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By S. SAKTESH

PETALING JAYA: National junior hockey team coach Nor Saiful Zaini believes his boys still face a stiff challenge in the Sultan of Johor Cup starting this Saturday despite the competition featuring only five teams.

Malaysia have Pakistan, Japan, China and Canada to contend with in the annual Under-21 tournament taking place at the Taman Daya Hockey Stadium.

The hosts finished fifth out of six teams in last year's edition and Nor Saiful said the competition this year will not be any easier, especially as his players still lack maturity.

"The number of teams competing doesn't matter. These teams are strong," said Nor Saiful.

"While they may not be unbeatable, we can't promise that we will reach the final.

"We have good players, but most of the team is made up of players aged 18 or 19. They still lack the experience and maturity of making crucial decisions in heated moments.

"I must admit I'm a little concerned because I feel the young players may not be ready yet."

Nor Saiful added that he would most likely be without the services of several key players who are either in the senior squad or have club commitments in the ongoing Malaysian Hockey League (MHL).

Defender Andywalfian Jeffrynus, midfielder Adam Ashraf Johari and Che Nur Aqilrullah Che Khairulzi Anwar are currently with the Speedy Tigers as they prepare for the Asian Champions Trophy starting on Oct 27 in India.

Youngster T. Naaveennash is competing in the MHL with Tenaga Nasional, leaving Nor Saiful to make do with the players available.