

MEMORIES CAME ALIVE

BY PETER MARTINEZ

Merdeka Stadium, May 17, 2025

THE ghosts never really left. They hang, like humid air, over Merdeka Stadium — that old concrete amphitheatre where a nation was born, where legends sprinted across the stage, and where heartbreak was served with the rhythm of a drumbeat and the swell of a crowd.

Here, where the very name means “freedom”, Tunku Abdul Rahman stood with fire in his lungs and destiny in his fist. August 31, 1957: Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka! — not a cheer, but a casting off. A spell. A liberation from colonial bone and sinew. A nation exhaled.

But history doesn't stay put. It laces itself through turf and timber, through stadium



Rama Krishnan, Ashok & Franco (from Left)



Ashok at the goalmouth where he scored.

gates and the battered seats of memory.

And on this day May 17, 2025, three men walked again onto that hallowed field — not to play, but to remember. To stitch together memory and myth, chalk dust and scar tissue.

Ashok Kumar, scorer of India's controversial winner in the 1975 Hockey World Cup final against Pakistan.

R. Ramakrishnan, Malaysia's tireless half-back. Franco D'Cruz, the elegant inside right with eyes like radar. Once gladiators in a coliseum of their own making. Now, storytellers, AThat semifinal, Malaysia vs India, still stings Franco and Rama like a bruise that never quite healed. Malaysia, up 2-1 with four minutes to go. The final so close ... and yet so far. Then came the equaliser. Then came the extra time. Then came the collapse.

"I remember coach Ho Koh Chye screaming from the touchline: 'Pegang bola!'" Franco said, smiling a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "We tried. God knows we tried."



Franco, Ashok & Rama Krishnan at the grandstand of Merdeka Stadium

India's comeback was surgical. Aslam Sher Khan — a substitute with a destiny complex — glanced right, switched left, and drove the ball like a guided missile past Khairuddin Zainal. Perhaps it was instinct. Perhaps it was divine intervention.

"Maybe it was Allah," Aslam said simply. "Khairuddin moved left. I hit right. The ball whispered past him. Brian Sta Maria couldn't block. The ball rocked the boards. We were alive."

Harcharan Singh iced it in extra time. Malaysia were done. Out of gas. Out of time. Out of heroes.

"We were patched together," said Rama, reflecting not bitterly, but honestly. "After Poland, we lost [left wing] R. Pathmarajah. Halfback Phang Poh Meng was unavailable for the semi. Our captain Sri Shan played through a thumb injury.

"Brian Sta Maria was sent in to replace an injured A. Francis. We had no more cards to play."

But it wasn't just a game. It never is, not here. The fans — a sea of flags, faces, and faith — carried them with roars that could part clouds. That support, Rama said, was like an extra man. But even an extra man cannot outrun the clock.

And then, there was Ashok Kumar. The name alone carries the weight of generations. His father was Dhyani Chand — the Mozart of hockey, the man who made sticks sing and defenders vanish.

Chand is so revered, there are 26 statues of him sprinkled in towns and cities around the sub-continent to honour the triple Olympics gold medallist who turned stick and ball dribbling into high art.

Ashok's own moment of immortality came not in the semi, but in the final against Pakistan. A ball, a flick, a hesitation, a goal that re-wrote the arc of Indian hockey.

"Harcharan hit a long corner to Ajitpal Singh," he recalled, tracing his steps like a pilgrim. "I took it inside the circle. Dodged two. Slid it right to V.J. Phillips. He whipped it back."

"I gave it a little 'jhatka' — a wrist flick — and the ball hit the inside of the boards, popped out like a coin from a carrom board. For two, maybe three seconds, silence. Then the whistle. Goal."

Pakistan protested, saying the ball had hit a post — it did not cross the goal line History didn't care. Malaysian umpire G. Vijayanathan had no doubts, and photographic analysis supported the decision.

"This is my favourite stadium," Ashok said, adding that he might not have been in the Indian World Cup side if he had taken up a professional contract with an Italian club in 1974.

But the advice from people he respected was to stay a little while longer, so he tore up the contract. As fate would have it, it fell on him to score the winner against Pakistan. He would go on to add an Olympics gold medal to his collection — World Cup bronze [1971] and silver [1973] and Asian Games silvers [1970, 1974, 1978].

And it might never have become his favourite stadium: Malaysia was handed hosting duties just one year before the bully-off after a hockey "crisis" in India, the original host forced the IHF to seek another venue.

Malaysia took on the colossal task at the drop of a hat and created what is still considered the best World Cup to be held from go to whoa.

And so, Rama, Franco and Ashok gathered again — half a century later, in the stadium where it all happened. Where the turf once soaked in sweat and roars now lies quiet, a canvas for ghosts.

Michael Jackson moonwalked here. Mariah Carey hit the quivering high notes. The Scorpions crooned. Ali boxed Joe Bugner here in a bout more promotional than pugilistic. And still, for so many, the real miracle of Merdeka wasn't pop or pomp, but those two matches in March 1975.

The stadium is older now. We all are. But time bends in places like this. You step onto the grass, and it becomes 1975 again. Your legs remember. Your lungs forget they're 70. The scoreboard doesn't judge. It just waits.

Merdeka Stadium. Where freedom once echoed. Where hearts once broke. And where, if you listen closely, you can still hear the faint beat of a game that meant everything.



Ashok, Dr Ronnie Yeo, R.Selvarani & M.Sri Shanmuganathan at the 9th Sports Flame event in Kuala Lumpur.