



Rama (left) & Peter

THE THINKER

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THERE will be many words written about R. Ramakrishnan, who left us in the last days of February, aged 73, felled by a heart that had once seemed to beat in perfect time with the game itself.

They will speak of the tackles, the interceptions, the man-marking assignments carried out with monk-like devotion and assassin's precision.

They will say he was soft-spoken off the field — unfailingly polite, almost shy — and made of steel on it.

All of that will be true.

But it will not quite be enough.

Because Rama — as we all called him — was not merely a defender. He was an argument. An argument that hockey, like life, could be solved with thought before force. That anticipation was a higher virtue than aggression. That the mind, properly trained, could arrive half a second before danger did — and half a second in elite sport is the difference between applause and regret.

At the 1975 World Cup, staged across Kuala Lumpur, and Ipoh, he was handed a task bordering on the unreasonable: shadow India's great centre-half Ajitpal Singh and ensure, as he once put it with characteristic understatement, that "he was not supposed to see the ball at all."

"I had two intense matches in the man-marking role before the semi-final," Rama told me last year, as we walked again through Merdeka Stadium.

"So I wasn't intimidated playing against Ajitpal."

Not intimidated. That was his way. Where others might have spoken of magnitude, Rama saw geometry. Passing lanes. Angles. Patterns to be interrupted.

Coach, R. Yogeswaran, perhaps grasped it more clearly than most. He spoke of Rama's sharp hockey brain — the way he occupied space intelligently, distributed the ball with economy and accuracy, and adhered to discipline as if it were a private creed.

Above all, Yogeswaran admired his instinct for threat.

Rama could sense trouble forming and extinguish it before it properly caught light.

India's triumvirate — Ajitpal at centre-half, Ashok Kumar to the right, BP Govinda to the left — had turned dismantling defences into a kind of art form, spraying more than a hundred passes in a single game.

So, the Malaysian coaches did something radical. They placed their faith in stillness. In discipline. In Rama.

They sent him out to disrupt India's engine room. To harry Ajitpal out of the game, cut off time and space.

It almost worked. Malaysia lost that semi-final 3-2 in extra time, a game balanced on fine margins and exhausted legs.

And yet, when we stood again on that turf last year, nigh on a half century after that day, Rama's memory did not dwell on missed chances or refereeing calls. It turned instead to the bench.

"Injuries cost us," he said quietly. "We didn't have a full working bench. In extra time, there was no full complement of reserves to draw on."

He wasn't offering excuse. He was explaining a condition.

Extra time, he reminded us, is less about inspiration than attrition. Legs harden. Lungs burn.

Decisions, once crisp, begin to blur at the edges.

"It was tough," he said. "Some players were operating out of position. Others were running on empty."

There was no melodrama in the telling. Just fact. But in that fact lay the truth of that night: Malaysia were not undone by lack of courage or craft, but by depletion. By the cruel arithmetic of tournament hockey.

When the game stretched beyond regulation, so too did bodies already strained to their limit.

Rama, of course, did not mention himself. He never did. But he had played every match of that campaign. He had man-marked giants — Pakistan's Akhtar Rasool, the Netherlands' Ties Kruize — and reduced luminous talents to ordinary mortals. In those final minutes of extra time, when the bench offered little relief and the lungs little mercy, he endured as he always had — positionally correct, mentally alert, refusing panic.

Some defeats are loud. That one was quiet. A slow draining of possibility. He came from Teluk Intan, the son of a driver, picking up a stick as a lower secondary student at St Anthony's.

Soon, he was training alongside his hometown idol A. Francis, a renowned international fullback.

By 1970, he was in the Perak side; by 1972, he was at the Munich Olympics; by 1976, in Montreal; by 1978, captaining Malaysia at the Buenos Aires World Cup and the Bangkok Asian Games.

The résumé reads like a timeline of Malaysian hockey's golden decade. But what it does not capture is the economy of his movement — the way he seemed to glide rather than run, to pass without flourish, to choose the sensible option and make it look like inspiration.

With Wong Choon Hin, S. Balasingam (both have passed away) and K. Balasingam, he formed a midfield of such balance, skill and intelligence that it remains, for many of us, without equivalent in Malaysian hockey.

And yet he never carried himself like a man aware of legacy.

When asked if his career had been wild, dramatic, exhilarating, he smiled and chose a different word: "Blessed. Blessed with wonderful teammates."

That was Rama, too. The deflection of glory. My own memories of him are humbler but no less cherished. He wrote a column for StarSports titled *Stick With Me*, which, in the charming bureaucracy of media tournaments, qualified him as a bona fide player for the newspaper's hockey team.

In those spirited rivalries, the New Straits Times promptly recruited Poon Fook Loke in response. I forget the final score of our grudge match. I do remember that both Fook Loke and Rama scored. Of course they did.

Even in friendly combat, he understood space better than the rest of us.

Rama always appealed to me as the thinking player's player. Not flamboyant. Not theatrical. Just correct, again and again, in moments when correctness required nerve.

There are footballers who are poets, cricketers who are generals. Rama was something rarer: a cartographer. He mapped danger before it arrived. He redrew the routes of men who believed they owned the field.

He proved that calm could be combative, that silence could be strategic.

Many will remember the tackles. I will remember the pause just before them — the brief stillness in which he had already solved the problem.

In a sport of movement, he mastered anticipation. In a life of modesty, he achieved permanence.

And for those of us lucky enough to have played beside him, or simply watched him think the game into submission, that is legend enough.