

2011 FIP POLO WORLD CUP
ASIAN-AUSTRALASIAN-AFRICAN CHAMPIONSHIPS ZONE D PLAYOFFS

Malaysia Rise to the Day with Victory

Stories by Sunleye-Solawumi Olaleye

Host country, Malaysia, celebrated a hard-fought win over New Zealand last night with a dazzling fireworks celebration that lit the Royal Pahang Polo Club sky up, for upwards of five minutes. The 9-8 victory was made more poignant for the Malays because of the way and manner it was wrought – via emotions running high, scores swinging back and forth like a yoyo; not to mention a pony that was so excited and going with the game – even when it was feeling no more up to it – that she allowed herself to be rode to death, as they say, when she slumped on the field of play and died.

That it was going to be one of the most exciting games ever was to be seen from the moment the ball was thrown in by the referee, for hostilities to commence. If the throw of the ref was the signal for battle to begin, the two sides did more than compliment that with the adrenalin-fuelled attacking play that was set up right afterwards.

Hardly had the exchanges begun than the hosts went on the rampage, forcing the players of the Kiwi team to need a foul to stop them from an early minute goal. But the infringement did not help the matter for them as it resulted into a penalty-4 punishment, which was a 60-yard strike. With their specialist striker Zaini in fine fettle and on top of his game, his high shot was unstoppable and it sailed well over everything for the opening goal. But New Zealand struck back almost immediately to restore the much needed Kiwi parity.

From that moment on, it was going to be a seesawing affair in fluctuating fortunes; however, with never any of the two sides going more than one goal ahead in advantage. And in this, it was always the hosts, leading the light with New Zealand invariably coming back to level up scores.

It went on like this for three chukkas, with each side scoring two goals apiece in each chukka; each chukka seeing to the scoring of four goals by both sides. This meant the first chukka ended 2-2 and the second 4-4. The story looked like it was going to persist on this path in the third chukka when as usual, Malaysia went forward to 5-4. But the colouration would experience a different hue in brightness for the home fans when their team proceeded to lead; for the first time since the match begun, by two goals, taking the score line now to 6-4. At that point, it was looking like there would be no stopping the home side. But just as every fan of Malaysia was beginning to think the Malay birds were about coming home to roost, the men from New Zealand began their renaissance.

Going for broke, they scored two goals in quick interval to restore parity and make the match-tradition of four goals per chukka and two apiece by each

side to stay unbroken. Then came the reverse drama in the fourth chukka. Entering the pitch after a stern talk-to by their coach, New Zealand became crispier in attack, and before the home side knew what was going on, they were two sweet goals behind at 6-8, to leave the 'peloton' looking like a graveyard, and the high table atmosphere – where polo-playing 'governor' of the state; Pahang State, His Royal Highness Prince Abdullah, had been busy clapping and cheering excitedly a while ago, to take on the picture of a bereaved household. However, if the visitors were able to fight back from two goals down at beginning of the third chukka, the Malay players were already looking capable of packaging the same surprise, and they very well did, because by the end of the chukka, they too had successfully staged their comeback to bring the scores to 8-8; again making the match -tradition of four goals per chukka, and two goals apiece from each team, to stay true.

And then came the crunch fifth and final chukka; and what a chukka that turned out to be.

With the dramatic way Malaysia scored their equalising goal in the very last seconds of the fourth chukka to go into the break period 8-8, they were obviously the ones coming back for the last hurray with a higher psyche and motivation.

After a few attacking switches befitting of the level of contest that has been seen in the last four chukkas – not minding a few nerves, which saw both sides losing sitters, particularly on the side of the home team, it would be them; Malaysia, that would eventually break fifth chukka goal-drought via one of the most beautiful play and team-work imaginable in the sport. One that even the World Cup proper coming up in Argentina in a few months time, would be proud of, had that kind of move took place there. And the whole club erupted in ecstasy as the Malay side once again went ahead, taking the scores to 9-8.

By that time, even the royal personality of Pahang, Prince Abdullah, was already standing on his feet and away from the state box position, to lead a chorus of supporters down the pitch, at the position of the home team's bench. But then came the pony fatality moment as the horse of one of the players of New Zealand, without any prior notice of stress or tiredness; without any horse hitting it or her colliding into another, suddenly slumped.

When play resumed, the Kiwis would fight tooth and nail to get the equalizer, while the home side would defend as if their lives depended on it to keep their assailants at bay. And even then, it would be the Malays that would run closest to scoring as the chukka became the only one out of the five played that would not see four goals being scored and would have only the home side's opening goal sealing the affair.

Malay fans were busy counting the seconds aloud as the encounter grounded to a finish. And when the gong sounded for the end of hostilities, it was a happy Prince Abdullah that led the cheering reception for the Malay players as they filed out of the pitch.

PLAYERS LINE UP AND HANDICAPS

MALAYSIA

- *Along – 3
- *Edham - 4
- *Shaik - 3
- *Zaini - 4

PLAYERS LINE UP AND HANDICAPS

NEW ZEALAND

- *Ben - 1
- *Kit - 4
- *Andrews -5
- *Bary - 4

Poor But Brave Pony Gave Her Life

Nearly two hundred ponies were ordered in from Argentina in the throes of preparation for the on-going World Cup Polo Qualifiers Zone D, in Kuantan, and all has been performing with exceptional devotion and zeal. But last night, the line suffered a sad fatality as one of them collapsed suddenly in the fifth chukka of the match between host team Malaysia and New Zealand.

With the match, which has been proceeding from one team going into the lead and the other recovering to restore parity for the past four chukkas, was still delicately balanced well into the final chukka, with Malaysia leading 9-8 to eight when one of the ponies suddenly slumped squat midway between the two ends of the field.

The pony fatality moment came when the horse of one of the players of New Zealand, without any prior notice of stress or tiredness; without any horse hitting it or her colliding into another, suddenly slumped. As the player strived to extricate his right leg from under the belly of the poor pony, the first thought in the minds of people at the stands had been that perhaps the pony had been ridden harshly by the player and she had thrown him off and the player had been injured.

But given the way the player had been trying to extricate just his one leg, caught under the belly of the horse, and the fact that the incident happened far away from the area where the polo action was taking place at, and the fact that at a point, the player had begun to be less concerned about his leg and instead was suddenly stroking the belly of the pony, it was obvious that the reverse of the thinking was the case and that the pony might be seriously in trouble. Suddenly the message was flying about: "Pony Down, Horse Down".

It was like the distress call of the Police when one of their own was down, a-la 'Officer Down, Officer Down'.

Immediately, the whole club was wearing mournful looks. The reality

would sink home via the statement of His Royal Highness, Prince Abdullah, during the ceremony of the opening day on Monday when he emotionally declared that his biggest message to the players was that they should ride the ponies with love and compassion as 'they were the great love of his life'. With the New Zealand player stroking the belly of the pony even while still trying to extricate himself, the whole field had dismounted to rush to his side and get him off from under the horse while a team of medical and an ambulance had driven in within the minute.

But that it would be a fatality was immediately evident as about six personnel were kicking and pressure pressing different parts of the body of the big animal, obviously in a bid to get her systems back working. But they were losing her faster than a man holding the tail of a tilapia fish. At that point, the scene was reminiscent of that when the former Arsenal player Eduardo suffered a leg fracture on the field of play in the Premiership, some four seasons ago. After about 20 minutes of attempts to revive her, it became obvious that the veterinary medical team had lost the horse. Consequently a green, hospital-type partitioning enclosure was created around the area, right there on the pitch, to cover up further procedure. By the time a heavy duty yellow caterpillar had entered the pitch, everyone was resigned to the worse.

When the caterpillar emerged from the enclosure, it was to reveal the pony had been packed into an orange body bag. It would be taken consequently to its final resting place as a few females around shed a tear or two for the dear thing that gave her life to the game.

India Survive Pressure Cooker Aussie Attack

The last time these two gladiators of polo had a face-off was at the last World Cup Finals in New Zealand in 2007. Then, India ran away with a close 13-11 victory. Last night the victory would be even not that clear cut; five and half to five (5 ½ - 5), with India only managing half a goal to survive this battle.

So pissed off with the loss was one of the Aussie players that when he came right out of the pitch, he sent the first object he came into contact with, a plastic chair, reeling into the air with a looping kick that worshippers of the 'Bend it like Beckham' slogan would have been massively proud of.

'I'm sorry you are disappointed. Hard luck it is', I had tried to sooth him up as I gently asked him what he thought had gone wrong. "This is bad. We didn't fight for each other. We were not together as a team on the pitch..."

That was all he could get to say about the match before his equally disappointed coach, Glen Gilmore, breezed in to stop further conversation, saying: "Hey, hey, what is happening right here?" And then, with the ostensible excuse he needed to do team-talk first, he had the interview terminated.

On the part of the India team, their most experienced player, Tarun (handicap 3), says it was one of the toughest matches he ever played for the national team. "Don't even let us talk about whether this was a tough one," Tarun said in-between heavy breathing. "It was almost tougher than tough."

Later the coach of the Aussies, Gilmore, after having gained back his calmness, would say of the match as being heavy in defence formation. "They were very strong in defence. We tried to break their defensive formation down, but it was so difficult." Reacting to the low scores, he said maybe it was not only the Indians that were defensively motivated. "Maybe both of us had strong-arm defensive tactics. Because if we took our last encounter to bear when we scored 24 goals in-between the two of us, with them winning by 13-11, then we could say there was a little bit of strong defensive tactics on both sides. In today's encounter, all the two of us could muster are 10 and a half goals.

"We probably would not have lost to them if not for their captain, Samir, a five handicapper. He was very strong for them. In fact, he scored four out of their five and a half goals. Buy I think it was a nice match anyway."