SINGAPORE – Four years after re-in.stating football in the school’s curricul.um, St Joseph’s Institution (SJI) claimed their first football title in 30 years when they beat Queensway Secondary School 1-0 in the final of the National Schools’ South Zone B Division Football Championship at SAFRA Tampines yesterday. “SJI supporters cheering when the team scored the only goal of the match in extra time. PHOTO: ROBIN CHOO

But SJI were left on edge when Mari Martinez was sent off for two unprovoking infringements, including a handball that gave Queensway the opportunity to take the match into extra time.

However, Queensway, the better side for most of the match, failed to convert the free kick as referee Victor Teo blew the final whistle.

SJI’s victory capped four years of hard work by former LionsXII assistant coach and national defender Kadir Yahaya, who was hired in 2012 to help SJI build a decent football side after they dropped the sport in 2000.

They were quick to announce their return, reaching the South Zone C Division Final the following year, but lost 2-1 to Serangoon Garden Secondary School. That defeat only strengthened the team’s resolve to work harder.

“Microphone signs S$70,000 sponsorship deal with Under Armour distributor

John McGrath, SDBA’s vice-president, was delighted to see corporate support ahead of the SEA Games. “We are struggling to get sponsors to see value in partnering a relatively less well-known sport in Singapore, one that has achieved little competitive success. It is not easy, but we need to do that to advance our sport,” he told TODAY at the sponsorship-signing ceremony at the Singapore Sports Institute yesterday. “If we achieve our target of a podium finish in all the events (at the SEA Games), it will be unprecedented. Sponsors will start seeing more value in us, our athletes will gain more confidence and win medals regularly and it will be a turning point.”

Added team manager Derick Tan: “Our dragon boat teams have been making strides over the years, but with more funds, we can definitely take steps in performing better at the regional level. We are looking at more sponsors and those that can provide cash sponsorships can help us go to the World Championships in Canada this year.”

At the 1998 SEA Games, the men’s 500m 10-crew team struck gold for Singapore. The 20-year medal duck was finally broken at the 2013 event in Myanmar, when the women’s team won a bronze in the five-crew, 500m event.

This time, the SDBA has signed on a “secret weapon” in new head coach Nyaing Nyaing Htoo, who started work with the national team nine months ago. A former national assistant coach with Myanmar, Nyaing Nyaing Htoo guided the team in topping the medal tally at the 2013 SEA Games in Naypyidaw with 14 gold medals.

In a first for the national team, the paddlers have also taken eight-month no-pay leave or a semester off school for the SEA Games, training full time at Kallang Basin and Marina Bay while staying at Dunman High School’s hostel. Costs for training, accommodation, food, equipment and athletes’ allowances are estimated at up to S$220,000.

Said Tan: “For this year’s SEA Games, the feedback from the coach-es from the time trials we hold every week is that the timings are pretty good. There is still a gap between us and the teams in the region, but we are fast improving.”