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Open affair in MHL

THE Malaysia Hockey League, which starts today, will see 20 foreign signings playing for various clubs and double champions Kuala Lumpur Hockey Club (KLHC) will find it hard to defend their titles.

A total of 14 teams will battle in the Premier and First Division of the TNB/MHL.

And the monopoly of Tenaga Nasional and KLHC looks set to be broken this season, as several players have been engaged to boost the chances of other clubs.

Eighteen foreign signings are from Pakistan, and one each from Australia and India.

The clubs failed to secure more players from India due to the reluctance of Hockey India to release its current batch of national players while their juniors are embarking on an European playing tour at the beginning of May.

KLHC have signed six foreigners — five from Pakistan and the sole Australian to replenish their squad that was hardest hit by debutants Terengganu.

Pakistan national team skipper Muhammad Imran, who scored five goals in the Azlan Shah Cup last week, leads the cast that also comprises the evergreen Waseem Ahmad, Fareed Ahmad, Muhammad Umar Bhutta and Akhtar Ali.

“It will be interesting playing for KLHC this time around as I played for Sapura last season. The MHL is an interesting league and there are no easy matches. I believe that we have a good team and we are capable of defending the titles,” said Imran.

Also signed up by KLHC is Timothy James Deavin, who is best remembered for his last gasp goal against Korea at the Azlan Shah Cup that helped Australia earn a 3-3 draw.

Maybank are the other team that went on a recruitment drive, securing former Pakistan skipper Shakeel Abbasi, Muhammad Irfan, Muhammad Waqas and Shafqat Rasool.

Sapura signed Pakistan’s Khasif Ali, Yasir Islam, Muhammad Zubair and India’s Raja Veerachamy.

Nur Insafi Warriors opted for six players from Pakistan — Nasir Ahmad, Abdul Asim Khan, Shazad Amir, Imran Muhammad, Hussain Muhammad Salman and Ateeq Muhammad, all from Pakistan.

TODAY — Premier Division: Tenaga v Terengganu (National Stadium Hockey II, 6pm), Nur Insafi v Sapura (USM, 6pm), KLHC v UniKL (National Hockey Stadium II, 8pm).

Division One: SSTMI v Thunderbolts (Taman Daya, 6pm), Ipoh CC v UiTM (Azlan Shah, 6pm), Sunday 2030 v UniTen (National Hockey Stadium I, 6pm). **By Jugjet Singh**