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Tie-up pays huge dividends

JHL: Other teams should emulate SSTMI-Tenaga partnership

JUCJET SINGH

THE Junior Hockey League (JHL) was so predictable that Tengku Mahkota Ismail Sports School (SSTMI) should have been handed both the titles right after the fixtures were drawn up.

But SSTMI, also known as Thunderbolts, should not be denied glory for they did not have it so rosy in the early days when they were known as Bandar Penawar Sports School (BPSS).

As BPSS, they did not have the resources to hold on to their players after Form Five, as money was the big factor which drove their best to Malaysia Hockey League (MHL) big spenders.

"We were just another struggling side as we kept grooming players but could not hold on to them after they finished schooling.

"But now, with Tenaga Nasional's backing, we have produced results in the last four seasons," said SSTMI coach Wan Roslan Wan Rahman.

Money and a good coaching set-up have seen UniKL Young Guns

and Thunderbolts sharing the titles since 2010, with Petaling Jaya City Council (PJCC) sneaking in to finish second in the league this season.

But Thunderbolts are fast breaking free of the chasing pack with three consecutive league titles, as well as claiming the double back-to-back.

When asked about his take on this season, Wan Roslan said: "The gap between Division One and Division Two teams is getting bigger and bigger.

"And even in Division One, the challenge from traditional rivals like Bukit Jalil is fizzling out."

BJSS hold the distinction of seven consecutive league titles from 2003 to 2009, and were double champions in 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008 and 2009.

They are now whipping boys, as they do not have the financial strength to hold on to players.

Wan Roslan's sentiments were shared by UniKL Young Guns coach K. Embaraj, a third-time unlucky Milo Cup finalist.

"There used to be at least four teams who had quality players in the past, but now, we are left with only two sides while the rest are struggling because the talent pool is shrinking fast," lamented Embaraj, a former international.

Both UniKL and SSTMI Thunderbolts also play a feeder role for their senior sides, with SSTMI grooming players for Tenaga Nasional.

"It is a win-win situation, where we groom the players with help from Tenaga, and then supply talent for their MHL side.

"This year, two of our players will see action with Tenaga in the senior league, and this augurs well for the country as well," said Wan Rahman.

Money, and affiliation to a strong sponsor, is what the rest of the JHL teams should start hunting for from today.

If not, next year's season will also see UniKL, who will have 15 players eligible from this season, and SSTMI hogging the headlines again.



A UNIKL player is checked by a SSTMI player in the final of the Junior Hockey League on Sunday. SSTMI won 1-0. Pic by Saifullizan Tamadi