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Thumbs up for our hockey players, now get the sport going

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FOR almost a year now, I've stopped biting my nails. But on two occasions in the Hockey World Cup, I had a hard time keeping my fingers away from my teeth.

The Malaysian hockey team had me – and the fans – on tenterhooks before scraping through with 3-2 victories, first over minnows Chile and then over fancied New Zealand.

It was that kind of cliff-hanger – you were at the edge of the seat and, up to the last minute, there was no telling what the outcome will be.

Still, those two group stage victories will be remembered for a long time.

The win over unheralded Chile had a sobering effect on the nation, with some saying it was Malaysia's worst performance in the tournament although it was their first win in the World Cup in 21 years.

That must have got to the players. A day before the game against New Zealand, there was a new fire in them to prove that they were here to

compete, not just make up the numbers.

Every shot from Faizal Saari felt like a bullet. Every interception and movement from Marhan Jalli inspired confidence. And Shello Silverius' energetic runs lifted the whole squad.

Those vibes were brought to the game, and they deservedly won 3-2, although the fourth quarter wasn't for the faint-hearted.

Now, 21 years after that 4-2 win over Cuba in Kuala Lumpur in 2002, we have two wins on the trot in a World Cup.

It is progress and the Speedy Tigers make us believe that we can do as well as or better than in 2002 when we finished eighth.

The camaraderie in the Bhubaneswar squad has been good. Every single player has a mission in mind and wears the badge with pride in every game.

In manager Datuk Mirnawan Nawawi, they have a man who is always concerned for their welfare and has a

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Sports Box

smile on his face.

As a former world-class player, his ideas get you going and Malaysian sports needs more administrators like him.

Then there is coach A. Arulselvaraj, who is always fixated on tactics and principles. When needed to man manage, he is like a father or big brother to his players.

The fact that they treat their Indian Liaison Officer like a team member says

a lot about this squad. They symbolise the values of Malaysia, unity and kindness.

The thing is, they could use some kindness from others back home.

Hockey is getting funding but with the talent we have now, we need more corporate companies to help them thrive.

Why only act when we win something? Why can't we invest in a growing team?

We have been consistently in the World Cups but the gap between Malaysia and the European nations is still huge.

And that's why I envy India. The development of the game here is immense. Every Indian company wants a piece of that brand.

Ranked fifth in the world, they are playing in the Pro League, they have superb infrastructure, and the players have a pathway in terms of their playing career and after it.

Our players and coaches can benefit from the help of corporations.

Tenaga Nasional and Maybank have backed the game, and in the past, there were major companies like Sapura, Bank Simpanan Nasional (BSN) and Universiti Kuala Lumpur (UnikL).

But we need more, not only in terms of financial backing but also exposure.

When there is widespread interest in the sport, the Malaysian Hockey Confederation (MHC) can grow and not just rely on the National Sports Council (NSC).

We need to play against top nations, have top facilities, and have a year-round league.

This bunch of players who have made it to the crossover stage of the World Cup and are looking strong for the quarter-finals bring hope.

We should not be twiddling our thumbs. We need to get to work on growing the game while we have this team that has us biting our nails.