

STEVEN BONG'S PUNCH

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BONG PASSED AWAY ON 9TH AUGUST 2026

TWO young men, fully armed to the hilt, faced each other on the court in 1964.

They were like “gladiators” forced to battle each other to claim the title.

You could see the nervousness on both their faces. One couldn’t afford to lose. The other knew a win was an extremely difficult task.

Their surroundings were in an uproar. They could feel the heat. The 800 roaring spectators packed the three tiers right up to the rafters. They were breathing down their necks, hot and cold.

I was one of those among that screaming crowd urging on for the battle to start.

The two “gladiators” were Punch Gunalan, the favourite and Steven Bong, the underdog.

Selangor Badminton Hall, in Kampung Attap, Kuala Lumpur was where the battle was being played.

Gunalan was leading the charge for King George V School, Seremban, while Bong was leading the fight for St John’s Institution, Kuala Lumpur.

Already a member of Malaysia’s Thomas Cup training squad, Gunalan, was not only an accomplished shuttler, he was a heavyweight facing an unknown.

Bong on the other hand had no outstanding credentials other than being a schoolboy badminton player.

The only thing that was common among the twoboth were in Upper Six and headboys of their respective schools. Bong was also the Drum Major of St John’s marching band.

When the two went into action, the roar was thundering and rattled the seats in the hall.

“We were no match for KGV. They really had a very strong team,” said James Selvaraj, who at 14 years old played the second single for St John’s.

It was a dramatic exchange of a shuttle, rackets and strokes between two schoolboy shuttlers.

Gunalan was in his element in the opening game. His powerful smashes showed that St John’s was doomed.

The vociferous St. John’s supporters were silenced. We lost our voice when Gunalan won the “opener”.

But something came over Bong. He did not feel defeated nor did he cow down to Gunalan’s supremacy.

The Johannian took everything that Gunalan threw at him in the second game. He retrieved the smashes, controlled those delicate flicks at the net. Bong actually bounced back into contention.

“I remember so vividly. He played like crazy. All of us never expected that sudden change in our captain,” Selvaraj recalled with pride.

We, the Johannian supporters, regained our voice and kept urging Bong to “smash” and go for the kill.

Suddenly Gunalan was taken overwhelmed by his rival’s comeback. This time Gunalan was on the defensive. He was playing at Bong’s pace and

found the going tough.

Bong, with renewed confidence rattled the experienced Gunalan, and grabbed the opening point for St John’s.

He would express years later to me, “It was the most punishing and hardest fought game in my short badminton career.”

Despite Selvaraj losing the second single, there was no letting St John’s from being walked over. They grabbed the third single and a doubles match to capture the King’s Cup with a 3-2 win.

Twenty years after that epic final, Gunalan and I would still talk about it. I would chide him by saying: “Punch remember you lost to Steven and gave the King’s Cup to us”.

We would laugh about it and Gunalan revealed: “Steven was superb against me.”

“St John’s supporters also made me nervous but Steven really played very well.”

Gunalan, went on to become an engineer, continued his badminton prowess to become a top player in the world and later a renowned badminton administrator. As for Bong, he pursued a different path. He channelled his talents by shaping the

Malaysian advertising industry.

When Gunalan passed away in 2012, this was what Bong penned: “My relationship with Punch was short, sweet and extremely memorable. He was so graceful, kind and motivating when he congratulated me after the match.”.....Steven Bong

That match may have lasted only a few games, but it gave both men a lasting place in Malaysian schoolboy badminton folklore.

And for those among us who witnessed it, Steven Bong’s “punch” was one we would never forget.

