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## School sports: How Marsiling Secondary became sepak takraw kings



Marsiling Secondary School's sepak takraw team in training on Aug 29, 2022. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN



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SINGAPORE - Going into last year's B Division competition last year, Marsiling Secondary's sepak takraw coach Jamaluddin Suaip was managing his expectations.

The co-curricular activity was set up only in 2020 and this was their first foray into the National School Games. Most of the players were previously from the football squad and had not played the sport before.

To Jamaluddin's surprise, the team finished fourth of 19 schools. This year, after another 12 months of training and recruiting Secondary 1 players through direct school admission (DSA), they topped that by winning both the B and C Division national titles, beating powerhouses like defending champions Jurongville Secondary and Changkat Changi Secondary.

Jamaluddin, 53, has been a sepak takraw coach since 1998 and was proud of his charges. He said: "In my first year in charge, there was a big challenge because the B Division boys transferred from football. But they had the basic skills needed and we built their skills from there.

"Their participation last year was important for them to get experience. I just told them not to think about winning but just play their best and gain exposure.

"They ended up getting fourth and from that, they learnt resilience and got valuable experience that they used for this year."

For captain and former footballer Nithan Nabil Rao, who competed in the B Division last year and this year, the 2021 competition helped him gain confidence in his skills as he had previously been self-conscious as a new player.

To improve themselves, he and a few teammates met for extra practice sessions last year. He added that it was easy to adapt to sepak takraw with his football background but had to work on learning to keep the ball in the air.

Still, the Secondary 4 student, 16, felt some nerves before this year's final in April. He said: "The only thing that helped me keep my composure was that coach spoke to us before the match and said if we won first place, we could eat together as a group (to celebrate).

"I'm really proud that our hard work, discipline and determination paid off."

Ralph Roche, head of department for physical education and CCA at Marsiling, said the school replaced its football CCA with sepak takraw because of dwindling cohort numbers and student interest, with a few players coming from the nearby Qihua Primary, also coached by Jamaluddin.

One of those was Secondary 1 student Herzy Khaliff who entered Marsiling via DSA. He had wanted to play football in primary school but as Qihua did not offer the sport, he chose sepak takraw as it also involved kicking a ball.

"I thought very long if I wanted to (switch to) football after that but (Roche) gave a talk in Qihua, asking us to join Marsiling and my mother thought it was a good opportunity," he said.

"I have no regrets and I'm glad I came here because most of my friends are here. We also wanted to come here because if we go to a school with another coach, it's going to be hard to get used to a new coach."

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Earlier this month, Jamaluddin took the C and B Division teams out for their respective celebratory meals.

Their focus is now back to retaining their titles next year.

Jamaluddin said: "It's not easy to retain (both titles) so it'll be a big challenge for me and the kids to work harder because we'll be the favourites and have to be prepared to face other schools who are more motivated to beat us.

"Last time, there was no pressure so now I'll have to train them mentally to prepare for next year."

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