

REMEMBERING RICHARD VELU

A GENTLEMAN

(from left) R. Velu, Peter Martinez, Terence Netto and M. Bala



I first came to know R Retinavelu when he joined the New Straits Times in the second half of 1977, going there from Star Publications, where he had started his journalistic career as a sports reporter in 1975.

I was impressed by his dignity and self-possession. He radiated a gentlemanly aura that I, who was then a sports reporter with the NST's sister paper, Malay Mail, discovered was not common to journalists. That was why I liked him even if I was not too friendly with him, nor he to me.

I was at the stage of my career where I was trying to develop a personal code of conduct that did not require that I like a person in order to respect them. Velu's dignified carriage on its own compelled respect.

I could tell from his reports in the NST that he liked reporting on athletics. His writing on the discipline drew me to read him with interest and marked him in my eyes as someone to watch.

By the early 1980s, the NST had become a dead-end where promotions were stagnant and disgruntled reporters had to

seek their fortunes elsewhere. Velu joined a new biweekly called Sports Mirror, but that publication did not get very far. In my opinion, it was not because it was not good, but because Malaysians generally have a low affinity for reading. On such barren ground, new publications, however worthy, were hard put to succeed.

That reality drove Velu and another sports scribe, George Das, who had also hit the trail from Star Publications to NST and later, Sports Mirror, to look to fledgling fields like sports public relations and marketing for sustenance.

Soon, a promising seam of work that brought income and respect opened up for the two trailblazers. It was encouraging for me to see them do their thing and prosper. No small pleasure was derived from the fact that the NST and Star were not the be-all and end-all of things for those who have started as journalists in the English dailies.

Velu forged ahead in the 1980s when he gained the rights to market the biennial SEA Games. By the early 2000s, he and George hit the big time by acquiring the right

to market the telecasts in Malaysia for that quadrennial summit of sport, FIFA's World Cup.

Through all his dizzying rise to prosperity, Velu remained down-to-earth and matter-of-fact, his innate dignity and self-possession not losing its lustre. I admired him for that.

To give back to the sports field that gave them their start in life, Velu teamed up with George to set up Sports Flame in the early 2010s.

This endeavour saw many nationally renowned sports performers and their formators bask briefly in the remembered glory of their past at biennial and triennial get-togethers that served to show them they were not forgotten by the sports writing fraternity.

This must have been immensely gratifying to them because their times and achievements had faded in the rush towards the professionalisation of sport in Malaysia. Their past had been an era where pride counted for more than payment.

Sports Flames' attempts to remember and honour past greats were salutary acts that evoked times past and the sentiments that had bathed them in a special light.

I will especially remember Velu and George for responding with alacrity to a plea of mine for aid in a writing project that both of them knew was close to my heart. Velu's approval of the aid and the appropriateness of the project told me he was a better friend of mine than I adequately knew.

His final words to George, "Let's do it for a friend," will stay in my memory for a long time. Truly, I am privileged to have known him.

BY TERENCE NETTO