PENANG Panthers nearly received a double bonus from their club side PBAPP FC, who staged a brave front before going down against Felda United FC in their Premier League clash at the City Stadium.

That came in the wake of Panthers bouncing back from defeat to register a come-from-behind 3-1 win over Sabah at the Likas Stadium and the bonus would have come if PBAPP FC had won their match against Felda united.

Felda United FC marched out 2-1 winners at the City Stadium that same night.

Felda United's Liberian striker Edward Junior Wilson scored his team's first goal in the 18th minute from the penalty spot and Australian Ndumba Makeche doubled the score in the 57th.

PBAPP FC just refused to throw in the towel and staged a late onslaught. Determined to salvage at least a point from the Felda United side as they had done in their 1-1 draw in their season opener on Jan 24, PBAPP fought on gallantly against their star-studded opponents, who had players such as national ace striker Indra Putra Mahayuddin on their side during the match on Monday.

Thus, the moment PBAPP pint-sized striker Mohamed Faiz Nasir successfully pulled one back with an unstoppable left footer in the 72nd minute, Felda United were made to walk the tight rope.

The Waterboys just threw everything they had at the Felda United goal, forcing goalkeeper Mohamed Farizal Harun to work doubly hard to ward off PBAPP's late charge, keeping out another Mohamed Faiz power shot in the 84th minute as well as blocking a crushing header from Mohamed Farhan Mustapha deep into injury time.

If PBAPP had been successful in forcing a draw, it would have served the Panthers well as it would have meant Felda United dropping precious points in their promotion battle and that would have been an advantage to the Panthers.

Despite the outcome, PBAPP coach Yunus Alif was satisfied with his players' performance.

"It has given me renewed confidence in achieving the desired results when we square up against those who are almost on par with us in the matches to come," said Yunus, who was only in the second round action given the blessings to rope in foreign imports.

Panthers, in their match with Sabah at the Likas Stadium, once again lived up to their 'comeback' prowess with their impressive 3-1.

Left trailing at the end of the first half when Sabah struck in the 37th minute through import Andre Reinaldo Esposito, who bolted home from a free kick, the Panthers mauled their way back to reckoning.

They doubled their efforts and the moment they began dictating terms after taking a firm grip of the challenge in the second half, it spelt trouble for the East Malaysian side.

Just seven minutes into the second half, Muhd Zamri Chin connected a Lee Gil Hoon cross to level the game in the 52nd minute.

They then charged with inspiration and the Sabah defence was often put on red alert. In the 65th minute, Angolan striker Buengo Andre Titi firmly placed Panthers in the lead with a deadly header.

In another heads-I-win situation, Gil Hoon struck, nodding home a cross from Mat Saiful Muhammad to take Panthers to 3-1 just five minutes later.

Team manager Azizudin Mohamed Shariff was all praise for his boys, whom he felt gave a performance worthy of champions.

"We may be still be licking our wounds inflicted by Johor just days before but when my Panthers displayed their readiness to put behind that disappointment and make up for that loss of points, everything just fell into place," said Azizudin in a telephone interview from Kota Kinabalu.

With Felda United on the sidelines wanting the Panthers to falter so that they could take over the second spot on the League table, the Panthers have all the more reason to want to troop out as winners.

The lavish spending Felda United, with a RM40mil budget this season, are currently placed third, just a point adrift, following Penang's unfortunate 3-2 defeat to Johor DT II in a reverse fixture at the turn of the season at the Municipal Council Stadium in Pasir Gudang recently.

With Felda United getting six straight points, three from their game in hand against Kedah and another three from a hard-earned 3-2 win over DRB Hicom, the Panthers' seven-point advantage was reduced to a mere point in just over a week.

With the Kuala Lumpur club side trooping out as winners again over the Waterboys at the City Stadium and the Panthers coming
away unscathed in the assignment at the Land Below the Wind on the same night, it has enabled Penang to maintain their second spot ahead of the top of the table showdown against the 'Cops' today.

"The fiery performances displayed by my Panthers against Sabah had indeed served as a good morale booster and with it coming ahead of our top of the table showdown against the high riding Police, it is indeed most timely," said Azizudin.

"With my players in the right frame of mind and with the home fans expected to turn up in numbers just to lend vocal support, I will be lying if I am to say we are not aiming at bursting their unbeaten bubble."

It has given me renewed confidence in achieving the desired results when we square up against those who are almost on par with us in the matches to come.

– YUNUS ALIF
PBAPP midfielder Khalis Ibrahim (second right) sliding in with this tackle in a bid to stop Felda United’s Ahmad Syamim Yahya (No. 11) from creating further damage.

Felda United defenders Adid Aizuddin Abdul Latif (No. 5) and Shahrunizam Mustapa (No. 8) watching anxiously as their goalkeeper Mohamed Farizal Harun (No. 30) is challenged by PBAPP’s Ugandan striker Ochaya Silvus Luis at the City Stadium.