

# WINNING THE HEART OF A NATION

BY FRANCO D'CRUZ

Looking back in time, my memories of the World Cup began long before the start of the tournament.

It was in July/August 1974, when I was living in Sydney, Australia, that I recall returning home from work and finding a telegram from the Malaysian Hockey Federation (MHF) inviting me to represent Malaysia at the 1975 Hockey World Cup in Kuala Lumpur.

I was somewhat surprised, elated, honoured and filled with excitement to be called to play for the country. I consulted the family, and with their blessing, I accepted. How could I turn down an offer to represent the country of my birth, playing the game I absolutely adore?

I clearly recall that month in March 1975, 50 years ago, when hockey fever gripped the country when the Malaysian team climbed to its highest pinnacle to finish fourth in the World Cup.

It's incredible how 50 Years have gone by since the World Cup, but these very fond memories still stay embedded deep in my mind and close to my heart.



Holland's downfall – Khairuddin Zainal, A Francis, Shanmuganathan, and Franco D'Cruz.

Bolhuis added: "Khairuddin was unbeatable, while Francis and Shanmuganathan did not make any mistakes. Franco D'Cruz was a thorn in our defence. He was coming up with the ball all the time, and it was very difficult to stop him."

We were later told that we would be taking on the might of India in the semifinals. Surprisingly, we were unfazed. The players believed in themselves and were committed to giving their very best.

It was a big thrill, as well as nerve-wracking, playing in front of a packed Merdeka Stadium of approximately 60,000 people, willing the team on.

Although we led twice, 1-0 at halftime and 2-1 with approximately five minutes left, India equalised. In extratime, India scored the winner.

It was difficult to accept defeat at that time, and players and officials were so upset that tears flowed.

That evening, after dinner, we were in the lift with some of the Indian players, heading to our respective floors. One of them said: "India should have lost this match; you Malaysians were very unlucky." Govinda revealed some of them visited a temple to offer prayers for the victory.

Yes, we were all very disappointed with the outcome. But what remains are not only memories of the matches but, more significantly, the contribution the players of this team made to the nation.

We brought such joy, pride and unity to the country. The hockey fever wrapped the nation. Whenever Malaysia played, the whole nation came to a standstill. Offices



I find that as time has lapsed, I recall and ponder on all the events during the World Cup, looking back and saying, "What an achievement by the team".

For me, it's not only the significance of the success and the final position but also the drama and excitement created en route to it. Being involved in it all made it extra special for me.

I know that everyone who witnessed the performance of the national side will remember the two finest games played – the game against defending champions Holland and the semifinal against India. These matches clearly stand out in the team's performance.

Against Holland, I distinctly remember that we



were awarded a penalty corner with, I believe, seconds remaining in the match. I went to take the push out. I placed the ball, stooped over it, and said a prayer before relaying the ball to Wong Choon Hin. It was a perfect stop by Choon Hin, and Sri Shan slotted it home to give a 2-1 lead over Holland.

I recall running back to the halfway line with my stick raised with absolute elation, only to be mobbed by hundreds of spectators who invaded the pitch, dancing and jumping for joy. It had to take the Federal Reserve Unit to clear the pitch for the match to resume.

With this victory, we were in the semifinals.

Reflecting on the match and the statements by the Dutch captain, Andre Bolhuis, spoke volumes about how the Malaysians performed.

He stated: "The Malaysians played like a team possessed, and you can't beat a team like that".

He went on to name a few players instrumental in

stopped working, lessons stopped in schools, everyone was glued to the TV, and the roads were not clogged with traffic.

We did not have a podium finish. The popular saying is, "Winning is not everything, it is the only thing". But in this instance, I beg to differ – The 16 Malaysians did win. We won the hearts of the nation.

I wish to thank my teammates, the coaches – (late) Ho Koh Chye, (late) Lawrence van Huizen and R. Yogeswaran. Even some of the officials like the tireless G. Vijaynathan and the hordes of supporters and spectators who came to cheer us on – these memories will be treasured forever.

Most importantly, I would like to thank these guys – Lazarus Rokk, George Das, Fauzi Omar, the late R. Velu, the creators of the Sports Flame – and Chris Raj for organising and honouring the players on the 50th anniversary of the 1975 World Cup.

Velu is no longer with us, but I'm sure he will be looking down on all of us and, in his quiet way, will be saying, WELL DONE!