

Old Is Gold: Private Hospitals Finally Triumph



Intense footwork and nimble plays

Text by Dr Chng Nai Wee

While COVID-19 refuses to die down and is still blazing around town, doctors have returned to their busy routines. Like clockwork, the 47th SMA-Goldplus Universal Inter-Hospital Soccer Tournament was back on at The Cage at Turf City in a night tournament of battling grit and wit, where five teams pitted themselves against each other on a regular 11-a-side field. Each game was played over 22 minutes with rolling substitutions permitted from an unlimited roster.

For the Saturday tournament on 13 May 2023, the various hospital clusters consolidated their individual hospital teams into formidable single outfits. Changi, Sengkang and Singapore General Hospitals banded together to form the SingHealth team. The National University Hospital System (NUHS) cluster included its eponym, Alexandra Hospital and Ng Teng Fong General Hospital, while the Tan Tock Seng (TTS) team absorbed Khoo Teck Puat Hospital and Woodlands Health.

While this consolidation of teams reflects the prestige of the tournament and the seriousness by which the players aspire to win it, it also suggests by the dwindling number of young blood that the younger generation of doctors may have been distracted by a wayward couch potato diet of Netflix

and online gaming, or enticed by the allure of gym body-building instead of vigorous cardiovascular exercises such as soccer.

The two Private Practice teams, Sigma and Zeta, were a melting pot of doctors coming from all walks of life. The Parkway Pantai group – comprising Gleneagles, Mount Elizabeth Orchard and Novena, and Parkway East Hospitals – supplied most of Private Practice's players, who also practise at Farrer Park, Raffles and Mount Alvernia Hospitals, and Thomson Medical Centre. GPs, dentists and pharmacists complete the motley crew.

Kicking off the tournament

Employing the round-robin format, each team plays the other once. The two Private Practice teams played each other first, ostensibly to prevent collusion, and Sigma triumphed 3-0 over Zeta with a brace of goals from aesthetics physician Dr Desmond Chin Xu Yang and a blindside run by ENT specialist Dr Lau Hung Tuan, assisted by a through ball from ophthalmologist Dr Chng Nai Wee. GP Dr Larry Kang made a stunning double save for Zeta from a close-range shot and rebound to keep the score-line respectable.

Red-shirts SingHealth and dazzling white NUHS neutralised each other

in a goalless draw. Private Practice Zeta team fell 0-2 to the black-garbed TTS cluster in a game where family physician Dr Lawrence Wong Teck Boon pulled his hamstring, and Dr Vikram Ravichandran and Dr Lim Zi Xuan both scored. Private Practice Sigma drew first blood in a well-struck goal against a youthful NUHS but at the dying embers of the game, a stunning thunderbolt from Dr Joel Chong Yi outside the box rocketed into the goal past the defensive stumps of the crestfallen yellow Sigma, forcing a score parity. Commandeered by Dr Jesse Christian Chang Jia Hao, family medicine trainee at Ng Teng Fong General Hospital, the NUHS team proved indomitable.

Perennial favourite SingHealth with its battalion of dynamic midfielders, Drs Amirul, Bernard Koh and Jon Han, was expected to perform like merciless lawnmowers scything through green grass, but perhaps having lost their cutting edge from disuse, they laboured to break the opposition down and were unable to exert their authority and control the games. Perhaps it was the luck of the draw that found SingHealth facing NUHS and Private Practice Sigma in successive games, but their confidence was evidently a mirage of complacency, and they soon had to hunker down and weather wave after wave of assaults from a rampaging



Sportsmanship and collegiality among the players

Sigma. Eventually, SingHealth's defence buckled, and a careless foul enabled hepatobiliary surgeon Dr Winston Woon Wei Liang to launch a penalty shot. However, Meredith Chin Choon Siang, houseman at Changi General Hospital, was equal to the challenge and parried the ball away. Revitalised, SingHealth counterattacked furiously. In the final seconds of the match, gastroenterologist Dr Malcolm Tan Teck Kiang fractured his clavicle when he clattered with Pasture Holdings pharmaceuticals owner Lloyd Soong, goalkeeper of Sigma. Both had leapt for the lofted free-kick ball at the goalmouth.

Meanwhile, NUHS buried TTS with a brace of goals. Following a fevered tussle, NUHS prevailed against Private Practice Zeta by a solitary goal when forward Dr Joel Lim outpaced cardiologist Dr Leow Khang Leng to snatch the ball and launched a shot beyond the despairing dive of goalkeeper aesthetics physician Dr Felix Li into the net. Perched at the top of the scoreboard, NUHS was ascendant at eight points from two wins and two draws.

TTS battered a shell-shocked SingHealth, driving the latter out of contention with a score of 2-0. Nevertheless, SingHealth overcame a determined Private Practice Zeta with a tense 2-1 consolation win after Private Practice dentist Dr Lee Kwang Yueh equalised the score and ENT consultant Dr Edward Zhang rifled in a last-minute goal.

A finale for the ages

When it came to the final game, the question boiling in the expectant minds of the crowd was whether Private Practice Sigma would be able to beat TTS by a large enough margin to pip NUHS to the trophy, based on a goal difference.

Private Practice Sigma secured a perfect dream start with an early goal and a speculative long shot by aesthetics physician Dr Tan Ying Zhou that flew past the flailing hands of the surprised goalkeeper. The energetic TTS cluster fought back to claim a goal. Nevertheless, the defence of Private Practice Sigma manned by pharmacist Bhanu Sharma and cardiologist Dr William Kristanto stayed firm. As the game flowed, the comparatively



A close contest for the high ball

geriatric warriors in Private Practice Sigma smelled blood and the glory of victory that awaited them, and they were galvanised in their push for successive quick-fire goals.

In a breakaway conceived by the interlinked play of the triad of Drs Desmond Chin, Lau Hung Tuan, and Chng Nai Wee, the lattermost blasted the ball into the goal at the six-yard box for a 4-1 win and secured the Private Practice team the tournament trophy for the first time in living memory, erasing the painful memories of almost half a century of near-misses and second places. ♦



Complete focus on the target



Pharmacist Bhanu Sharma celebrates the Private Practice victory

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