



Top right Franco with Brian (2nd top right). Michael Yan (bottom centre)

A slim, flamboyant player danced on the pitch from the bully-off. After out-smarting the whole opposition, he slotted the goal with ease.

That neat looking player was Franco D'Cruz and that match was at the 1972 Razak Cup Hockey tournament in Kuala Lumpur.

The opponents were none other than Singapore, who had no counter dance moves to stop Franco's Negeri Sembilan team.

Franco's dazzling goal was carved at the start of the second half. Negeri Sembilan went on to mesmerise Singapore 4-0.

You could notice the visual tension of the Singaporeans. His rhythm, his flipping wrist movements was in unison with his delicate dribbles as he silenced the Singaporeans.

A gifted player with exceptional skills, he was adored and looked upon by most Negeri youngsters.

Franco and I went to the same primary school, St Paul's Institution. We were in the same standard but not in the same class. We both had a very close friend, the late Michael Yan, an exceptional midfield exponent.

Surprisingly both went on to international fame while I left behind my hockey stick to wield a pen and typewriter.

Franco, who had featured in the 1972 Munich Olympics and the 1975 World Cup, was never one to brag about his hockey exploits.

Playing as a right inside forward, he would make the creative moves but hardly found himself in the media highlights.

Defender Brian Sta Maria, also from Seremban, an Olympic and World Cup teammate, wrote in *SPORTS FLAME* "Franco was not a show-off. His wrists, stick and body swerves, moved with elegant rhythm."

He also recalled how during training with the Negeri team, coach Lawrence Van Huizen would make him face Franco in a "defender against a forward" sessions.

Brian, 76, always found Franco a difficult player to stop.

So one day, he plucked up enough courage to ask Van Huizen, why he always paired him against Franco.

The coach's reply: "If you can stop Franco, you will be able to stop anyone."

He always kept a low profile and was very popular amongst young hockey players in Seremban.

A group of nine and ten year-olds would hang out near the sideline of the hockey pitch watching Franco.

They were enthralled by his deceptive Indian style dribbling technique, switching from a pouncing position to a high intensity sprint.

Five of them went on to represent Malaysia while the others turned out for Negeri Sembilan.

I decided to seek out Stephen Van Huizen and Colin Sta Maria, two of those youngsters, to find out what all that adulation of Franco was about.

Both these players together with the late Kevin Nunis, Derek Fedelis and Raymond Tio (all internationals) were in total awe with their idol's status as a player.

They would observe Franco at close range as he trained or played a match on the NS padang in Seremban.

They watched how he duped opponents, catching them off guard, his vision of the game, telepethic distribution of the ball on the run.

"He had silky dribbling skills. And the ball was glued to his stick. All these still stand out in my mind," described Stephen.

Colin's impression was "He was a neat and effective inside forward and was such an influence on me."

The two of them still remember how all the young boys would wait for Franco to finish a match or practice.

They would immediately surround him with probing questions.

He would take them aside, demonstrate and explain the finer points of each move or tackle.

They found it a delight observing Franco at close range. Eventually it became a very regular affair. They became his understudies.

Colin, 67, chipped in: He always had time for all of us. He never walked away from us."

Stephen, 68, also saw that despite robust tackles, Franco was always composed. "Those hard knocks never disrupted his game".

Surprisingly, both Stephen and Colin not only emulated Franco, they went on to achieve international recognition playing for Malaysia. Both donned national colours playing in the 1982 Mumbai World Cup and the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

On retiring Colin handled the National Junior teams from 1995 to 1998.

As for Stephen he was charged with the Senior National teams on four occasions (from 1994 to 2018).

Franco moved to Australia after the 1973 World Cup and became a big hit in the League there. He was recalled for the 1975 World Cup in Kuala Lumpur. He gave up his job to help Malaysia finish fourth.

He retired from international hockey to concentrate on his studies and a job in Melbourne before moving to London.

These days Franco, who resides in London, makes his annual pilgrimage to Malaysia and his home town of Seremban.

Those ten year-olds are themselves fathers today and Franco still has time for them. These days they reminisce on those dreams and memories of waiting for Franco on the sideline of NS Padang.

What did Franco, 79, think about all this: "I just helped them master the basics."



Colin, Brian, Franco & Stephen (from left)