

LEGENDS OF THE TURF

BY PETER MARTINEZ

AS I WATCHED THE MALAYSIAN TEAM LINE UP TO TAKE ON NEW ZEALAND FOR THE OPENING MATCH OF THE 1975 WORLD CUP FROM THE COMFORT OF MY LIVING ROOM ON FEDERAL HILL, I COULD NOT HELP BUT RECALL THE PERIOD IN 1972-73 WHEN PLAYING HOCKEY WAS MY NUMBER ONE PURSUIT.

But let's rewind Father Time. As a first former in St John's Institution in 1967, competitive sport, any sport, soon overtook the academic side of things for me. It was a discovery as momentous as, say, realising that girls existed and were mildly interesting

And given SJI's renown as a nursery for outstanding athletes [1975 World Cuppers Khairuddin Zainal and halfback S Balasingam among those], I had the chance to try my hand at anything involving a ball, a racquet, or a stick.

There were the academic exams, too, of course, where, like a starving golfer trying to make the weekend cut, I somehow scrambled to get up and down and make par. Somehow.

I found I had the talent to run around chasing a football or, in rugby, downing an opponent with a crunching tackle.

And then there was hitting a ball with a stick, learning about a 'D' and hand stops for penalty corners and being unable to turn or raise the stick above one's shoulder to strike the ball. All quite exotic but interesting to a newcomer.

Thus began a sports journey, representing SJI in hockey and rugby and progressively into the Selangor schools' under-15s, 16s, 18s and 20s systems for both codes. There was no plan – I just ran with the flow of the sports seasons.

And so it was that after sitting the MCE at the close of 1971, I asked around to see if I could play hockey in the Selangor league.

I got a call one day from the hockey team manager of the Eurasian Recreation Club, saying I had been recommended and asking if I would like to come for a try-out.

That person was Vicki Marsh, a highly regarded personality in Selangor hockey.

I had played all my hockey up until then in the half line, but given the chance to switch to centre-forward, I found I had a penchant for scoring goals and made that spot mine.

And that brings us to the point of boring you, dear reader, with my sports background.

Vicki Marsh's extensive contacts and her reputation meant she could pick up the phone and organise warm-up matches with some elite clubs despite ERC being a Division Three act featuring a mix of 30-40-somethings, a few schoolboys still in their hockey diapers and ex-Olympian fullback in one M Shanmuganathan, affectionately known as 'Big Shan'.

Weeks later, ERC was at the Selangor Club padang to play the PKNS Division Two side. But PKNS sent some of their Division One players for a hit out – fullback A Francis, centrehalf Wong Choon Hin, and forwards M Mahendran and R Patmarajah – all four were to star in the 1975 World Cup campaign.

It was a shock and awe moment for the young ones in the ERC side and a humbling moment for the rest of the side, bar 'Big Shan' who was still a great player in his late 40s and had the respect of all he played against.

Even though playing at half pace, the silky stickwork of Mahendran and Patmarajah, Choon Hin's elegant and pin-point passing and Francis' stylish footwork are still fresh in my mind. ERC lost 0-2, but that was a victory in defeat, if there ever was one.

Another team ERC played a warm-up match against was the Rubber Research Institute side, which fielded S Balasingam, R Ramakrishnan and Phang Poh Meng – who were on their way to becoming 1975 World Cup heroes.

All that taught me a lot of hard work was needed to



achieve the skill and physical fitness to represent the country, let alone at the state level.

When the Div 3 season opened, ERC played UMNO, and my name appeared in a Utusan Malaysia report for scoring a hat-trick in a 4-0 win.

I ended the season with 30 ballpoint marks on my battered Chakravati stick for the goals I scored.

Early in 1973, Mrs Marsh rang and said she was recommending me for the Selangor Under-23 trials at the Police training college in Gurney Road.

There were about 40 players at the trials, and the only ones I knew were clubmate K.P. Chandran [La Salle PJ] and Avtar Singh Gill [Setapak High School, an adversary from the Under-20 schools competition].

I scored a hat-trick in the opening 20-minute session and was named into Selangor's training squad.

We trained at the Teachers Training College at Pantai under coach Mohd Sidek, and then it was announced that Choon Hin, in his last dance at the Under-23 level, would captain the side bound for Penang.

Two weeks later, the squad was augmented with a handful of players who switched allegiance to Selangor from Perak for job reasons.

Thus, I found myself playing and training beside K Balasingam and Poon Fook Loke – both already in the sights of national selectors and for good reason. They had the potential and skills to go with their ambition – that was obvious.

Fook Loke was building his reputation of being "as slippery as an eel in the D' [a description an impressed English hockey scribe handed out when he later went to England to study and play there].

I withdrew from the squad because I had to devote more time to my HSC studies. But I also knew I did not yet have the skills and mental hardness to perform at that level.

Back to 1975. As we got caught up in a three-way fight with New Zealand and Spain to make the semifinals, I went to TPCA Stadium to watch Malaysia's match against Pakistan.

That match was where K Balasingam showed how far he had come in two years.

He ran himself into the ground to cut the time and space of the fearsome Pakistan attack. Malaysia had lost 1-2, and he and his teammates looked like they had run through hell over a bed of nails afterwards.

Years later [as a reporter for the Star], I asked the team's coach, Ho Koh Chye, what he told the team before that match.

"When a side has the likes of Islahuddin, Shahnaz Sheikh, Manzoor Jr, Manzurul Hassan, Samiullah and Akhtar Rasul? Not too much.

"Mainly, just ask them to play with pride and heart and enjoy themselves."

So, the stirring events of 1975 hold a special place in my memories.

As a sports reporter [I started in 1976, first in general news/sports with The Star, a sports reporter with NST and then Sports Mirror and AllSports], I got to see a side of many of that 1975 team that was not for public consumption – particularly the off-the-books conversations with Koh Chye who also took the team to the 1978 World Cup in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Ko Chye, in his time in the 1960s, was rated the best goalkeeper in the world.

As a kid, my dad took me to watch Malaysia play India at Merdeka Stadium, and I was astonished to see Koh Chye still standing after he had stopped a certain goal with his forehead.

When I asked, he replied: "My head got in the way of the ball."

I cannot close such an article without saying I treasure the presence of Sri Shan, Patmarajah and Fook Loke, who were at my mum's funeral service in 2023.

