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Don't expect any shock wins in quarter-finals

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KUALA LUMPUR: No surprises are expected when the knockout stage of the MHC-Milo-NSC Junior Hockey League gets under way today. The top three Division teams SSTMI-Thunderbolt, Petaling Jaya City Council (MBPJ) and Universiti Kuala Lumpur (UniKL) are expected to waltz through their two-leg quarter-final ties. If there is one match that could go either way then its the tie between MSS Kelantan and MBI-Anderson. There is little to separate these two teams. MSS Kelantan are a robust side with several players showing good individual skills, but their tendency to lose their composure when the chips are down is something they need to sort out. They will, however, sorely feel the absence of playmaker Mohamed Ashraf Mohd Noor who is under a one-match suspension. MBI-Anderson have shown that they have the quality. Their only problem is their lack of consistency. On their day, they are a team to reckon with as double champions Thunderbolt found out to their detriment. MBI-Anderson are the only team to take full points off Thunderbolt for the past two seasons. The first leg will be in Ipoh with the second match in Kuala Terengganu. The choice of Kuala Terengganu as home venue is a surprise since Kelantan had used Alor Setar as their home venue for all their league matches. The UniKL-Malacca High School tie is also expected to be a close affair although the KL team enjoy the edge with their better all-round play. We beat Malacca High School in the league, but its a different ball game in the last eight, said UniKL team manager Mohamed Faiz Isa. They are not an easy side to beat. Our only advantage is playing the first match at home. We look forward to an interesting knockout stage as we want to salvage the season by trying to win at least one title. We have been preparing well since the end of the league. Hopefully, it is enough to take us through to the next round, he added. UniKL, however, will be without two keys players Mohamed Azrul Hasbullah and Meor Muhammad Azuan Hasan due to a one-match suspension. We will try to secure a healthy lead going into the second leg on Sunday. We must avoid a repeat of our profligacy in the league matches, said Faiz. MBPJ are another team with experienced players suspended for the clash against SSTMI-Juniors. But they have a talented bunch of youngsters and only missed out on the league title on goal difference to Thunderbolt. Mohamad Khairol Shafik Kasim has to serve a three-match suspension while Mohamed Asraf Zulzali will have to sit out both legs of the quarter-finals. Both players picked up red cards in their last league match. MBPJ assistant team manager Zainal Abidin Ismail believes the absence of the two players will not affect the team. Our task is to win and move on to the final. Our main concern is travelling for the away match. Playing at Taman Daya in Johor Baru is very troublesome and tiring. Our players need to recover quickly after the first leg, said Zainal. Division One winners Thunderbolt face Division Two champions KL Sports School (KLSS) in the clash of the champions. Thunderbolt, however, are too formidable and should not have any problems making the last four. KLSS, however, will take heart that MBI-Anderson did beat Thunderbolt and are banking on an upset win. Said KLSS team manager Zainal Ariffin: The odds are heavily stacked against us. We will give it our best shot as we have nothing to lose. The first leg will be vital as we cannot let them score a big win. So, getting a good result in the first leg is crucial.