

GASP OF AWE

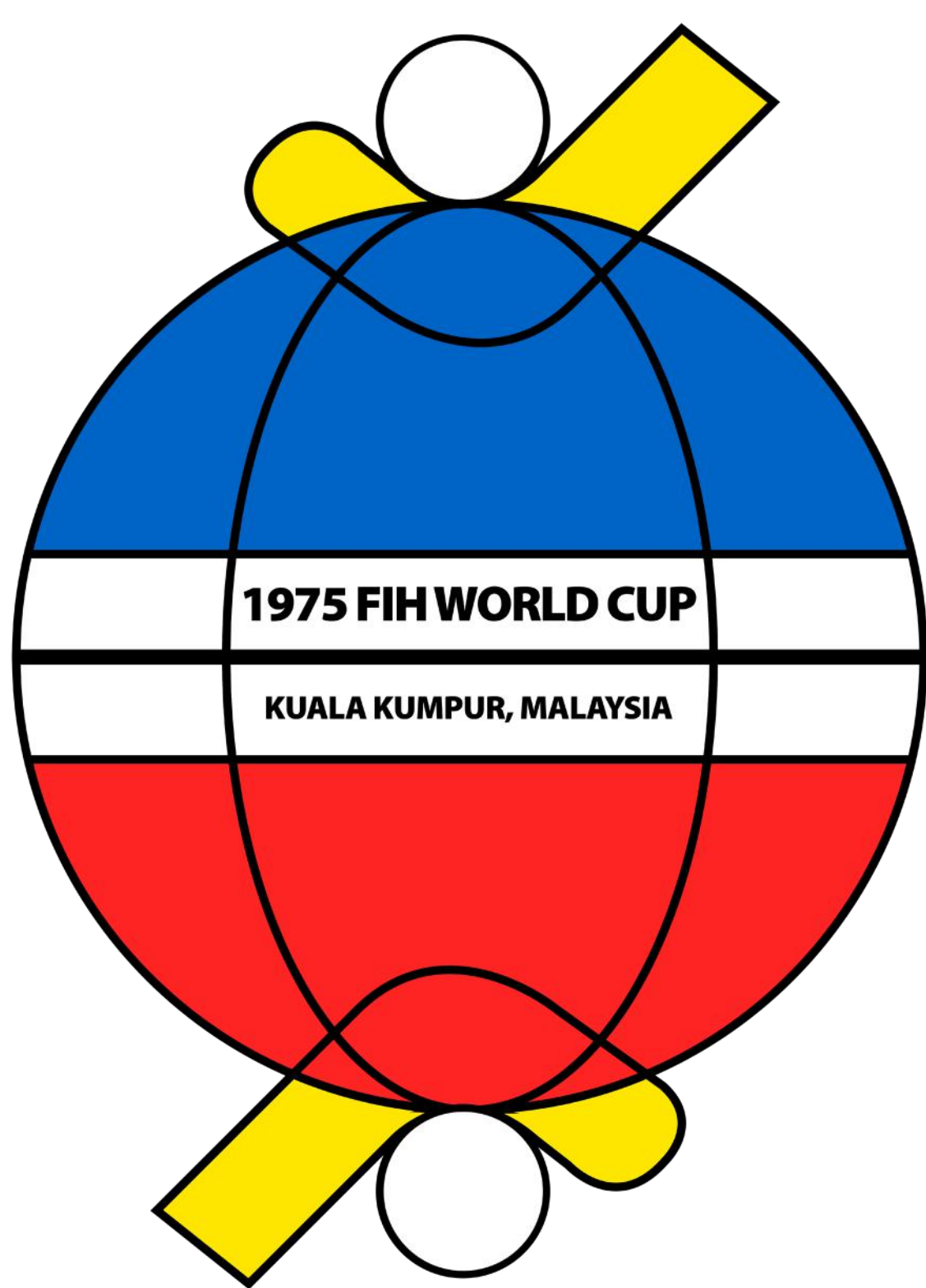
BY **TERENCE NETTO**

IT is hard to believe a half-century has passed since the Third World Cup of hockey was staged by Malaysia in March 1975. The passage of time has not dimmed the lustre of the tournament.

The rousing crowds that turned up to support the home team whenever they played and for matches that pitted the top five teams in the world – Pakistan, Germany, India, Australia and Holland – gave the tournament the razzmatazz such events must always possess to draw people into its magnetic field.

Hockey, especially field hockey – not the astroturf variety – was a sport that women also liked to play and watch. This made the Third World Cup, which was played entirely on cow grass, an eminently watchable tournament.

The sizeable presence of women among the teeming crowds of spectators who turned up to watch boosted its appeal to the general public.



As the two-week tournament progressed to its finale, the crowds simply waxed until it became evident that hockey enthusiasts from the states located close to the locus of the play, which was the Klang Valley, were not averse to making daily road trips to watch.

This was helped by the fact that play was scheduled in the mornings and in the early evenings, which made the idea of daily return road trips to watch them an undaunting prospect to the hockey cognoscenti.

The sight of the expectant spectatorship was evocative of all that was good about sport in Malaysia, from the time of the 1950s when the country was represented in the Melbourne Olympics, to the 1975 World Cup when Malaysia emerged fourth in the world.

The preparations for the 1975 World Cup began at the East Asia regional tournament in Kuala Lumpur in May 1973.

Word was rife during that event that Malaysia was slated to host the Third World Cup in 1975. The inaugural World Cup was held in Spain in 1971, and Netherlands got the hosting job in 1973.

At the May 1973 East Asia regional, Malaysia was headed to top Australia in the standings, but what looked like a deliberate injury inflicted on centre-forward M Mahendran just when he was rampant in the opposition's half put paid to Malaysian hopes of

dislodging Australia as East Asia champions.

A review of the Malaysian performance suggested that the country's team had the quality to be among the top eight teams in the world, but a brittleness about their mental strength was their Achilles' heel.

The Malaysian team to the Munich Olympics in September - October 1972 were edged out of a place in the semifinals because of injuries to their better players more than from a shortage of requisite merit.

The talent was there, but a dismaying feature of Malaysia's players giving tantalising glimpses of their potential before lapsing into recurrent and familiar vulnerability had dogged them.

When, by the end of 1973, it was confirmed that Malaysia would host the World Cup, expectations for a good outing for the host country mounted steadily.

These expectations were fired by a good showing by a crop of our better players when Pakistan International Airlines team toured the country in November 1974, a little over three months before the World Cup.

The PIA team featured several players who were certain to be fixtures in their World Cup squad. The Malaysian selections gave the PIA a run for their money. That raised hopes of a Malaysian performance at the fast-approaching World Cup that would do Malaysian hockey proud.

When the tournament began on March 1, a brimming Merdeka Stadium expected Malaysia to beat New Zealand in the curtain-raiser. The match ended with a 1-1 result, but it did not douse the sky-high expectations of the Malaysians.

These expectations were roused by the quality of the play in the matches that involved the Big Five teams – Pakistan, Germany, Australia, Netherlands and India. The matches unveiled scintillating talent in the Pakistan left-winger Samiullah Inayatullah and featured the grace and control of India's captain Ajitpal Singh.

Pakistan made the early running and was headed to win the tournament. Still, the heroics of the Malaysians in the later stages of the tournament boosted hopes that the Malaysian team would pull off the improbable by qualifying for the final.

The Malaysians' eleventh-hour heroics when skipper N Sri Shanmuganathan scored from a penalty corner in a decisive group match against the Netherlands, qualifying them for a place in the semifinals, was probably the happiest result in the history of Malaysian sport. The cathartic flush of emotion it evoked among spectators and officials signified Malaysian hockey's finest hour.

The Malaysian team fell short in the semifinal against India, losing 1-2, but the defeat was not as important as the Malaysian achievement of being in the semifinals. It had the word 'honourable' written all over it.

Though this scribe was a cadet reporter in the New Straits Times at the time of the 1975 World Cup, I felt that watching the tournament was a more pleasurable self-assignment than reporting on the event. A good month before the tournament's start, I bought a season ticket at RM150/- and waited with bated breath for the show to start.

I requested my desk chief to put me on the night shift for two weeks so that I could watch the matches I was interested in during the day. It turned out to be a fortnight of immense enjoyment of the play, fortifying my preconception that field hockey, at its highest exhibition, is an aesthetic pleasure.

The India vs Pakistan final, played before a stadium packed to the gills, cemented that conception. A pass by India's inside-left, B P Govinda, square across the field while he was in full stride, went straight to the stick of his inside-right teammate, Ashok Kumar, who was also in full stride, was the indelibly graceful move of the entire tournament.

It had all the panache of what the incomparable Brazilian footballers of their vintage years had done. The gasp of awe uttered from an appreciative crowd lifted the 1975 World Cup to a height such summits should always reach.