

STRONG FINISH BY MALAYSIANS

Up-and-coming players win four of eight titles at Asian Juniors

KNG ZHENG GUAN
nstsport@nst.com.my

THERE were some lows, but overall it was a strong finish by the Malaysians as they swept four of the eight titles at the Asian Junior Squash Championships yesterday.

Malaysia, who contested in seven of the finals, claimed the boys' under-13 and under-15 titles, as well as the girls' under-13 and under-19 crowns in Pattaya.

It was 12-year-old prodigy Harleein Tan who started the ball rolling by taking the girls' Under-13 crown.

The Negri Sembilan lass, who came into the spotlight after winning the British Junior Open Under-11 title in 2020, was a class act as she whipped Hong Kong's Chloe Lo 11-3, 11-2, 11-0 in just 14 minutes.

Then it was Sim Yeak Wei's turn as he rose to the occasion to down compatriot Raziq Putra Fakhrrur Razi 11-6, 6-11, 11-4, 8-11, 11-3 for the boys' Under-13 title.

It was Yeak Wei's first major title, and he certainly lived up to the reputation of the famed Kedah grassroots programme, which has produced top players such as national No 1 S. Sivasangari and national No 2 Aifa Azman.

In the boys' under-15 final, Penang's M. Nickhileswar collected his second major title by beating compatriot Aqil Mirza Naim 11-8, 11-9, 11-6 in the final.

The 14-year-old had won the Under-11 title at the British Junior Open in 2019.

Malaysia's streak was temporarily halted when Goh Zhi Xuan lost 11-4, 11-4, 11-6 to Japan's Akari Midorikawa in the girls' under-17 final, while Low Wa Sern fell short in an 11-7, 11-8, 13-11 defeat to South Korea's Na Joo Young in the boys' under-17 final.

Aira Azman then won Malaysia's fourth title after thumping Hong Kong's

Kirstie Wong 11-8, 11-3, 11-2 in the girls' under-19 event.

It was a record-breaking fifth Asian Junior title for the Kedah-born. She is now the most decorated player in the competition's history, having won the most number of the titles.

The 17-year-old won the under-13 and under-15 titles two times each from 2016 to 2019.

In the boys' Under-19 final, Joachim Chuah just fell short of making it a grand finish after losing 11-9, 10-12, 11-5, 11-9 to hot favourite Noor Zaman of Pakistan.

It was still a strong finish, although they could not repeat their best-ever finish of six titles from the 2015 edition.

"It was a very good week for the juniors, not just in squash but in their overall conduct and attitude towards the tournament," said national assistant coach Andrew Cross.

"The kids were united and cheered for each other. The way they conducted themselves and fought on court was impressive.

"Harleein was exceptional. Aira also had a very strong week, although her semi-final match against (Yee) Xin Ying was probably the actual final.

"Joachim also played his heart out. Although he lost, it should give him some confidence going forward.

"So all in, it was a very positive outcome for us... a good sign for the future."

RESULTS, ALL FINALS (Malaysians unless stated) — Boys' under-13: Sim Yeak Wei bt Raziq Putra Fakhrrur Razi 11-6, 6-11, 11-4, 8-11, 11-3;

Under-15: M. Nickhileswar bt Aqil Mirza Naim 11-8, 11-9, 11-6;

Under-17: Na Joo Young (Kor) bt Low Wa Sern 11-7, 11-8, 13-11;

Under-19: Noor Zaman (Pak) bt Joachim Chuah 11-9, 10-12, 11-5, 11-9.

Girls' under-13: Harleein Tan bt Chloe Lo

(Hkg) 11-3, 11-2, 11-0;

Under-15: Anahat Singh (Ind) bt Ena Kwong (Hkg) 11-7, 12-10, 11-5;

Under-17: Akari Midorikawa (Jpn) bt Goh Zhi Xuan 11-4, 11-4, 11-6;

Under-19: Aira Azman bt Kirstie Wong (Hkg) 11-8, 11-3, 11-2.

Harleein Tan won the girls' under-13 title at the Asian Junior Championships in Pattaya yesterday.

