

Ruhaizad's rise to S-League and national fame has been phenomenal

Shooting star

S-League savvy



By LIM HAN MING

A YEAR ago, if someone had told Ruhaizad Ismail (right) that he would be playing in the S-League and become a full-fledged Lion, the 21-year-old would have laughed it off.

Then, he was a little-known

midfielder playing for Elias Park in the Islandwide League.

His football career took off when Balestier Khalsa assistant coach Darren Stewart plucked him from the wilderness and threw him into the S-League cauldron.

Ruhaizad survived the baptism of fire and has not looked back since.

Today, he is the talk of the town with some sterling performances in the S-League.

Two weeks ago, the 1.79m midfielder was rewarded with his first call-up to the national team for the friendly match against Oman.

Singapore lost 1-3, but he was one of few players who impressed national coach Raddy Avramovic.

Ruhaizad told *Streets*: "I'm still wondering if all these are for real.

"When my coach Jang Jung told me to report to the national team at Amara Hotel recently, I thought he was pulling my leg. I had to ask him again whether it was true."

Yes, everything is looking rosy for the former ITE Ang Mo Kio student.

Not so long ago, he was struggling with work – he was a retail assistant at a sports shop in Bukit Batok – and football.

Most days, he had to skip lunch and dinner so that he could knock off from work two hours earlier to go for training.

His hard work has not gone to waste. The midfielder is now one of the first names to be pencilled into Jang Jung's starting 11.

Said the head coach of Balestier: "Ruhaizad has a bright future. He has good physique and good speed.

"But this is only his first season in the S-League. We have to watch his progress carefully."

Ruhaizad is not letting success go to his head.

He said: "I'm very grateful to Darren Stewart and the club for giving me the chance to play in the S-League.

"He always tells me, 'Don't let me down.' So far, I've given 100 per cent effort."

Tonight, the Tigers of Balestier will count on his high work rate to end a three-game winless streak when they host the Young Lions at Toa Payoh Stadium.

Ruhaizad will then join the Under-23 team for the second round of the pre-Olympic qualifiers in Saudi Arabia.

He said: "A game is a game. I'll play my heart out for Balestier before I join the Young Lions."

A Balestier win is uppermost on Ruhaizad's mind, but he will also be out to impress under-23 coach P N Sivaji.

A good performance will almost certainly secure a starting berth against the Saudis.

He said: "I was a bit disappointed when I was dropped from the senior team for the trip to Kuwait.

"But I'm still young and I'm sure I'll get my chance in the future. I just hope to do well for the Under-23 team in Saudi Arabia."

