The gold, plus two nights in Manila

Singapore rewarded with incentive stay after finalising 21st consecutive title

By Chan Tse Chueen
In Laguna (Philippines)

STANDING on top of the medal rostrum is great, but topping the rostrum and staying two nights in Manila is even better.

By winning their final match against Vietnam 15-4 yesterday, the Singapore water polo team won themselves an incentive promised by Singapore's chef de mission Oon Jin Teik: Leave sleepy Los Banos, Laguna, where the competition is held, for the bright lights of Manila one day earlier.

The gold, Singapore's 21st and hard fought, was already in the bag after they beat Thailand 12-3 on Thursday in the round-robin league.

With one more match to go, Singapore were playing just for pride. And, as icing on the cake, Oon threw the team a challenge.

"Play this game like a real final. Win by double digits and you can stay in Manila for two nights," he told the team, which were scheduled to attend tomorrow's opening ceremony in the Philippines capital before flying home on Monday.

The boys duly obliged, outclassing Vietnam in front of a nearly full grandstand at the Trace Aquatic Center here.

Singapore completely shut out Vietnam in the first half of the game, racing ahead to 10-0 before conceding two goals — to loud cheers from spectators rooting for the underdogs.

Singapore and Vietnam scored two goals each in the last quarter, bringing the final score to 15-4.

When asked about the treat after the match, assistant coach Lau Kom Weng said, laughing: "We've been here for nine days; it's been a while. But we had a job to do and we did the job first."

It was a tough job, as SEA Games rookie Ronald Lam found out.

The Singapore Management University student was still a little shell-shocked by Tuesday's scorcher of a match against the Philippines, whom Singapore just edged out 7-6.

"The title is not something to be taken for granted. I really understand it after I came here," said the 22-year-old.

So you believe it when the centre forward said the incentive, while a bonus, was not what was on his mind during the match.

He pushed the scoreboard to 14-4 in the dying minutes, thus ensuring the team got the extra night in Manila.

He added: "We have to play to show our style and class, to show that we are the best in South-east Asia. We've not lost a game and we have a record to keep."

Upholding Singapore's winning tradition in the SEA Games water polo competition — they have not lost in 20 editions — is pressuring. And it may get even tougher.

At the SEA Games in Vietnam two years ago, Philippine also came close to beating Singapore, losing by the same 6-7 scoreline.

If the two Philippines showed the perennial champions just how tough the competition could get, they also showed their opponents that Singapore could be vulnerable.

Speaking of the 2003 game, Philippine coach Reynaldo Galang said: "It woke us up, hey, it is possible to beat Singapore. It was also an eye-opener to the other countries. No one is infallible."

The Philippines finished silver medallists after beating Malaysia 8-2 yesterday, with the losers taking the bronze.

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