

A LAND WHERE BADMINTON IS KING

Earlier this year I travelled to Malaysia to watch the finals of the Thomas and Uber Cup which were played in Kuala Lumpur. It was a fitting place for the most prestigious team event on the calendar. The Badminton crazy country of Malaysia is a massive shock for those of us that have grown up with the sport in Australia as a minor one with no publicity or stature at all. My several trips to Malaysia over the years have lead me to believe that only three things really matter in Malaysia – food, shopping and Badminton! The best way to probably describe Badminton in this country is to compare it to the A.F.L. here in Australia. It's more than a sport, it's more like a religion.

On the first day of competition at the Bukit Jalil Stadium, I was standing in a long line outside waiting to purchase tickets with former New Zealand national player Rebecca Bellingham. There were TV crews and news paper reporters taking shots of the crowded line in the heat when we were noticed and were bailed up for newspaper shots and interviews for ESPN. We joked to ourselves that we were receiving more media attention long after we retired as players here in Malaysia than we ever did as players in our own countries!

Each day of the finals week, the first four pages of sport in the main daily paper, The Star, was all about Badminton. Every taxi driver I spoke to had an opinion on the Malaysian players and coaches. The people who I sat with in the crowd were extremely well knowledged on the game and it's players. For the first time in my life I could quite happily boast that I am a professional Badminton Coach, something which would not result in the same respect if said here in Australia.

For a week I caught trains to the stadium which were crowded with fans going to support their nation. I mingled outside the stadium amongst thousands of others waiting to get in or to by supporter merchandise set up around the stadium. Inside on the bigger nights I sat with a capacity 14,000 other spectators and watched in amazement whilst they all cheered non stop like a soccer crowd.

The top Malaysian players are treated like gods. They earn ridiculous amounts of money through endorsements and business ventures. They all drive expensive luxury cars and are treated like VIP's wherever they go. I remember several years ago when I was out at a club in Kuala Lumpur with former World number two and Malaysian singles star Ong Ewe Hock. A girl started to chat with me and asked what I was doing in KL when I told her I was there for Badminton with Ong Ewe Hock who was sitting next to me. She immediately picked up her phone and started calling family members excitedly telling them she was at a club drinking with Ong Ewe Hock.

During the Thomas and Uber Cup, anytime Malaysian and world number one Lee Chong Wei would walk into the stadium, even just to walk over to the racket stringers, the crowd would erupt with cheering. One afternoon Malaysian number three Mhd. Hafiz Hashim was having a bight to eat with his wife and young daughter at a table outside of a food stand. This quickly turned into a big crowd surrounding the table with people wanting autographs and photos taken. After being very obliging for 5 mins, Hafiz eventually had to get up and leave with his family to return to the safety of courtside.

However with such die hard support and attention comes a lot of pressure to perform. At times the weight of the world appeared to be on the shoulders of some of the Malaysian players. The press had been extremely critical of some leading up to the start of the event and if a player faltered at all they were sure to be lashed by the papers the next day. The sound of 14,000 fans supporting you is amazing but to hear them all turn on you and boo you off the court if you underperform is actually

frightening. The Malaysian people are ruthless and have been starved of a lot of major success in the sport over the last 15 years. The pressure is amazing.

To be in a country where there are signs up all over the city advertising the event, having it shown live on TV throughout the whole of Asia, have four pages in the newspapers on the sport and to sit in a bar and have a drink at the end of a long day and watch a replay of the day's matches on a big TV screen sounds great to a Badmintonphile like me!

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