
Tengku Abdullah checking the turf at the National Stadium in Bukit Jalil before the Malaysia Cup final in October 2014. — GLENN GUAN/The Star



Tengku Abdullah's Biodata

- Born on July 30, 1959, at Istana Mangga Tunggal, Pekan.
- The fourth child and eldest son of Sultan Ahmad Shah and Almarhumah Tengku Ampuan Afzan.
- His early education was at Sekolah Ahmad, Pekan as well as at the St Thomas primary and secondary schools in Kuantan.
- Later attended the Aldenham School, Elstree Hertfordshire - Advance School (1975 - 1978), Davies College, London - Advance School (1978 - 1979), Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, England (1979 - 1980)
- Took a course in Foreign Affairs and Diplomacy at Worcester & Queen Elizabeth College in 1981

national coaches and stunted youth development projects.

Yes, the list goes on.

But there were no hard feelings as the heated discussions were in the best interests of developing the game.

The FAM may not have got the desired results over the years but they did try.

Once, Tengku Abdullah made a surprise visit to a local football academy. Here, he checked on every single detail including what meals were given to the boys.

The director of the academy started by saying, "Mondays we serve them *sup tulang*" and Tengku Abdullah immediately interrupted "why *sup tulang* only ... give them *sup daging* (with meat), too. We are paying, right?"

No matter how hands-on he tried to be, eventually Tengku Abdullah admitted that the Academy Project failed to produce the desired results.

One thing you must admire Tengku Abdullah for is that he takes harsh criticisms in his stride. There have been damaging

headlines, including numerous calls for the top brass to step down.

But never once did Tengku Abdullah or Tuanku Sultan show their anger.

During a one-on-one interview when Tengku Abdullah took over the No. 1 seat in FAM, he was forthcoming, sincere and had his own vision.

He is a man of his word too. He stood by what he promised – to step down if all efforts to revive Malaysian football failed.

There's no denying that Tengku Abdullah's involvement in football saw him go places – he was elected to the FIFA exco in 2015. The last Malaysian to hold a post in FIFA was the late Tan Sri Hamzah Abu Samah. He was vice-president from 1982 to 1990.

There was a reception at Wisma FAM for Tengku Abdullah's appointment into FIFA's decision-making body and in his speech, he thanked the media for the role they played in his success.

He said: "My rise would not have been

made possible if not for the support from all in FAM and the media."

Imagine, after all the bashing he took, he remained modest, open-minded and friendly.

Tengku Abdullah holds nothing back – and is indeed a people's person.

Once, he came up to the media box and told his bodyguard to snap a photograph of him with us during the National Under-23 pre-Olympic match against Japan in Fukuoka.

Well, Tengku Abdullah may not be the FAM president any more – but he's one cool personality.

The writer was StarSport's deputy editor before opting for early retirement last year.



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■ Proclaimed the Tengku Mahkota Pahang on July 1, 1975, and installed as the heir apparent on Oct 23, 1977.

■ Is ranked Brigadier General in the Regiment 505 Voluntary Army.

■ Took on the role of Pahang Regent in 1979 when he was 20-years-old after Sultan Ahmad Shah was elected as Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

■ Married to Tengku Puan Pahang Tunku Azizah Aminah Maimunah Iskandariah Sultan Iskandar since 1986.

■ He has nine children.

■ Known for his keen interest in sports and has helmed the Football Association of Malaysia.

■ Appointed Regent again in Dec 2016.

Source: <http://www.royalark.net/Malaysia/pahang10.htm>