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By T. AVINESHWARAN

PETALING JAYA: Malaysian hockey defender Syed Mohd Syafiq Syed Cholan has been granted with a heavy responsibility. But he is welcoming it with pride, experience, and a steady sense of duty.

The 30-year-old penalty corner specialist will be one of the key players for the Speedy Tigers in the upcoming FIH Nations Cup in Kuala Lumpur, which begins on June 15.

Syafiq, who scored four goals, all from penalty corners, in five matches during Malaysia's recent tour of Australia, was away for two years from 2022 to 2024 to focus on his studies.

He returned to international action last year playing in the Sultan Azlan Shah Cup, Nations Cup in Gniezmo, Poland, and the Asian Champions Trophy.

Syafiq has said that he is doing his part to guide the youngsters in the team to be on par with the seniors to ensure they do well in the international stage.

"They are a new team. After failing to qualify for the Olympics, many of the old guards were dropped," said Syafiq, who works



Specialist: Syafiq (left) scored four goals, all from penalty corners, in five matches during Malaysia's recent tour of Australia.

for Tenaga Nasional.

"We now have a lot of young players. I'm pleased to be back and I know I have a role to play, to guide these boys to our level."

Syafiq is no stranger to stepping up. With Faizal Saari retiring, a leadership vacuum emerged, and the weight of expectation has since fallen on his shoulders.

"I expected this. I'm the senior guy now. I trained hard, and the

coach and team put a lot of trust in me. I cannot give excuses. I must deliver, not just for Malaysia, but for my teammates."

With nine days to go before the Nations Cup starts, Syafiq is in full focus mode, strengthening his drag-flicking technique under the watchful eye of legendary Pakistani flicker Sohail Abbas, who is one of the coaches in the national team.

"Sohail has helped a lot. He has his own methods and we're seeing results. Personally, I've improved, and I'm glad there are now other young flickers behind me. That's a positive sign. It gives us depth in set-pieces. If I'm not available, we still have quality options."

Syafiq refuses to let the narrative of inexperience define this Malaysian side. He wants results and accountability.

"We can't keep using the new team excuse when we lose. That cannot happen. The standard must be maintained, and senior players like me must step up. We don't want to be the host nation and finish seventh or eighth."

"We want to be on the podium. We believe we belong there. We have a good mix in the team. Once you're selected, you must give your best."

In the Nations Cup, Malaysia are placed in Group B with New Zealand, Japan and Pakistan.

Their first game will be against Pakistan at the National Hockey Stadium in Bukit Jalil on June 15.

As Malaysia gets set to host the tournament on home soil, Syafiq's focus is clear – No excuses. Just execution.