

BASKING IN THE GOLDEN GLOW

BY PETER MARTINEZ

THERE are some evenings that hang in the air a little longer than others — warm, weighty, golden. Not because of the chandeliers or the hotel linen, but because of who's in the room, and what they once meant to a nation. This was one such evening.

The ninth edition of Sports Flame on 18th May 2025 — that quietly glowing ember of Malaysian memory — lit up the Concorde Hotel with the kind of gentle, unforced reverence that rarely survives in modern sport.

It was a reunion, yes.

But more than that, it was a reminder that Malaysian sport once moved not just scoreboards, but souls.

And if the night belonged to anyone, it belonged to the men of 1975.

You can still hear the echoes if you listen closely enough.

The thwack of hooked stick on ball. The roar of thousands of throats at the Kilat ground. And somewhere in that timeless din, Sri Shanmuganathan scoring a winner against the Dutch that sent a nation giddy



— and gave Malaysian hockey, for one unforgettable evening, the power to bring a nation to its feet and a stadium to the pitch.

Fifty years later, the men who did that most Malaysian of things — punching above their weight with grace and grit — were gathered again, still upright, still luminous with that unmistakable pride.

There was Sri Shanmuganathan, Khairuddin Zainal, Wong Choon Hin, Poon Fook Loke, N Palanisamy, R Ramakrishnan, Franco de Cruz, K. Balasingam, Brian Sta Maria, Len Oliveiro and R. Pathmarajah — representing the gallant ensemble.

The absence of some — Mohd Azraai Zain, M. Mahendran, A. Francis, Phang Poh Meng — was noted gently, not mourned but understood. Some could not be found, some could not be there, and some now live only in the stories passed across the dinner table with a chuckle and a glass raised.

Ho Koh Chye, their revered coach, is now the stuff of sepia and folklore, having left us in 2008. So too S. Balasingam, the tireless halfback whose heart finally gave out in 2020.

Time may take its toll, but legacy does not fade.

This was a night of many sports, many eras, stitched together like an old national jersey — each thread distinct, but stronger for being part of the same fabric.

There was Dr Mani Jegathesan, who once



ran like the wind and gave Asia a new idea of speed. Tan Aik Huang, badminton's elegant philosopher-king.

Santokh Singh, Redzuan Abdullah and Bakri Ibni — legends of a time when the Hari-mau Malaysia roared with genuine menace; ten-pin bowlers, motorsport daredevils, and even a cricketing Hector.

A cast list that, if pressed into medals, would jangle with enough gold to blind a generation.

And then, almost like a line change in a particularly elegant hockey match, members of the 1982 women's team stepped into the spotlight — those pioneers who clinched a bronze in New Delhi, Malaysia's only Asian Games hockey medal by women.

Mary Lim and her comrades, their names less known but no less worthy, stood with quiet dignity and reminded everyone that history is not always written in bold fonts.

Ashok Kumar, the Indian who broke Pakistan by scoring the World Cup winner in 1975 — in Kuala Lumpur no less — was there too, because the lines between friend and foe blur over half a century.

These days, he swaps stories, not wristy dribbles, with his former semifinal rivals. His father was Dhyan Chand. His presence needed no introduction.

The Sultan of Pahang, Al-Sultan Abdullah ibni Sultan Ahmad Shah, a monarch with a midfielder's instincts, made the rounds. His handshakes were many, his words sincere.

Then, just to jolt the timeline slightly off-kilter, Ryan Giggs appeared — yes, that Ryan Giggs — and handed the Sultan a signed Manchester United jersey. Because why not? History and football intersect in strange ways.

And amid it all, a few moments of silence. For R. Velu, founding member of Sports Flame, sportswriter, steward of memory. His son Aaron accepted a plaque from the Sultan.

As the evening faded into warm laughter and clinking cutlery, Sri Shan said it best:

"We played as one. Malays, Chinese, Indians. Six years after May 13, we showed what unity looked like. That's why this still matters."

Assistant coach R. Yogeswaran's abiding memory was the hum in the air as 40-plus thousand parochial fans jam-packed into Merdeka Stadium for the semifinal made their voices a weapon of mass intimidation on the Indian side.



"I will never forget the 1975 World Cup. It remains vivid in my mind — how Malaysians from all walks of life came together to fill the stadium," Yogeswaran said.

"I'm grateful to Sports Flame for celebrating us year after year."

Fook Loke, goalpoacher extraordinaire, regretted the fact Malaysia had not equalled or bettered his team's record since.

"I want to thank Sports Flame for reminding the nation of our achievement," he said.

"It happened 50 years ago, and I'm sad that we have never come close to replicating it."

The tapestry of the 1975 World Cup matters.

It matters in ways that medals can't measure, that headlines can't hold. It matters because this was a night not of nostalgia, but of gentle defiance — a reminder that sport, at its best, isn't just about winning. It's about what we become when we play together.

As the curtains slowly fell to close the evening, we remembered the late journalist James Ritchie. A poignant moment as he took us down memory lane with his rendition of "How great thou art".

Ng Peng Kong and Shahid Majid flew the flag for rugby. So too did Ronnie Yeo, the national sports doctor, who had probably poked and prodded almost every one of the athletes there at some point of their careers, only to tell them: "Nothing wrong with you. Get back on the field."

