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Hup Wei not in Nauraj's way but he's not jumping for joy

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Spicing up their lives: Nauraj Singh at the sponsorship ceremony by Ajinomoto (M) Berhad with heptathlete Norliyana Kamaruddin and women's discus thrower Queenie Ting (right). — Pic courtesy of Ajinomoto (M) Berhad.

PETALING JAYA: Nauraj Singh Randhawa will miss great rival and close friend Lee Hup Wei as he strives to continue Malaysia's dominance in the men's high jump at the Hanoi SEA Games from May 12-23.

Hup Wei denied Nauraj a fourth consecutive gold in the 2019 Manila Games on countback (both cleared 2.21m) but the former won't be around to defend his gold.

Hup Wei announced his retirement last month after the Malaysian Athletics Federation (MAF) dropped him from the SEA Games and selected Mohd Eizlan Dahalan instead.

Nauraj, 30, pipped the 35-year-old Hup Wei to the gold medal in the 2017 Kuala Lumpur SEA Games on countback after both cleared 2.24m. Nauraj had also won in 2013 and 2015.

Before Nauraj emerged as the top high jumper in the Games, Hup Wei had won the gold in 2007, 2009 and 2011.

Malaysia's only blemish in the event since 1977 came in the 2005 Games in Manila where Nguyen Dui Bang of Vietnam won gold. Malaysia had an impressive collection of 21 golds out of 22 editions since the 1977 Games.

"It's never about me. It's about representing the country. My aim is to deliver the gold for Malaysia and maintain our dominance in the high jump," said Nauraj in Bukit Jalil yesterday.

"Of course I will miss Hup Wei as we have been training and competing in events together for years. We have been close friends on and off the field and despite our rivalry in events.

"We have travelled the world together for training and competitions and I'm going to miss all that.

"He will not be around and it is my responsibility to make sure that Malaysia keep up the long winning tradition in this event."

Nauraj is the favourite in Hanoi following his season best jump of 2.27m in a meet in Nehvzdy, the Czech Republic, in January but the Johor-born athlete is not looking at records.

"I'm not looking at my improving my personal best as it is about winning gold in Hanoi," added Nauraj during a sponsorship ceremony by Ajinomoto (M) Berhad for the high jumper, heptathlete Norliyana Kamaruddin and women's discus thrower Queenie Ting yesterday.

Nauraj, who holds the national record of 2.30m, returned to Kuala Lumpur from his training base in Leipzig, Germany, with his coach Jan May two weeks ago to acclimatise and continue preparations for the Hanoi Games.