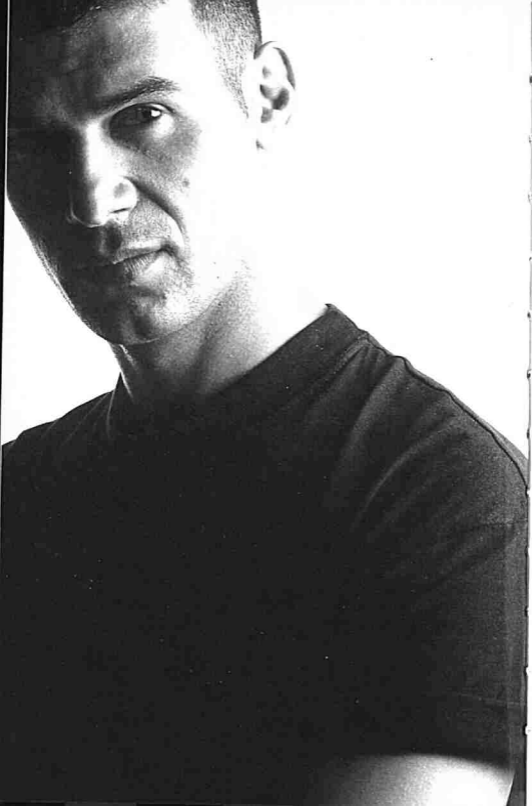


ABBAS

*My
Story*





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jason
offord

TIMES BOOKS INTERNATIONAL
Singapore • Kuala Lumpur

Cover photograph by Mark Law
© 1995 Times Editions Pte Ltd

Published by
Times Books International
an imprint of Times Editions Pte Ltd
Times Centre, 1 New Industrial Road
Singapore 536196

Times Subang
Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park
Batu Tiga
40000 Shah Alam
Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

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Printed in Singapore

ISBN 981 204 664 X (Limp)
ISBN 981 204 633 X (Hardback)

M 916961

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927.9633

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01 JAN 1998
Perpustakaan Negara
Malaysia

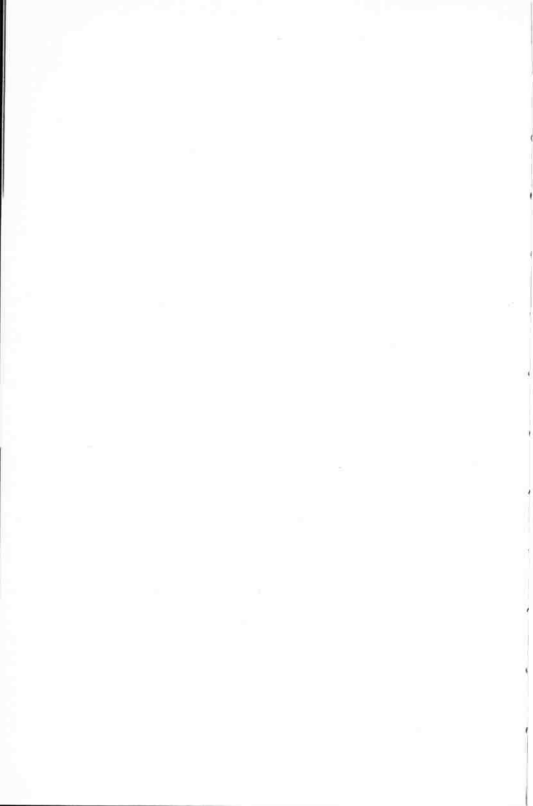
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The Author

Jason Offord was born in Sydney, Australia in 1970. After completing high school in 1987 he started work at News Limited as a copyboy and later as a cadet and then as a graded journalist on various newspapers including *The Daily Telegraph Mirror*, *The Sunday Telegraph* and *The Australian*. In 1994 he moved to Singapore and freelanced for a number of magazines, including a soccer publication, before taking up a position as an on-air sports reporter on Channel 5 at the Television Corporation of Singapore. Among other sports, he has covered the Malaysian Premier League and Malaysia Cup soccer championships as well as Singapore's pull-out from Malaysian football in 1995. He also reported the most prominent match-fixing trials of that time including Abbas Saad's. This is his first book.



Acknowledgements

This book would not have been published without the help of many people. Firstly, Abbas Saad for the many hours spent recalling the details of his life. His family and his best friend Fandi Ahmad. The coaches for their insights into the game and the player. The book's editor, Jonathan Griffiths, for his passion and enthusiasm. The Television Corporation of Singapore for giving me the opportunity to report sport and the trials and tribulations of Abbas Saad. And lastly, my family, friends and Gina for their love and encouragement.

Foreword

When I think of Abbas Saad one thing always comes to mind, and that's the number one.

One of the best footballers Singapore and many other countries around the world have had the pleasure of seeing play the game of soccer.

His skills and accomplishments in the sport make him a legend—definitely one of a kind.

Abbas is like a brother to me and I love him like one too—he's one of the best friends a person could have.

Without his services, Singapore probably wouldn't have won the Malaysian Premier League title and Malaysia Cup final in 1994. He took control of the Cup final against Pahang like no one had ever done before, scoring a hat-trick for the Lions and setting me up for one goal as well.

One in a million—that's how I like to describe Abbas Saad.

Abbas, like all true champions, has achieved so much because of his determination and will to win, to succeed even when all is against him. He is the type of footballer who believes anything is possible and that belief has seen him accomplish more in twenty-eight years than most others would in a lifetime. He has many talents which make him stand out on the field: He's fast, strong and able to read a game instinctively, as if he knows what's going to happen next.

But what impresses me most about Abbas Saad is his never say die attitude to life. He has had many setbacks but he has always overcome them.

Abbas, you're a great player. A friend. A winner. You can play in my team any time. I just hope that will happen again soon.

—Fandi Ahmad.

Prologue

The young Singaporean newspaper reporter couldn't wait a second longer. Jumping to his feet, he sprinted from the courtroom, dialling the news desk's number on his mobile phone as he fled. "Guilty! Guilty!" he shouted down the line—"Abbas is guilty!"

The presses started rolling, printing the words that made a nation stop: "ABBAS VERDICT: GUILTY"

Meanwhile, back in the courtroom, a dejected looking young man sat back down in the dock, his legs trembling with fear as he waited for his sentence.

His lawyer had told him not to worry, a fine would be a sufficient penalty. But as he waited and waited, the minutes becoming hours, scores of his friends and even people he had never met gathered around outside raising the hundreds of thousands of dollars which may have been needed if he was sentenced to jail and had to be bailed out.

Best friend and former team-mate Fandi Ahmad stood outside with his hands guarding his bulging pockets, a stern look on his face. Inside those pockets was more than \$100,000 in cash and a cheque for another \$100,000, just in case. One fan stood nearby with a \$100,000 cheque in his hand.

"I am of the view that a custodial sentence is inappropriate and that a fine would be an adequate sentence," the judge said, staring blankly at the accused and ending the three-week trial. "Considering all the facts and circumstances of the case, I would fix the quantum at \$50,000." Teenage girls who were sobbing in the public gallery rose to their feet and squealed with delight. "He's free! He's free!" they chorused.

Abbas let out a sigh. He raised his eyebrows and shook his lawyer's hand as if to say, "Thanks, but what now?"

He left the courthouse as he had so often left a football field, with a police escort and surrounded by the media and fans.

Driving away slowly in his friend's silver BMW, while hundreds of fans chased the car and shouted, "We love you Abbas," the reality of the moment set in like a punch in the nose—his football career was almost certainly over.



The Boy

Abbas Saad was born in war-torn Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, on December 1, 1967. He had an extraordinary childhood, growing up amid a civil war that destroyed his family home and took the lives of two of his brothers. It was, he says, the worst time of his life. Abbas has vivid and varied memories of his early years in the Middle East. It was where, as a stumbling two-year-old, he first kicked a soccer ball and became known for his incredible football skills. But it was also where he suffered emotionally as the war ripped apart his country, his family and his childhood dreams, the scars of which remain with him until this day. In 1976, his family fled their homeland for Australia—the bloodshed and personal loss ultimately proving too much.

After being thrown to the ground by a powerful and deafening force, the boy picked himself up from the road and stood frozen in his tracks. Around him people ran for cover, screaming and crying as they disappeared into shadowed side-streets and behind closed doors. Alarm bells rang out in the distance, but the

protective sounds were muffled by the ground shaking explosions nearby. With each bomb that fell, destroying another life and another home, the boy, unable to comprehend what was happening, asked himself, "Why?" and started to cry. It was a significant moment in his life because it was the first but not the last time Abbas Saad would feel that way.

"Abbas," his brother's familiar voice called out from behind him, "move it now!" Abbas jumped, and realising his life was in danger, ran towards his older brother Hassan. But then, remembering he had forgotten something, stopped and turned to pick up a worn soccer ball he had been playing with moments before the explosions. When he finally caught up with his brother and friends, Abbas received a firm whack across the head. "Don't ever do that again," Hassan said, "if mum finds out we were playing soccer here we'll never be allowed to play again." Abbas didn't speak. He knew his brother was right but still he couldn't understand. He was not aware of the political conflict which ravaged his world. All he ever wanted was to play soccer. He dreamed of being the best. If he couldn't play soccer, then his life was worthless.

Ali Saad was born and raised in what was then Palestine and started working when he was ten-years-old. He grew into a handsome young man, he was a hard worker and determined to make something out of his life. But more importantly he wanted to have a family of his own. In 1950, Ali, at nineteen years of age, married his childhood sweetheart, Fandie, who was sixteen, and they moved to Lebanon. There they bought land, built a house and started a family. Over the next twenty years, they had eight children—six boys and two girls. "The more the merrier," Ali

would say every time his wife fell pregnant. In December 1967, Fandie gave birth to their sixth child—Abbas.

"He was different but I couldn't quite work out what it was," says Mrs Saad. "He wasn't as big as my other children but he was strong and very aware of his surroundings. I remember the day he was born like it was yesterday. The doctor lifted him up and said, 'Mrs Saad you have another healthy boy.' I looked at him and thought, 'Oh, he's skinny,' but he was glowing and he wouldn't stop kicking both his legs up and down. I knew right then that one day he would make me proud," she said.

Abbas walked, talked and, just as naturally, played football at an early age. He was always first to do things, his parents recall, and he was usually good at them too. At school he was a bright student although unlike other boys his age he never dreamed of being a fireman or a pilot. He wanted to be a sportsman. Abbas was small in stature but he could run like the wind and his athletic skills belied his size and age. He started playing soccer as soon as he could walk and because of his natural ability played above his age group.

"I was only about six-years-old when I started playing in the under-eights team and sometimes in the under-nines," says Abbas. "I was always better at the game than the average boy and I just kept progressing as I grew. I couldn't have asked for a better start to my soccer career because in Lebanon, just like in Singapore, soccer is the only game. The people love it. Soccer was my first love. From the time my dad first showed me how to kick a ball, I was hooked. My mum still reckons I was born with a soccer ball under my arm because I always used to carry one around the house. I was never interested in other toys, I just wanted to kick

a ball around because it made me happy and I never had trouble finding people to play with because my brothers and neighbours were football fanatics too.

"We used to play any chance we could get. Whenever it was quiet, whenever there was no gunfire we would run outside and play in the street and everyone would come out and join in. But when there was a raid everyone would just disappear. One minute we would be having the time of our lives, the next we would be hiding inside hoping we would not be killed. Then, as soon as the fighting stopped, we went back out to play. We were living dangerously but we were kids and we didn't really understand what the war was about. For me, there was only one thing to do and that was to play football.

"I have mixed emotions thinking back to those days. I learnt to walk, run and play soccer there. But it was different and it wasn't easy. There were no parks or fields to run around on. It was on the road or nothing. And it was tough stuff. Go out there and score goals, that's all I thought about. Many times I got knocked down and scratched my legs and arms, but I would get straight back up and try even harder. I was always the smallest but I could mix it with the best of them."

And that was never in doubt from the day he became an overnight soccer sensation in Beirut—aged seven. It all happened one lazy Saturday afternoon in 1974 when Abbas experienced a special moment that still makes his eyes light up and his face beam with emotion. It was the day he realised where his life would take him. His fourteen-year-old brother, Hassan, was playing in a local soccer tournament. It wasn't a major competition by any standards but, just the same, most of the neighbourhood and hun-

dreds of others had kept the afternoon free to watch the local boys in action. Abbas went along with his parents to support Hassan and sat right on the sideline to get a better view. Not for a second did he take his eyes off the ball and every time Hassan kicked it Abbas would voice his support. Now and then his mind wandered and he would dream of being out there and scoring a goal. Then midway through the second half the unexpected happened. One of his brother's team-mates went down injured and had to be replaced. Hassan told his coach about Abbas. "He's too young and too small," the coach said. But Hassan persisted. "Give him a chance," he pleaded. The coach laughed but reluctantly gave in. "There are no reserves anyway," he muttered under his breath.

By chance, Abbas had strapped on his boots that morning. "Just in case," Abbas thought, as he jumped into the car to go to the ground. And now the chance had presented itself, like every boy's dream. Abbas' toothy smile stretched from ear to ear as he pulled on the dusty No 9 jersey and ran onto the field. Many in the crowd laughed and pointed at the skinny kid whose jumper flapped below his knees. But Abbas didn't care, in fact he relished being in the spotlight. This was his moment.

"From that second, I knew this was my destiny, I was only seven-years-old and everyone, except my family, thought it was a joke that they let me play. 'He's too young, too small,' they said. But I showed them."

With his first touch of the ball, Abbas beat two opponents and passed to his brother. Hassan had a shot but it curled over the crossbar. The crowd roared. With the score locked at one apiece and less than five minutes on the clock, Abbas intercepted

a pass and ran the ball forty metres to within striking distance. The goalie, who looked as tall and as wide as the goalmouth, charged at the diminutive No 9 but Abbas, as cool as ever, deftly lobbed the ball over his head. The crowd was silent—one, two, three bounces and the ball rolled into the back of the net. Abbas and the goalie collided with a bone crunching thud. Players from both sides rushed to their aid. With the help of Hassan and the coach, Abbas stood up. He shook his head and raised his arms in triumph. The crowd rose as one. The goalie was stretchered off as the siren signalled the end of the match—two goals to one the final score. Abbas was the hero.

"Everyone who doubted me changed their tune after that game. 'He's incredible,' they said. I played every tournament after that day. Too young and too small maybe, but I could play. I had something special and I have to thank God for that. I was born with the talent to play football. My brothers were good footballers but their lives took different directions. I gave my mind, my soul and my heart to football. I knew what I wanted to be and that's why I succeeded. I'm very strong minded and if I put my mind to something I will give it my best. I've always done that."

Beirut was a beautiful city back in the sixties and early seventies. Considered the cultural centre of the Middle East, it was a thriving metropolis with a long and rich history and, many believed, a prosperous future. Before all-out war broke out between the Muslim and Christian forces in 1975, it was often called the Paris of the Middle East. But the war changed all that, Beirut and her people suffered horribly over seventeen years of bloodshed in which neighbourhoods were flattened and thousands of people, many of them innocent civilians, were killed. The Saads, a traditional Muslim family, lived in a modest home in the city

centre and owned another house, which they built in the country, about an hour's drive away. Until the war, they lived a comfortable middle-class existence. Ali had a secure job with the government and his growing family never went without anything. Fandie stayed at home and looked after their children. It wasn't always easy. Her sons would often run out of the house to play despite her warnings.

The war made life a lot tougher. The city was no longer at peace. Sporadic gunfire became as common as a sunny day and it was unsafe to walk the streets. People were afraid to go out and at night most people, including Ali, Fandie and their children, couldn't sleep—the explosions jolting them from their rest. But the worst was yet to come. In 1975, tragedy struck the Saad family—not once, but twice. The war claimed Abbas' older brothers Hussein, 19 and Basam, 16 on separate occasions.

It was a relatively quiet day when Ali and Hussein headed off to the city to shop. Abbas wanted to go too but his mum wouldn't allow it. "It's not safe," she told Abbas. "You can go another time." Abbas waved them goodbye and went inside to play. The fighting began to rage as soon as they left. Fandie sat on her favourite chair near the radio as news flooded the airwaves about major air raids on the city. That night, only Ali returned home. Abbas knew he would never see Hussein again. Later that year, Basam, was fatally wounded as he returned from a day out with his friends.

"I miss them," says Abbas. "I was too young to remember everything, but it was a big blow to me and my family. I still ask myself, 'Why?' They were just minding their own business. It so easily could have been me or anyone else in my family. After that we rarely left the house. It was like playing Russian roulette to go



Top: The Saads just prior to leaving Lebanon for Australia. Clockwise from top left: Hassan; Ali; Fandie; Gadah; Silvana (niece); Reda; Abbas; and Hasan.

Bottom: Abbas Saad's former playground in downtown Beirut—where he first kicked a soccer ball and discovered his love of the game.

out and it was not worth the risk. Their deaths changed a lot of things. As you can imagine my mum and dad found it difficult to deal with and yet mum still had to raise the other kids. But we looked after one another, helped around the house and made it easier for mum to cope, although it took mum ten years to get her life back together. There isn't a day we don't think about them. I don't hold grudges and I don't blame anyone for their deaths. But war makes me mad. There are no winners, it's as simple as that."

Soon after the double tragedy, the family moved from the city to the country. But when the war spread to the border of Israel, like so many other families in Beirut, the Saads decided to flee their homeland. The Saads' eldest daughter, Namat, 20, had previously settled in Australia with her husband and the family hoped to join her and start a new life in a new country. In 1976, Ali and Fandie and their children: Hassan, 15; Hasan, 10; Abbas, 8; Reda, 6; and Gadah, 3 packed up and caught a boat to the island of Cyprus.

They lived in a hotel for three months, organised their visas and flew to Australia. "Sometimes I wonder how my parents got through it and kept the family together. The war forced us to leave a lot behind. We lost our home, our friends and our family. We were caught right in the middle of the conflict and if we had stayed any longer who knows what might have happened. No place was safe. Nothing compares to what we went through as a family in Lebanon. Whenever I am down, I think of those days and I pull myself together because life isn't that bad after all."

When Abbas first saw the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Opera House as the plane descended into Sydney's airport, he

started clapping. "I just thought, 'Wow!' It was so beautiful. I couldn't believe that this was going to be my home."

The family stayed with Namat for a year before buying a home at Bexley, in Sydney's south. It was a far cry from Beirut. Every home had a backyard and there were wide open spaces for the children to explore. There was no political conflict and there was no war. It was perfect and Abbas recalls his childhood in Australia as one full of promise. "I was given the opportunity to start again, to play soccer and I didn't have to worry about being shot or killed by a bomb blast," he says. "That's why Australia will always be my home."

Abbas didn't speak English when he arrived in Australia. He spoke Arabic and French but like most things he caught on pretty fast. He was enrolled at Kingsgrove Public school, just a ten-minute bus ride from his house, and wasted no time making friends. But Abbas was always different from the other boys his age. He was an individual—a bit of a rebel. He grew his hair long when all his team-mates had short back and sides, his long hair earning him the nickname 'mop.' But despite the ribbing he kept it long and didn't get it lopped off until he was eighteen. "I could play football and I was good at other sports so it was easy to find friends—every Australian appreciates someone who is good at sport. I got on well with all the local kids. Back then there weren't many migrants in the area so I wasn't affected by racism, although I did get called a wog now and then."

At school, Abbas played soccer, running rings around the other students. But he wasn't satisfied. One day he decided to switch codes, swapping the round ball for a rugby ball. "When I first went down to the local park with a soccer ball I almost got

chased away. They were all playing rugby league. So I ditched the soccer ball and gave it a go. I ended up playing rugby league for about three years. It was great. It was funny because my mum thought I was playing soccer on the weekends and she couldn't understand it when I would come home with a bleeding nose and bruises all over me."

In the end he had to make a choice between soccer and league. He didn't toss a coin and he didn't seek advice. He went with his heart. "I chose soccer not just because I was good at it but because I had always dreamed of being a soccer star and I knew that's where my future was. My teacher told her husband, who was a coach, about me and he asked me to join his team. I did and league got the boot."

The coach took Abbas under his wing when he joined the Kingsgrove YMCA team and in his first season, he broke all the club records, scoring more than seventy goals. At age fourteen he was spotted by a talent scout and was asked to sign with Sydney Olympic, a National League soccer club. But just as his career was taking off in leaps and bounds Abbas had a major setback that almost cost him his life. He was seriously injured in a car crash on the way to a Saturday soccer match. The car he was in was hit side-on and rolled three times. Abbas, who was not wearing a seatbelt, suffered a broken pelvis, a smashed nose, deep bruising and cuts to his face. He needed four operations on his nose, was on crutches for three months and spent many weeks in hospital. "The doctor said I was lucky to be alive, he told me I would never play soccer again."

In hospital Abbas went through bouts of depression as he pondered life without football. He lay motionless in his bed



Abbas, front row, second from left, captain and leading goalscorer of the Kingsgrove Primary School soccer team. He also played for the local YMCA team and scored over seventy goals in a season—a club record.

suffering the pain and emotional trauma of his predicament. His parents rarely left his bedside during the first crucial weeks, praying for their son's quick recovery and hoping he would be able to run again, their previous losses still vivid memories.

Over the weeks that followed, Abbas grew stronger, physically and emotionally, and when he started walking unaided he made a decision. Refusing to accept the doctor's opinion that he would never play again, he set about rebuilding his broken body, although he knew it would not be easy.

"When I was in hospital I thought it was the end of my football career. I was young and I didn't know what had happened or how bad the injuries were but I was in a lot of pain. In the beginning I felt like giving up. I was depressed and I couldn't walk but as I started to get better I began to think I had a chance of proving everyone wrong. I was in bed one day, moaning and groaning about everything, and I just realised that I was being stupid. I thought about all the times when the chips were down and the tough times my whole family had gone through together and how I had overcome my problems by being determined and having a positive attitude. So when I got off the crutches I went down to the park and learnt to run again. I went there every day after school and practised and practised and practised until I was exhausted."

Slowly he regained his strength and fitness although he still suffered from painful leg cramps and lethargy. Six months later Abbas finally regained a spot in the Olympic team but spent more time on the bench than on the paddock. The following year, aged sixteen, he failed to make the grade in the under-nineteens squad.

"You're too small," the coach told him without further explanation. Abbas, hurt and despondent, left that day.

A week later he was signed on the spot by another leading club, Sydney City, who saw his potential. "I had one training session with them and they wanted me. Getting told I was too small by the officials at Olympic made me more determined to show the world what I could do."

Abbas made his first-grade debut in the midfield for Sydney City aged seventeen. The occasion was extra special because it was against his former club, Sydney Olympic. There were about 15,000 fans at the game and Abbas played a blinder.

"It was a dream come true. City was the best club in Australia, they had sixteen internationals and they were champions every year, plus they were coached by Eddie Thompson, who later became the national coach. I was in the team and I had a great first game, scoring one goal. It just proves that what goes around comes around. I made many people eat their words and better still, my career was back on track."

After two successful years with City, playing in the midfield and playing a pivotal role in the club's League and Cup winning seasons, he returned to his former club. "The offer was too good to refuse and I wanted to show them how good I was, because there were still some doubters at Olympic."

At Sydney Olympic he proved his critics wrong. He became a prolific striker, winning many man of the match awards. For three seasons, from 1987, he was among the club's top scorers. In 1989 the club made the final but lost. In 1990, they won it for

the first time since the club was formed in 1956. Abbas was then chosen in the Australian youth side which played in Chile in 1987. It was his first appearance in the green and gold colours of Australia and it was in front of 100,000 fans. He made his senior representative debut with the Australian Socceroos in 1989 and was in the squad until 1993.

"Playing for Australia was one of the highlights of my life. Nothing is quite like playing for your country and travelling with the national side was fantastic. I got to see some beautiful countries that I would not have seen if it wasn't for football. I had the best time and there were some wonderful memories." Abbas Saad was no longer too small. The boy had become a man.

Close Encounters

Training every day and playing soccer most weekends, Abbas didn't have much of a social life but he was still a big hit with the girls. A handsome athlete with tanned olive skin and a cheeky grin that made all the girls blush, he never had to do the chasing. Up until his last year of school Abbas attended an all-boys high school but would often be seen at the girls school just up the road. He preferred older women, especially his teachers and even dated one in his final year. But by his own admission he wasn't a stud and says his relationships were more often than not short and sweet. He found it hard being tied to one girl for any longer than three months. That was until he was reunited with an Arab girl he had known in Beirut. They fell in love, were engaged and planned to marry. Abbas was twenty-one and his career had just started to take off.

It was behind the assembly hall at a school dance where Abbas first kissed a girl. "She was in high school, I was in primary school. She was fifteen, I was eleven. It was pretty good. I'd had a crush on her for a long time. She was older and I liked older women, I

still do. I had lots of lady teachers at school and I had a crush on just about every one of them." In year-twelve, his last at high school, he dated a physical education teacher. "All the boys liked her, I think she liked me because I was into sports. We went out a few times. It was no big deal, we never went all the way and after a while it ended."

There was only one girl Abbas really fell for in high school. "Her name was Joanne and she was very mature, all the boys liked her. We dated for a few months and then I got bored and went out with someone else." His relationships were typical of those his age. As his hormones raged he went from one girl to another, kissing, cuddling and groping in the dark. But they never went further—until he turned eighteen.

"I suppose I was quite old actually, I just didn't want to waste it on someone who I didn't care about. There were lots of opportunities but I wanted to wait until the right time and do it with someone special. It ended up being an ex-girlfriend who I met up with out of the blue. It just sort of happened. We did what we didn't get to do when we were younger. It was nice but there weren't any fireworks. It wasn't exactly what I expected but it was OK. As always, she was a few years older and she showed me the way."

Clean-cut, fresh-faced and softly spoken, Abbas looked like a teenager who could have easily fallen into the wrong crowd at school. But he didn't. He got his kicks playing soccer while others, including some of his friends, joined gangs, experimented with drugs and alcohol and committed petty crimes. When he was fifteen he was offered a puff of a marijuana joint at a party but refused to give in to peer pressure.

"I've always been against drinking and drugs. There have been times when both were available but I just wasn't interested. I never even drank beer. It was different for me because I was always training and playing so I didn't really go to many parties. I made the step from childhood to puberty and manhood almost overnight. I missed out on a lot of good times with my friends but it was probably a good thing. I was a teenager when I started playing semi-professional football and a lot of the players were ten years older than me. I grew up fast but I have no regrets."

Despite his football commitments, Abbas did manage to hold down an odd job or two before he turned professional. One of his first was as a clerical assistant at the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service. But the position he is most proud of was at Streets Ice-Cream where he worked in the lab as a quality control expert. Sounds like a senior position but it was simple really—all he had to do was to taste test ice-cream. "That was the best summer job imaginable," says Abbas. "It was part-time and gave me some extra cash. I'm glad I got the chance to work as a young man because now I know what I missed out on during the years I played football and I wouldn't change a thing."

Abbas finished senior school and was awarded his Higher School Certificate at the end of year-twelve. When he turned eighteen and legally became a man it was as if he had changed into the wild one. But it had nothing to do with his age and the fact that he could buy a beer at the pub, it was just that his football career was gathering speed. When he was selected in the Australian youth squad, he started travelling overseas and made the most of his new found success. After a few trips, he got a reputation for being a clown and a ladies' man.

"I was a bit of a bad boy," he admits. "My life changed when I made the Australian side and travelled overseas. I was very mischievous. I was a practical joker but everyone in the team played jokes on each other. We had some wild days and nights, that's for sure, and some of them are just a blur. We went out clubbing, stayed out late and broke curfews. But I don't think we did anything that anyone else in our position wouldn't do. We were young and we were playing for Australia and we just wanted to have a good time."

On one trip to Auckland, New Zealand, for the qualifying rounds of the World Youth Cup, Abbas and his team-mates, including room-mate Alistair Edwards, went out to celebrate making it through to the next round. And as expected, they had a big night.

"We went clubbing and we took along a few of the waitresses and other staff from the hotel. Everyone was drinking and having a good time. Alistair got very drunk and was going around drinking all the leftovers of other people's drinks. Anyway, it got late and we went back to the hotel with a few girls. I don't know what happened to Alistair but we were in my room dancing and playing around and he came back and was trying to get into my room. He was absolutely blind and was sick everywhere. He wanted to sleep so I got a blanket and a pillow and I put him in the bath so he wouldn't disturb me and I locked the bathroom door. All the other boys were in the room and it was just a wild night. Alistair didn't know where the hell he was when he got up in the morning. He had a sore head because he had hit his head on the bath a few times and there was vomit everywhere. We did a bit of damage. Alistair wasn't happy about spending the night in the bath."



Abbas in Australian colours in 1987. He missed some matches through injury but still managed to enjoy himself. On his right is Alex Cummings and in the background Jason Van Blerk, now playing in England for Millwall.

On another trip to Chile with the same team, Abbas was in fine form. Despite the coaching staff keeping a close eye on him, he managed to have the time of his life.

"Over the years I've had close shaves with girls and curfews, but this was a good one. The coaching staff always kept an eye on me because they knew I would be up to no good. Anyway, on this particular trip we had a 10 p.m. curfew and at 10 o'clock they all came barging into my room. They checked the room, looking for girls under the bed, in the closets, everywhere and then they said to me, 'You'd better go to sleep.' I said, 'Sure, anything you say.' So they left and I got on the phone and called a waitress that I'd met earlier downstairs to come up. Then, all of a sudden, the door swings open and Alistair comes in and won't get out. So he hides under the bed. The girl comes in. She leaves a few hours later and then Alistair goes back to his room. I'll leave the rest up to your imagination. I'm not sure what Alistair was doing under the bed but I'm sure he had a fair idea what I was doing on top of it.

"All that type of playing about happened all the time. You can't put a bunch of young players together and expect them to act like choir boys. We just had a good time and a lot of fun. But obviously when it came to playing and training we put one hundred percent into it. That goes without saying. I think everyone knows that I like to joke around. I might not be the world's greatest trainer but when it comes to playing, I play as hard or even harder than anyone I know. I've always been a winner. I like to win, I hate to lose. Even at training games I go all out. That's the kind of attitude all my coaches liked about me. They know I've always put in one hundred percent even though I might be a bit of a clown off the field."

The following year he fell in love with a girl he had known in Beirut. They had a lot in common and as things became more serious for them they decided the time was right to take the next step. They were engaged for a year before things turned sour. His plan to move to Singapore to play soccer was the final straw.

"She was my first real love. We wanted to get married and have children but after a while we realised it wasn't right. There were so many things I wanted to do, like travel and play football overseas. They were my dreams and I thought we could make them come true together. There were a lot of problems, a lot of fights and I called it off. It just wasn't right for me, for both of us. She wanted to do one thing, I another. I decided to go alone and it hurt me a lot. That's probably why I have never been in a serious relationship since. I think I made the right decision. I went to Singapore, returned home after three months and thought she might have a change of heart but she wanted to stay in Australia."

Abbas knows he's made mistakes trying to deal with his relationships. Like any young man he experienced the growing pains of falling in love and being unsure of himself in some situations. His inability to express his feelings back then played a big role in his failed engagement.

"I used to keep my feelings to myself and probably missed out on a lot of good times with those who meant the world to me. There were times when I really liked someone but couldn't tell them until it was too late. But I don't think I had it any tougher or easier than anyone else. All of my friends were going through the same things that I was. I am grateful though that I come from a family that has always been close. Having brothers and sisters to learn from helped me a lot and I've always been aware of my

family's feelings in everything I do. I am lucky that they have always supported me and encouraged me to go after the things that I wanted."

Abbas has always seized the opportunities presented to him, both personally and professionally. Sure, he had earned his reputation as a young man who enjoyed the fast life but a time was fast approaching that would force him to decide between adolescence and adulthood, between good times and the responsibility of a career. As always, when it came to a choice between anything else and soccer, it was no contest. His next step: a professional soccer career which would take him to a small island republic in Southeast Asia. The man had come of age.

The Larrikin from Down Under

Larrikin is Australian slang for someone who is a bit of a rogue—who enjoys a beer with his mates and a practical joke. Abbas might not drink beer but he is a joker and he likes to play up, especially when he's with his football mates. Nightclubs, parties, women, sleepless nights, soccer training and football matches—not always in that order, but that's the way Abbas lived during his first season in Singapore. Engaged when he arrived in 1990, single when he left in 1995, temptation got the better of him as he went from one party to another, one woman to the next, nightclub after nightclub. Sometimes the lover, occasionally the lout, always the larrikin.

If Abbas hadn't initially been wary of leaving home and living overseas there's a good chance he would be playing in Europe today and earning a fortune. In 1989, at twenty-two years of age and showing great promise as a national and international

footballer, he was offered contracts to play in Greece and with Belgian club Standard Liege but turned them down because of his age and fear of leaving Australia and his family.

"I was pretty young and naive and I had a gut feeling it wasn't the right thing to do at the time," he says. "They were good offers and in hindsight could have been the right thing to do. But I didn't want to leave home or my family. Apart from that, and the fact that I was enjoying my football at Sydney Olympic, I was also having relationship problems. So I didn't accept either offer."

The following year however, Abbas thought, "What the heck" and decided to give it a go—in Singapore. And like they say, the rest is history. Originally it was to be for just four months and then he would return home to continue playing for Olympic. But as it turned out, he became so popular he would have been a fool to leave.

"Alan Vest, who coached Sarawak in the Malaysian Premier League, recommended me to the Football Association of Singapore (FAS) because they were looking for foreign players. We had just finished the season after winning the grand final and I thought it would be a good way to spend the summer break."

It was. And to make life easier for Abbas, the FAS also signed up his Olympic team-mate Alistair Edwards after the team manager, Mohamed Shahar Hussein, saw them play just one game.

Abbas arrived in Singapore in May 1990 and so did Alistair Edwards. In the space of weeks there wasn't a Singaporean who didn't know who these two dark haired Aussies were. Contracted to the FAS and being paid more than \$10,000 a month, Abbas ran wild. His ability to score on the field became as famous as his ability to score off the field with women. It wasn't a secret that he

liked to go out every night and party into the early hours of the morning. During his first season with the national soccer team, the Lions, he got into a routine of sleeping all day, training all afternoon and raging all night. For more than six months nothing changed—day after day, night after night. Abbas' reputation as the bad boy of Singapore soccer was becoming a reality. He admits taking advantage of what was handed to him but adds that he did nothing wrong.

"I did get into a routine and went out every night, it was fun, I could afford to do anything I wanted. I was being paid well, I had few responsibilities except to the team and the fans. All I had to do was train hard and play well and that's what I did. At that time in my life I was having a few problems and I just wanted to cut loose. It was out of boredom. I was living in a foreign country for the first time, I was a bit lonely and there were also problems with the coach. He didn't like me. I was getting a lot of favourable press and he didn't think it was right. He didn't like what I was getting up to at night. I got a reputation for being a bit of a playboy which was mainly because of the media. The impression you got from the papers and magazines was a bit over the top really. I got a bad name because I was going out heaps and having fun but I thought that was pretty normal for a guy my age. But the officials didn't think so.

"They had their own opinions and I copped a bit of flak. I know I was a role model for youngsters but just because I go out and party doesn't mean I'm to be condemned for it. It was my personal life and really it was no one's business. I took advantage of what was on offer and it went to my head. I wasn't paid all that well as a semi-professional in Australia, then I came to Asia to play part-time and suddenly I was earning a fortune. I was being

paid more money than I had ever dreamed about or knew what to do with and I suppose it threw me a bit. In the first month, the players showed me around and everyone wanted to be my friend because I was a star player."

Abbas did have to undergo a period of adjustment however, and he didn't have to wait long to discover that Singapore had a few surprises in store. His first awakening to life in Singapore came as he left the airport.

As the airconditioned Comfort cab pulled away from the taxi stand, dodging the fans around it, and travelled down past the line of palm trees onto the East Coast Parkway, Abbas started laughing as he took in his new home.

"What's so funny?" his manager asked.

"I expected dirt roads and donkeys for transport," he replied.

"Welcome to Singapore Abbas, welcome to Singapore," his manager said.

Abbas sat back and took a deep breath. He was a long way from home.

"It was nothing like I had imagined," he says. "There wasn't a donkey in sight and it was so beautiful, so clean and modern. The heat and humidity threw me a bit but I'd been warned about that. I honestly had no idea that Southeast Asia was so developed. I thought I was moving to a Third World country. Coming from Australia I didn't hear all that much about Asia and I didn't know anything about Singapore. Being asked to play in Singapore was a totally new experience for me. A new chapter in my life. It was a culture shock. I didn't know the people and I thought no one spoke English. But it was so multicultural, a lot like home really."

Although he was surprised by his new surroundings, Abbas didn't fall in love with Singapore straight away.

"It took me a while to get used to the place. The people have a different mind-set and I had to adjust," he says. And that included the food. No more meat pies, hamburgers or kebabs from the local take-away shop. This was chilli city.

"Coming from the Middle East some of the food was similar to what I grew up on," he recalls. "But unfortunately I couldn't eat chilli and just about everything I tried at first had chilli in it. My head nearly blew off. I wasn't too impressed by the food but I got used to it and I found many places serving my favourites—seafood and Italian. I love pasta. And I love Nasi Goreng."

When he wasn't playing soccer, training or eating, Abbas liked to sleep. But he also liked to play tennis, go to the gym, the movies and even go shopping. Although in 1990 that lasted for only a few months as his anonymity faded. Still unaccustomed to the attention, he was forced to remain at home like a recluse—except at night. He started venturing out after dark and sleeping all day until he had to go to training.

"For those first few months in Singapore I honestly didn't know where I was," he says. "I thought I was in another world. I got to the stage where it was impossible for me to walk down the street without feeling like a freak. People were constantly coming up to me, hounding me and I wasn't prepared. I felt like a superstar, like Michael Jackson and I didn't want that. I mean at first it was great. It was like, 'Wow this is cool' but after a while I hated it because I had no privacy. I felt as if my every move was being monitored. I couldn't handle that so I stayed at home and went out at night to the clubs. I was like an owl."

Top Ten, The Hard Rock Cafe and Fire—these were some of his favourite haunts around the city.

“I didn’t go there to drink or dance, just to chill out and catch up with my friends. Actually I wasn’t much of a dancer. I think I was too embarrassed to dance because I thought everyone was staring at me.”

They were but it wasn’t just on the dance floor. Abbas’ picture was always in the newspapers and soccer and fashion magazines. He made regular guest appearances on television shows and in advertisements. They were listening to him as well when he cut a CD with his team-mates, singing about himself and the Lions.

He was also an ambassador for the game and for Australia. He did a series of advertisements for the Northern Territory, promoting it to Singaporeans. And away from all the glitz he took time out to visit drug rehabilitation clinics and speak to addicts about staying clean and keeping fit.

Many would say he led an ideal existence but Singapore wasn’t all fun and games, particularly in the first year. Abbas went through a period of severe depression—so bad in fact that he wanted to pack his bags and go home.

“It was my first time away from home for more than a few weeks,” he explains. “I got home sick. I felt sad because I had no one special to turn to. You would never have guessed it, but I was lonely and I missed my family.”

But those times were few and far between and the public support lifted his spirits even though the soccer officials often didn’t. The fans respected what he did for Singapore soccer from the start and right to the end. Even though he was Australian,

they treated him like one of their own. And in return Abbas treated every fan like a best friend. Not once, he says, has he ever refused to sign an autograph. Not once has he ever ignored someone who wanted to chat, be it a cab driver, a journalist or the chicken-rice seller down at Newton Circus.

"I've always treated the fans like any other friend. These people make us who we are. They're appreciative of what we do and all the good times we've given them. For me, signing an autograph or saying hello is the least I can do. It's just a way for me to say thank you. And I think every sportsman in a high profile position should do that. Some players shun the fans but I think that's unfair because these people idolise us. The most important thing is not to get a big head and to be yourself. It's worked for me and has made me a better person. I like to enjoy the success with my fans. Really, when everything is said and done, I'm just a footballer," he says.

It was only a matter of time before his Lions team-mates came up with a nickname for the Aussie striker with the cropped hair and cheeky grin. They hit the nail on the head when one day at training they called him 'Jerry,' as in Jerry Lewis, the famous Hollywood comic. Not only did he look like him but they reckoned he acted a lot like him too. They all agreed and the name stuck—Jerry it was.

"It's not that bad," says Abbas. "It could be worse. No one except the players and some close friends call me Jerry. I suppose it's special."

Singapore's various nightclubs provided Abbas with a chance to let his hair down. He frequented all the hip clubs and pubs across the republic, jumping long queues and dodging cover

charges because of his star status. Outside, he would shake the bouncers' hands and sign autographs. Inside, he would sit back and relax and meet women who were often looking for him. "Life was good," he says. "Some people took advantage of me because of who I was but I have no regrets. I very rarely have a drink and I have never smoked or taken drugs. I mean, it was there to be had and I could have gone in that direction and ended up a mess but I didn't. I had friends who overdosed from drugs in Australia and I'm totally against it. About the only time I ever have a drink is to celebrate something really special, when I might have a glass of champagne but I've never been drunk, I've never thrown-up or had a hangover."

As a professional player, Abbas steered clear of alcohol and drugs but he couldn't resist the women. And being the good professional player he was, there were plenty who were willing to please and who were anxious to just be seen with one of the Lions' star players.

"I came to Singapore and couldn't get over how many beautiful women there were. The first time I walked down Orchard Road I strained my neck turning to look at just about every girl that walked past. I'm a happy-go-lucky type of person and made lots of friends. I didn't care what anyone said about me. I was enjoying myself and that's what life is all about—living life to the fullest day by day."

But, he says, he was not into one night stands, preferring to date women for several months at a time.

"I had a few girlfriends but most only lasted a few months. Of course I went out with a lot of women during the years that I was in Singapore and Malaysia but I wasn't sleeping with a different

girl every night. I enjoy the company of women and I like to go out, so it's only natural that people assume certain things but a lot of the girls I went out with were just friends."

They say Abbas throws a good party—and he does. In Singapore, his impromptu parties were renowned, providing grist for the Monday morning office gossip mill. He could round up twenty or so people from a nightclub and have them back at his apartment and in the spa within the blink of an eye.

"I have had a few big parties, I would go out and get a few people to come back to my house. Sometimes I would have to wake up Alistair when I lived with him at Newton and get him out of bed to help me out. It was never a problem getting people to come back to my place. When I was out, girls always came up to me and introduced themselves."

Not everyone agreed he was setting a good example and rumours spread about his playboy life.

"There were plenty of times when things were said about me and what I was doing. I got some bad press but I took it on the chin. Sometimes I would be out of the country and when I got back there were rumours that I was seen at certain places around town with certain people. There was a lot of gossip about my lifestyle. Some things were true, many things weren't."

Like his sexuality for instance. Abbas had a reputation for being a womaniser but there were rumours he was bisexual. One story linking him romantically with his best friend and Lions captain Fandi Ahmad.

"Let me set the record straight, I'm not gay, I love women too much. There was a rumour that Fandi and I were lovers. Can you

believe that? One of my friends told me that a girl had told him Fandi and I were an item. I said, 'He's a nice guy but that's as far as it goes!' I think the girls I know would vouch for me.

"I have nothing against homosexuality, even though it's a no-no in my religion. I have male friends who are gay. There were times when I would be out at a club and gay guys would come up to me and give me a hard time, whistle at me and stuff like that. Sometimes they would even pinch me on the bum. It was harmless though, they didn't ever hassle me. I'm not homophobic. As far as I'm concerned it doesn't matter if you're black, white, ugly, beautiful, straight or gay, if you're nice to me I'm nice to you."

His flamboyant lifestyle did take its toll on his wallet though, going out every night to eat and party wasn't cheap. Some nights he would spend \$500 just on food and buying drinks for friends. He blew a lot of money in Singapore but he did save as well, his savings paying for two homes in Sydney.

"I spent a lot of cash going out and throwing it around on friends but I wasn't stupid," he says. "I invested a lot of my earnings in property and managed to buy two houses in Australia. I also gave a lot of money to charity and sent money back to Lebanon for families and relatives that suffered in the war. I didn't have to buy many clothes because they were provided by sponsors. Most of my disposable income was spent on going out and travelling."

It wasn't all smooth sailing though, and in later years, Abbas' friendship with Lions team-mate Michal Vana was to come under scrutiny when Vana was charged with match-fixing and fled Singapore on the eve of his trial.

Then it would be Abbas' turn to face the music.

Good Times, Bad Times

The small island republic of Singapore will always be special to Abbas Saad. It's the place where he became famous, where his name remains etched in the memories of all those who watched him boot a ball into the back of a net. Singapore is his second home. He loves the mix of people, the balmy weather and especially the attention he gets from being the best at his chosen sport. With his coverboy looks, he was an advertiser's dream—his face becoming one of the most recognisable in the country. But not all of his memories of Singapore are as favourable. His arrest, court appearances, subsequent conviction and life ban will not be forgotten. But in spite of all the attention and the ups and downs one thing remains constant in his life—his love of the game.

Little did Abbas know what incredible times lay ahead when he took up the offer to play soccer in Singapore. Naturally he dreamed of success and of reaching the top but no one, in their wildest dreams, would have guessed that Abbas would take the country

by storm the way he did. Young, good looking and talented, he was just what Singapore soccer needed to boost its image.

Even before he had played a game, he became a local hero as the press wrote him up as a champion who had the goods to turn the tide for Singapore. He was welcomed with open arms from the moment he and Alistair stepped off the plane at Changi Airport and were mobbed by screaming fans.

"When I first got to Singapore people were coming up to me and asking for my autograph and wanting me to be in photographs," he says. "I didn't know what the hell was going on. I hadn't even kicked a ball. They knew and I knew something good had come to their country but that put more pressure on me to perform and it felt very strange because I was practically unknown. We didn't know what to expect—we didn't know how big a following soccer had in this part of Asia. One day we were playing to crowds of a few thousand then the next there were 60,000 cheering your every move. It was a rude shock. I just hoped I could live up to their expectations."

It's hard to imagine what Abbas Saad would be doing today if it wasn't for soccer. But to put it into some kind of perspective, it's like trying to imagine what Andre Agassi would be doing if he wasn't a professional tennis player. Soccer has been extremely good to Abbas—and he knows it. Every day he thanks God for the cards he's been dealt. Not all hands have been straight aces but whenever he's copped a bad deal he's managed to roll with the punches and get on with life. Forget the money, the women and stardom that soccer has provided; playing the game itself, he says, has given him enough satisfaction to last a lifetime and more. And throughout his long and illustrious career, Abbas played it

as well as any. He knows the game has made him the man he is today and without it he would be just another face in the crowd.

"The game is my life, my first love—my only love," he says. "It's a wonderful game, the greatest in the world and I thank God for giving me the opportunity to play football. There's been a lot of pleasure and pain. Nothing beats winning and I've achieved a lot of success. It's left me with a lot of happy memories and friends. But it also contributed to the break up of my relationship to a girl I was engaged to. Not everything worked out the way I wished but I've always tried my best and I think I've been a good role model despite all that's happened."

In the past twenty-eight years, soccer has taken Abbas on an amazing adventure which has spanned the globe—from the bleeding streets of Beirut, to the green playing fields of suburban Sydney and all the way to the groomed pitch, which takes centre stage, at the National Stadium in Singapore—a stage on which Abbas, for more than three years, played the leading role. His eyes widen as he recalls his first match for Singapore at the stadium as if it was yesterday.

"It was the first time I had been to the National Stadium," he remembers. "I had been in Singapore for just a few weeks and I didn't know what to expect. I imagined the atmosphere would be much the same as a Saturday game back home in Australia which usually attracted a couple of thousand people. Anyway, we got to the ground a few hours before the crowd started showing up and we went straight to the dressing rooms to get ready.

"While I was strapping up my boots, I started hearing this incredible buzz which got louder and louder. I didn't think much of it until we jogged down the tunnel and onto the ground for

our warm-up. It was like an earthquake, the place was shaking. I thought to myself, 'What's that? It couldn't be the crowd.' Then, as I ran onto the field I saw them—all 65,000 of them. It was the fans and they were cheering, chanting, singing and dancing in their seats. I stopped for a second to take it all in and every hair on my body stood up. Fans were screaming out my name. It was so emotional; I'll never forget it. I couldn't believe the happiness on their faces and I thought, 'Yes, this is what it's all about and everything I've done has been worth it just for this moment.'

"Then I ran over to Alistair, who was as stunned as I was and I said to him, 'If we don't perform tonight they're going to kill us.' He just nodded, I think he was speechless. Then one of the boys said, 'They've all come to see you play; to see how good you are.' During the warm-up I don't remember touching the ball. I was so overwhelmed by the atmosphere. I had a good laugh but the pressure was really on both of us to put on a good show. And we did—it was a great team effort. We went out there and I swear we did not let one of those fans down. They paid to see high quality football and that's exactly what we gave them. It reminded me of when I was a kid and I had to play in my brother's team and everyone was wondering how I would play. There was a lot of pressure on me both times but I thrived on it. I've always performed when it matters, I'm a big match player and I love the atmosphere of the big games. That night I did my job and that's all that matters. I'm an entertainer and I entertained."

That match was against Kuala Lumpur and Abbas was told to watch out for two legendary players—Fandi Ahmad and Malek Awab. Ironically, in later years both players became his closest friends when they teamed up for Singapore.

"I didn't know who they were," recalls Abbas. "Everyone told me they were two of the best players in Malaysia and that Malek was going to be marking me. But when I saw him I laughed because he was so small. My team-mates said he was really fit and could run all day. I said, 'No worries, I can take him on, he's only a little bloke.' But they were right, Malek absolutely killed me. He ran non-stop and I couldn't keep up with him. After about ten minutes I asked the coach to swap me because I hadn't attacked once and the heat was killing me. I should have known better—I'd been underestimated so often myself. So I went to the other side and started to play my normal game. We won 3-1. I didn't score but I remember I chipped over the keeper from forty metres out and hit the crossbar. I was satisfied. I was just happy to hear the crowd roaring. I thought, 'It can't get much better than this.' It was like playing for AC Milan or Real Madrid."

If his first match was a success, then his first training session was a failure—but one that laid the foundations for a long and illustrious career in Singapore with a bunch of players who respected his frankness and never say die attitude.

It was at Jalan Besar Stadium on a typical steamy afternoon. The humidity, as always, was lurking above ninety percent and kept most people inside. The coach, wanting to see where he could place Abbas, had arranged a friendly match with an expatriate team. More than a thousand people crammed into the ground to watch. The coach, realising the distressed look on Abbas' face meant that he wouldn't be able to stand the heat, put him on for the kick-off. With his tongue placed firmly in his cheek he said, "Get out there Saad and show us what you can do." Abbas thought, "No sweat"—but sweat he did and after twenty minutes he collapsed from exhaustion.

"The first twenty minutes were magic," he says. "I was stringing passes together and having shots at goal. I felt great. Then after that, I was on the line, crawling. I couldn't run anymore. The heat took its toll and I ran out of gas. The coach and all my team-mates just laughed. They knew I wouldn't last. I laughed too and it seemed from then on I felt like part of the team."

The new boy from Down Under had broken the ice and was accepted into a team which wasn't accustomed to foreign players. From that day on he became an integral part of the Lions' success that season—even though he wasn't included in the run-on side for a few weeks. As the season progressed and his fitness improved, so did his time on the field. It became clear Abbas was a cut above the rest, earning a reputation as a tough and hardworking footballer who could score goals. In his first season, playing in the midfield and as striker, he scored eleven memorable goals which helped the Lions secure a place in the Malaysia Cup final for the first time in nine years.

In August that year Abbas was so desperate to get on the field he convinced coach Robin Chan to let him play despite carrying a serious hamstring injury. Abbas limped off in the thirty-third minute, the Lions lost the match and Abbas lost some respect but it showed his doggedness and determination to have a go.

Abbas never really got on with Robin Chan and certain officials didn't like his attitude. More to the point, they were concerned his lifestyle was affecting the team. "They said I wasn't setting a good example," Abbas says. "They didn't like the fact that I was going out a lot and having a good time. There were all these stories about me not turning up for training, of being undisciplined and misbehaving. I couldn't believe it. I get the feeling they didn't like what I had become."

What he had become was a soccer player who had been transformed into a national celebrity who was fast becoming a soccer superstar. In the meantime the Football Association was debating whether to renew his contract.

"Some wanted me to stay, others wanted me out," he says, remembering some tough times during that first year in which he, more than once, contemplated his future in Singapore and wondered if it was all worth it. One afternoon, after training, Abbas found himself alone in his apartment. For three hours he sat there, staring at the wall in front of him and thinking about his family and how much he missed them. A few times he wept, sometimes he laughed but all the time he wondered what he was doing in Singapore. Depressed and despondent, he wanted to quit the game and go back home to Australia.

He had been in Singapore for four months but it felt like forever. The 1990 season, he says, was a 'shocker' and it had nothing to do with the way he was playing football. Abbas was a crowd favourite but Robin Chan wasn't impressed with his new Aussie recruit. Chan didn't like his attitude and thought he was more trouble than he was worth.

Abbas and Robin Chan were poles apart in terms of attitude and personality. Chan, a recently retired police officer of twenty-six years service, was a strict disciplinarian. He was an experienced soccer player and coach, having played as a forward for Singapore between 1965 and 1972, before quitting to coach the Police team and later Balestier United. He is highly regarded as a sound tactician and a good motivator but his motivational skills were not enough to smooth relations between himself and the headstrong young recruit from Australia.

Abbas feels that it was this personality clash with Chan that was the cause of their problem and it wasn't long before the two refused to speak to each other. Abbas had the impression that Chan didn't see the need for foreign players in the team but that the management had insisted. The particularly volatile situation was fuelled by the fact that some FAS officials were concerned about Abbas' so-called mischievous and undisciplined ways.

"We lost the Malaysia Cup in 1990 because there were serious problems in the team, not because it was fixed like a lot of people think," Abbas says. "Basically, I think the coach didn't see any long term benefit to the game in having foreigners in the team and would have preferred to nurture young local talent. The management wanted established foreigners to boost the team and they stood by that even though the coach preferred an all Singaporean side. I was only supposed to play for a few months but because I played well they were prepared to sign me up for the Malaysia Cup and the following season.

"In that first year we finished second in the Semi-Pro League and lost the Malaysia Cup to Kedah in extra time. It was a great season considering the fights and slagging that went on behind the scenes. The coach thought I was undisciplined and I knew he would be happier without me there. He was under pressure from others because he was hearing things about me that weren't true. He didn't like my attitude and he thought I was criticising him behind his back. He thought I was a trouble maker asking for a pay rise for the players, silly things like that. I mean, I didn't need the money, I did it for the benefit of the other players. He thought I was causing problems and so I got tagged a bad boy. But I'm a pretty straight up and down type of guy and what you see is what you get.

"Sometimes I wonder how I got through the year without quitting. I can't remember how many times I thought, 'That's it, I'm outta here.' As far as football goes, that was the worst year of my career. I hated it so much I was thinking of giving the game away. I was so upset I used to go home and shut myself in my bedroom and cry. I was so depressed.

"I was confused I suppose because I was giving my best and doing a good job but still copping flak. Where I come from you do your job as a player and how you spend your spare time is your own business as long as you don't get into trouble but I needed to learn how to balance the two things before I could really succeed in Singapore. When my four months were up and I had to go back to Sydney Olympic, the FAS asked me to stay longer. I had to renegotiate with Sydney Olympic. I didn't want to upset the flow, so I decided to stick the season out. We were in the quarter-finals of the Malaysia Cup and there was a good chance we could win it for the first time in years. Sydney Olympic agreed and Singapore had to pay extra money for me and Alistair to stay.

"But there were a lot of problems along the way. There was some tension in the team; some players didn't get along. There was a lot of back-stabbing going on and a lot of the officials didn't like me for whatever reason. I didn't really care as long as I was doing my job and we were winning. I didn't give a damn what the other players thought. On top of that I had to deal with angry fans who thought games were fixed. It annoyed me but I never lost my temper because it's a free country and everyone has an opinion and I know I didn't play brilliantly every game."

Abbas concedes that he was no angel and that at times he may have acted irresponsibly. The coach was not prepared to offer

any player special treatment and Abbas was in need of guidance. At times his actions did reflect badly on the FAS and only served to enhance his reputation as the bad boy of Singapore soccer. One example was the saga over an unpaid hotel bill which almost saw Abbas and Alistair Edwards facing a legal battle. When the duo arrived in 1990 the FAS put them up in a local hotel until they found suitable accommodation. When they checked out of the hotel after about three months there was a bill for entertainment and overseas telephone calls amounting to \$4,000. Abbas and Alistair informed the management of the hotel that the FAS would cover the expenses. On the eve of the Malaysia Cup final, with the account still not settled, the FAS learned that the hotel was planning to apply for a court order against the two players and it paid the bill. Abbas says the incident was a silly mix up and that he and Alistair were not expected to pay the bill under the conditions of their contracts. "When we arrived in Singapore the FAS put us up in a hotel until we could find our own place. Our understanding was that we did not have to pay any hotel expenses. It was in our contracts and was just a misunderstanding."

Against this backdrop Singapore had a Malaysia Cup campaign to battle out and the early signs were promising. Then, in the first semi-final, the team stumbled and it was the two Australians who found themselves being blamed.

"We breezed through the quarter-finals undefeated and in the semi-finals we played Johor and drew the first leg nil-all," recalls Abbas. "The coach said it was my fault. He criticised me in the newspapers. I couldn't believe he did that because we played our hearts out. We tried our very best but it just didn't happen on the night. Johor played a very defensive game. The coach said I

was greedy and individualistic. I thought that was pretty harsh considering there was still a few matches to go."

When the coach told Abbas and the media that he was not performing as a team player but as an individual he was stung. For a player in a sport like soccer, which relies so heavily on the support of each player to bring off the set moves which ultimately win games, it is a harsh criticism. Abbas was feeling alienated and defensive and consequently lashed out at the coach, bringing their simmering feud to a head.

"I just felt I had to talk to him about the problems," Abbas recalls. "In the dressing rooms after training on the Monday following the game, I told him I was fed up and I wasn't going to play in the other semi-final. I said, 'If you think I'm not good enough to play and if you think I'm to blame for the draw, then I'm out.' I had nothing to lose and I thought I was going home anyway after the tournament. Would you believe that was the first time I had spoken to him for months? He didn't seem too concerned. It was a pretty heated argument and my manager had to calm me down. I wanted to thump him, I was really frustrated. Then we had a crisis meeting at training. I went off my head and said I didn't want to play anymore. I was really hurt. How could he say those things in the press about me when he knew I had played so well all year? I remember playing when I was injured, that's how much the game and the Lions meant to me. Anyway, my manager talked me out of quitting. He said to forget the coach and go out and show him how good I was."

The return leg semi was in Johor on December 1 and Abbas remembers it well because it was his birthday. After twenty minutes, Singapore was down 1-0 and it looked like they were

going to get murdered. Singapore ended up winning 4-1. Abbas played brilliantly and scored two goals. But the final, two weeks later, would prove to be a different story.

"I think the problem in the final was we were too confident going into it. We were favourites. Kedah was a good team but we had beaten them at home and had the upper hand. But Kedah played too well. They basically put me and Alistair out of the match by closing us down whenever there was a scoring opportunity. The score was 1-1 after full-time but they beat us in extra time 3-1.

"After the match, allegations surfaced about the game being fixed. We heard that our entire team was on the take which was absolutely ridiculous. I'd never heard such crap in all my life. We lost because we didn't play well. You can't point the finger at any one guy, we were all to blame. There was a big outcry about players taking bribes and when that happened I knew I was not going to be staying. That was the final straw. Every time we won, people would say the other team was on the take and when we lost, they said we were on the take. It was a no win situation. We knew who the honest players in our team were and that's good enough for me to live with. But the coach didn't want me to come back after the Malaysia Cup loss anyway and he didn't want Alistair either because he said Alistair couldn't play without me. So we both eventually decided to go to Johor."

Coach Robin Chan remembers Abbas as a great player but acknowledges that there were some clashes between them. He feels that Abbas had all the qualities of a successful footballer but that his discipline left a lot to be desired. "At the end of the 1990 season I sent a report to the FAS and noted his faults and the

problems I had experienced," says Chan. The FAS accepted the report and he was removed from the side. "I had to be fair to the other players. I couldn't let him get away with all these things. I believe Abbas was undisciplined and that didn't help the team's cause. But apart from that, nobody can deny that he was one of the best footballers around. He certainly proved to be an asset in every team he played with."

Abbas may have left on bad terms but he still had his supporters. There were hundreds of people at the airport on December 20 to see him and Alistair go. Not one FAS official was there. But as one door closes another often opens and Abbas believes that his move across the causeway was an important part of his growth as a footballer and as a person. "I believe in fate," he says, "and it was probably good that I did go because it changed my life."

It was clear by the end of that season, especially after the Malaysia Cup final failure, that Abbas was down and on the way out as far as playing in Singapore went. The Lions had lost the final and Abbas had lost his way.

"It was disappointing to have put all that effort in and then to be let go," he says. "I thought they were making a big mistake by letting me go. I went home to Australia and later over to Malaysia with something to prove. I was very hurt about the accusations of match-fixing and with what the coach was saying about me."

The stress and tension of the 1990 season came to a head when Abbas left Singapore an angry young man after the Malaysia Cup final loss and his axing by the FAS and resumed playing temporarily in the Australian National Soccer League in Sydney.

In his first match for Olympic, after a seven month absence, he was sent off after hitting another player. It was the first and only time Abbas was sent off in his career. He received a two-match suspension and a thousand dollar fine for misconduct from the League's disciplinary committee.

"I was provoked and I retaliated," he recalls. "It was stupid. It was my first match back in Australia and a few of the guys tried to provoke me. I was kneed from behind in a tackle and I lashed out. It was a physical match, I chipped my tooth as well during the game. The incident was a build-up of a lot of things and I just lost it for a split second. I didn't even wait for the red card, I just walked off. I settled down pretty quickly though and I later apologised. I had been under a lot of stress after the Lions lost in the Malaysia Cup final and I didn't know where my career was headed, it was too much."

Shortly after, Abbas signed a two-year contract with Johor for the 1991 and 1992 seasons. It was one of the best decisions he ever made. At Johor his life turned full circle.

Across the Causeway

The relaxed and friendly atmosphere of Malaysia was just what Abbas needed after his disturbing and trying first year in Singapore. He loved living in Malaysia, in fact he enjoyed it more than Singapore. In Johor he was treated like family by the Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) and the fans. The pace of life was a little slower and, as a young man still adjusting to living away from home, it was a welcome change from Singapore, where he felt like he could do nothing right in the eyes of many.

Abbas had reservations about playing in Malaysia, his experiences in Singapore in that first year had made him wary of expecting too much. It may have been the lessons he learned in Singapore which allowed him to adjust to life in Malaysia more easily, or it may have been that the less hectic pace of the country and the attitudes of those he played with and trained under were more suited to his own style of play.

"Johor was great," recalls Abbas. "I had an Australian coach, Michael Urukalo—the best coach I've ever been under. No one gave us much of a chance but we had a top strike force and we all worked hard. I don't think I've trained so hard in my life. I was in good form because I wanted to show Singapore that they were wrong to let me go. I had to show the coach he made a mistake. I made a promise to my fans that I would let my feet do the talking. I shunned the media and concentrated on football and as a result I had one of the best seasons of my life."

In 1991 Johor won the League title and the Malaysia Cup—the first team to win the double. Abbas was the leading goal scorer and was rewarded for his efforts by winning the prestigious Golden Boot. "Winning the double was great," he says, "and winning the Golden Boot made it even better."

On the way to the Menteri Besar of Johor's home to celebrate after the Malaysia Cup final the fans stood in the pouring rain to cheer the team. Abbas breaks out in goose bumps when he describes the scene and the wave of emotion.

"There were thousands and thousands of people lining the streets in the rain and celebrating. Hundreds of motor bikes and cars followed the team bus, honking their horns all the way from the airport at Johor. I have never seen so many people in all my life. And at the airport the fans went berserk. Old people were coming up and hugging and kissing me and thanking me. Many of these people didn't have a cent to their names but they had come to the game and afterwards to the airport to see us. It was incredible."

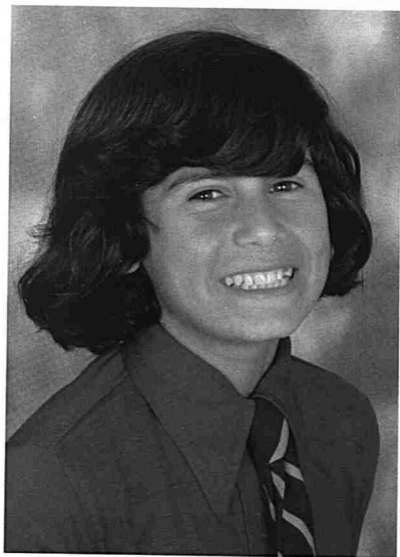
In that same year, Singapore on the other hand, even with talented Australian players Warren Spink and Craig Foster,

finished second last on the table and had to play off to stay in the top division. It was ironic and a sort of bitter-sweet revenge for Abbas, whose playing career was at an all time high.

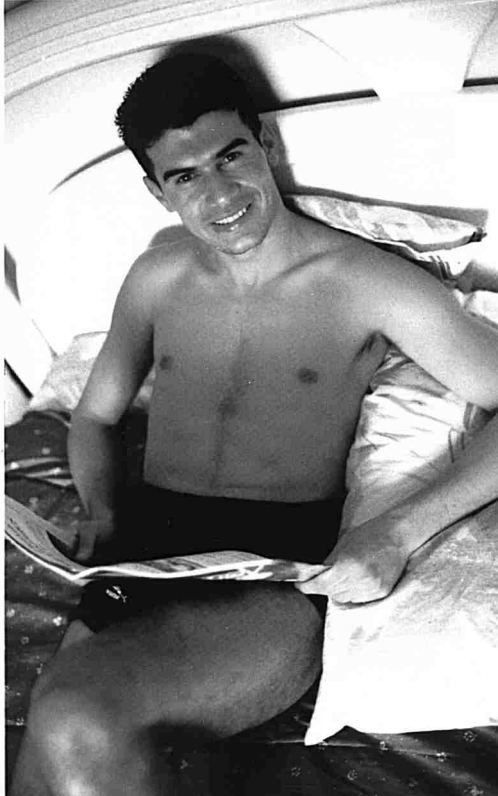
"The management at Johor was fantastic," he says. "Everyone was honest and straight about everything. There were no fights. It was a blessing in disguise that I left Singapore when I did because it opened my mind, I settled down and I matured a lot. I think some of the people in Singapore also realised they may have made a mistake in letting me go."

As he had in the past and would again in times to come, Abbas showed why those who dared to doubt him, should not. For someone who thought Malaysia was somewhere in China before he looked it up on a map and decided to move there, Abbas is rather eloquent in his description of the place.

"Malaysia is a fantastic part of the world," he says, as if he was born and bred there. "It's so beautiful and the people are so warm and kind. There are some amazing states and small islands that are perfect. Everyone supported me. The team and the management were great. They treated me like a human being not like a commodity. There was no back-stabbing and I never felt like the fans were against me at any time. They supported me all the way even when things weren't going our way. They never abused us when we were down. They were just happy to be able to watch football and I was happy because I played my best there. There was no jealousy among any of the players. We played as one close knit outfit and I'm fortunate to have been able to have achieved something for them. In Singapore things were down because the team hadn't tasted success for many years and that had an effect on some of the players."



The hairstyle may be a little different but the cheeky grin and boyish charm are unmistakable. A school portrait of Abbas Saad, aged twelve.





Above: In Australia Abbas shows off his lucky boots and training strip before returning to play for Singapore. In each of the three years that he played for the Lions they made the Malaysia Cup final, eventually winning the trophy in 1994.

Left: Relaxing before a game, Abbas unwinds with some light reading. He was always a favourite of the fans but he had his problems, mainly with officials, in that first year and almost left a number of times.



Above: Abbas and some of his Lions team-mates celebrate his birthday in slapstick style. "The bond between the players was like family," says Abbas, "and we played hard, on and off the field."

Below: Wherever he went Abbas was mobbed by adoring fans eager to get the most sought after autograph in town



Abbas at training. "I played to win even in training games," he says, "I always gave one hundred percent."

In Johor he was far more relaxed and it showed on the field.

"I was comfortable in Malaysia. I could go out and be myself and whenever I did I was at ease because the people would smile at me and they were so warm. They seemed to enjoy life even though many of them were quite poor in terms of wealth or possessions. To be honest I was more at home there than I was in Singapore. There was less pressure on me and so I was more relaxed. I was always on the go in Singapore, in the fast lane. In Malaysia I was laid back, I was in the slow lane and cruising. I had supporters from all over Malaysia and being a Muslim made it easier for me to fit in. The people were always honest. I mixed with royalty as well when I was with Johor. I did a lot of travelling from state to state and I was always going to parties and hanging out with local celebrities. I had a few girlfriends in Malaysia too and there were plenty of rumours about me going out with a princess and singers and actors. Let's just say I had a good time and met some wonderful women that I will never forget."

In Johor, Abbas played some of his best football. He trained harder than ever before and set his mind on winning a major trophy for the state. And he had plenty of incentive—he wanted to show Singapore how valuable he was.

After two strong years with Johor in 1991 and 1992, Abbas was lured back to Singapore by FAS General Manager Patrick Ang. Although Johor had won the Malaysia Cup in 1991, Abbas was suspended for the final and sat it out on the bench. In 1992, Johor fell apart and was unable to defend either the Premier League or Cup titles. There were problems between a number of local players and coach Michael Urukalo and by the end of the season, Abbas felt the time was right to return to the republic. Here was a chance

to make amends in Singapore. In doing so, he became an integral part of what was to be known as the 'Dream Team.' It was arguably the best Singaporean side in years. Included in the line-up were two other foreigners, Alistair Edwards, who also returned to Singapore after playing in Malaysia for Johor and solid Korean defender Jang Jung. The local bunch was a desirable mix of youth and experience including legendary striker Fandi Ahmad, veteran Malek Awab, the volatile V. Sundramoorthy as well as 'Supersub' Steven Tan, Saswadimata Dasuki and Lim Tong Hai.

"I got to know Fandi and Malek in Malaysia and even though we were in opposing teams we became friends and we often talked of playing together before we went our separate ways or retired. I went back there for them and for the fans. It had to be done—there was unfinished business."

The Season of Shame

The 'Dream Team' had heralded a new era for soccer in Singapore—but first the team had to get back in the top grade. Coach P. N. Sivaji, who had led the team to relegation the previous year, was in charge again, despite calls for his resignation. It was a tough season for Sivaji and the team but they clawed their way back up to Division One, finishing second in the Semi-Pro Division Two League behind Selangor. Abbas scored thirteen goals in Division Two, helping the team earn a shot at the Malaysia Cup. The team, with the 'Twin Terrors,' Abbas and Fandi, stuck to their guns during the Cup competition up until the final—before the dream turned into a nightmare and the Lions were humbled 2-0 by Kedah.

As in past seasons, match-fixing scandals plagued the game and after the final, it was being whispered that Singapore had thrown the match. The loss was humiliating and not a single player could hold his head high. It was hard to take for players and fans alike and the rumours gained momentum.

"That was a tough break," Abbas says. "We had played so well to get there and again we were beaten by Kedah. I was sure that was going to be our year. Overall, the season wasn't too bad. We managed to get out of Division Two and we made the Malaysia Cup final. But like in 1990, there was talk that the final wasn't clean, that it had been fixed. But that wasn't the case. It was a tough match and Kedah were too strong."

But the match-fixing stories got under Abbas' skin. He was sick to death of the various accusations and was sure the final wasn't rigged but still the rumours persisted.

"We felt like we were in a no win situation and it pissed everyone off. It was hard because we had brought the Kallang Roar back to Singapore and put smiles back on people's faces. We tried our best all season and if anyone had any doubts we would never have made the final. We just didn't get it together on the day and you've got to give it to Kedah because they were hungrier than us. The pressure was on us to win and it was too much to take. I thought in 1990 it was bad, but this was unbelievable. In the final Alistair missed a penalty and people were whispering that he was on the take. He couldn't handle the whispers so he left. In the quarter-finals I missed a penalty and I was told I was involved in match-fixing. It was ridiculous, no one's perfect. Diego Maradona and Roberto Baggio miss penalties now and then but no one says they're match-fixers. It seems to me that in Singapore, if you make one little mistake you're a match-fixer. And that's not easy when you know you're clean."

None of the disappointments from seasons gone by could prepare Abbas for the 1994 season of shame.

Not only did the 'Dream Team' fold with the axing of a number of key players, but match-fixing reared its ugly head again and threatened to destroy the proud tradition of Malaysian soccer as it had threatened to do in the past. During the season players and referees across the region were interrogated, arrested, charged and jailed in the biggest match-rigging investigation in history.

The probe followed years of widespread rumours about illegal gambling and rigging of games in Southeast Asia and requests from the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) and the Football Association of Malaysia to tackle the so-called 'cancer.'

Although he was offered more money to go back to Malaysia, Abbas had decided to play out his two-year contract and stayed on in 1994. When Sivaji's contract expired at the end of the 1993 season, the Football Association appointed a new coach—Australian Ken Worden, who was to become one of the most hated and short-lived coaches in the nation's history. As opinionated and outspoken as they come, Worden didn't pussyfoot around and immediately set out to toughen up his charges. But from the very start, it was clear he would not last. When the FAS sacked striker V. Sundramoorthy and Abdul Malek for inconsistency and announced a new lineup that included veteran keeper David Lee and Czech forward Michal Vana, it was clear he was not in control—he had wanted Sundram in the team.

His strict training methods did little to lift the deflated spirits of the players. Worden yelled and screamed and reprimanded his players on a daily basis. He even went as far as saying the Lions would not win a Malaysia Cup or Premier League title for at least three years. Rather than trying to prove him wrong, the players' morale sunk to an all time low. Many of them didn't like him and

he didn't like many of them. After an Australian tour in which he threatened to sack Michal Vana for insubordination, the players confronted him about his training methods and general attitude. Frustrated with the way things were going, he resigned and took a coaching job in Malaysia at Selangor, just six days before the Premier League kicked off. Abbas was one of the few fans of Worden and his hard-line coaching style, but he thought it was a cop-out when he disappeared days before the start of the competition.

"I got on pretty well with Kenny but it was low of him to slag us off and then leave," he says. "I wasn't impressed when he told us we wouldn't win a title for at least three years but maybe he was just trying to get us worked up so we would do the opposite. That was his style. Every coach is different. A lot of players, especially the locals, couldn't handle his outbursts and I think they were glad to see him go. It wasn't exactly a dream start to the season."

The FAS played down Worden's departure and moved quickly to appoint a new coach—FAS technical director Douglas Moore, an Englishman who had coached the New Zealand side. It was probably the best decision the FAS ever made. Under Moore, the team settled down and many players started to enjoy their football for the first time in months.

"Douglas pulled us together and told us we could win," Abbas says. "He gave us the confidence that was lacking before. Players who were scared to play their normal games were more confident. After what Worden said, it was as if we had nothing to lose. People were still saying Fandi was too old and that I was inconsistent. But we were confident that we had the players. I wasn't entirely

happy with the way things were going but I wasn't going to quit, especially not after everything that had happened. I had big offers to go back to Malaysia and elsewhere but I wanted to win the cup for Singapore. And we had a good team that year, it was a mix of young and old with Fandi and myself up front. Jang Jung was strong, Malek Awab had been around forever, David Lee had come out of retirement, Vana on his day could turn a match our way and there were the youngsters who were full of running and eager to win."

At the end of July, with the Lions in third spot on the Premier League table and with six games remaining, a number of players, past and present and including Abbas, were hauled into the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) headquarters at the Hill Street Centre and questioned by anti-corruption officers about their involvement in a multi-million scheme to rig matches.

The blitz was part of a major investigation into professional syndicates involving wealthy Singaporean businessmen, illegal bookmakers, soccer officials and big name players from Singapore and various states in Malaysia. Several Lions players who were questioned brushed it off as simply a routine interview but it proved to be a lot more than that—Pandora's Box had been opened.

The Bureau started to get tough in March when a senior Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau officer, Raymond Ng, lectured the Lions about match-fixing behind closed doors at the FAS. It was a routine interview but unbeknown to the players the CPIB was conducting a massive probe involving undercover officers, surveillance and later, hidden micro-cassette recorders.

On Thursday, July 30, officers raided an office in Beach Road and arrested a bookmaker who they had been following for several months. The bookie, whose name was later suppressed by the court, confessed his involvement and named several of his runners (go-betweens who place and collect bets for others through the bookie). The runners were arrested and implicated a number of prominent national players.

In the early hours of July 31, the Lions' Czech recruit Michal Vana was picked up and found to be carrying \$45,000 in cash, money which the bookie had given him for allegedly helping to fix matches.

Abbas later testified in court that he had approached Vana for a loan of \$45,000 on July 26 for his father who was in Singapore and on his way to Lebanon. Abbas said his father needed about \$70,000, to repair the family home in Beirut. Abbas never received any money from Vana and ended up giving his dad \$30,000 which he withdrew from two of his bank accounts.

After training on Friday, July 31, Abbas went out to dinner with Fandi and a few other team-mates before kicking on to the Hard Rock Cafe for a drink. Tired and sore from training, Abbas left and went home to bed at about 1 a.m. At about 2 a.m. Abbas was woken by a knock at the door—it was two officers from the CPIB.

The officers searched his Sophia Road apartment, taking his bank-books and other personal papers, and then took him down to the station for an interview. He was a bit reluctant to go but when he got to the CPIB headquarters he felt relieved after seeing some of his team-mates.

"It was like a football match," he remembers. "There were players, officials and well known fans."

Abbas was detained in a small room without windows for about sixteen hours and questioned about receiving money for helping Singapore win matches. He was also asked about a game against Penang that Singapore won 7-0. The officers asked him if he was offered money to score three goals.

"I was also asked why I missed a penalty in 1993," he says. "I thought the officer was joking but he was dead serious. I was pretty angry after that and I had to control my emotions. I wanted to shoot my mouth off and tell him where to go. I said, 'Why don't you ask Roberto Baggio why he missed a penalty in the World Cup.' That was the one and only penalty I had missed. He then told me that the 1993 Malaysia Cup final between Singapore and Kedah was fixed. I denied everything and told him I had not been approached by any bookies during the season or any other season. He asked me if I knew anything about Vana's involvement in match-fixing and I said no. He said that a bookie had told them I'd been offered \$45,000 to score goals and I told them if someone said that then bring him to me. They said the whole team, some officials, bookies and former players were being questioned as part of their investigations. At one point they put Michal in the room next door and I could hear him screaming at everyone in his language. Then later they put a friend of mine in the room next door and were interrogating him and telling him he was a bookie. They also asked me about the bookie Michal was supposed to be doing business with and they said that I had met him. I told them I hadn't. I was worried because I had asked Vana a few days earlier for a loan of \$45,000 for my dad, because

he was going to Lebanon to fix up the family home, which had been damaged in the war."

Abbas was released the following night after giving a statement. He was so scared of what had happened that he ran home—the entire 1.5 kilometres.

"I was petrified," says Abbas. "I thought they were following me. I didn't know what was going on so I ran home. It's probably the fastest I've ever run. I couldn't believe I had been brought in for questioning. Do you think if I was guilty that I would have stayed in Singapore after the 1993 final?"

From the information the bookie gave investigating officers, on August 13, Singapore had the dubious honour of being the first country in Asia to charge a top-class player with match-fixing.

Midfielder Michal Vana, 31, faced court on six counts of corruption totalling \$375,000 and a referee, T. Rajamanickam, was also charged in relation to the matter. It was alleged Vana had received between \$20,000 and \$45,000 a game for helping Singapore to win. Vana was released on \$500,000 bail, which was put up by a local businessman.

"The first I heard of his arrest was when I read it in the newspaper," says Abbas. "I had no idea why or what he was involved in. It was a big shock to everyone in the team. It happened at such a delicate time. We were close to winning the Premier League and all this started happening. It could have killed us but I think it made us fight harder on the field. With Vana facing court and his contract terminated, we were the centre of attention. You could tell everyone, the press, the fans and the officials were thinking the worst, but we still had our supporters.

Douglas said not to worry about the problems with Vana and to concentrate on the League title.

"I spoke to Vana after his court appearance and asked him what was going on. He said he was doing business with this guy who was a bookie. He said it was strictly business and nothing for me to worry about. I asked him if it had to do with him betting on the games but he said he didn't want to talk about it. I believed him, I had no reason not to. He was that type of guy. He spoke his mind, didn't have many friends in the team and was hard to get along with but I liked him. I was concerned because Michal had approached me earlier in the year and told me he was betting on games. He said he wanted me to play my best, to go all out and help Singapore win. I said, 'Of course, I do that every time I play.' But it was obvious Michal was in some pretty serious trouble."

Despite the Vana saga and continuing CPIB investigations, Singapore clinched the Malaysian Premier League title at the end of August after winning twelve of their last fourteen matches.

Although rocked by his run-ins with anti-corruption officials, Abbas played an important role, scoring twenty goals from twenty-six matches. The night Singapore clinched the League title was at the National Stadium against bitter rivals and defending champions Kedah. In fact, the Lions had to play another game a week later against lowly ranked Brunei to ensure victory, but it is the Kedah match that everyone remembers.

The Lions had a rollercoaster ride to the top of the League table but got off to a good start by winning the first four matches of the thirty-match-a-side competition. With seven matches to go, the Lions were seven points behind the leaders and had to win virtually every game to stand a chance of taking the title.

With three matches remaining, Singapore climbed to the top of the table—five points ahead of Kedah. But unexpectedly the Lions lost to Johor 1-0 at the National Stadium, setting up a do or die match on August 20 against Kedah to decide the title.

The game attracted the biggest crowd in years—more than 60,000, and even the Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong was there adding his authoritative voice to an almighty Kallang Roar.

“That was some game,” Abbas says. “It was one of the fastest and toughest games I’ve played and I loved it. Kedah came out with all guns blazing and so did we. Kedah and Singapore were two of the best teams at the time and there was a fierce rivalry especially after we had lost to Kedah in both Malaysia Cup finals in 1990 and 1993. It was a classic game, very physical and there was not much between the two sides. Both teams were prepared to do almost anything to win because the title was on the line. But we were hungrier and the roar of the home crowd was inspiring. It really picked us up and kept us on our toes when we tired in the final minutes.”

In one of the most exciting and hotly contested games ever played at the stadium, the Lions triumphed 2-1, thanks again to Singapore’s lethal striking combination.

Abbas didn’t score but had a superb game all round and pipped Fandi for the man of the match award. He ran his heart out, tackling and putting the Lions on the attack time and time again against a wall of green and yellow Kedah defenders who tried to take him out. In the opening minutes he was kicked in the hips by a Kedah defender and looked certain of taking an early shower. But he took a few deep breaths and kept going. He did his bit at the back too with some timely clearing kicks to get

the Lions out of trouble. Kedah didn't have a bad game, in fact, they had many chances. But Singapore made the most of their opportunities as Fandi netted two goals to Kedah's one.

Fandi's second in the seventy-ninth minute was one of the best that year. Malek got the ball rolling with a tenacious tackle before passing to Abbas who was tearing down the right flank. Again the mental telepathy between the 'Twin Terrors' came into play as Abbas booted a scorching cross into the box for a diving Fandi to head into the net.

"I don't know if the fans thought we could overcome Kedah because they had beaten us so many times in important matches," says Abbas. "It was sweet revenge, not only because we beat them at home but because it virtually sealed the crystal trophy for us. Winning in front of 60,000 fans was the ultimate. I had a great game and so did all the other players. Having lost to Kedah three times, once for the Premier League title and twice in the Malaysia Cup final, made it all the more pleasing."

The following Tuesday, the Lions beat bottom placed Brunei 1-0 at Bandar Seri Begawan but it was enough to secure the title, the first for Abbas in Singapore colours and the republic's first major soccer trophy since 1980 when the Lions had beaten Selangor 2-1 in the Malaysia Cup final.

"It reminded me of playing in Johor. The team was so composed and committed to winning. It was fantastic. The pressure was almost too much to take because of match-fixing talk, but we put that out of our minds. The boys played superbly—played their hearts out and delivered the goods when it mattered most. Fandi and I were like twins, we thought as one on the field

and it worked perfectly for us all season. We were praised as the best striking combination in the region."

But there were some anxious moments when the FAM considered taking the crystal trophy off Singapore because of the Vana scandal. That didn't happen and the Lions started their Malaysia Cup campaign. Before the kick-off there was a three-week break for the team and Abbas returned home to Lebanon for the first time in twenty years. Borrowing money from Fandi (\$31,000) and Malek (\$5,000) he raised another \$45,000 to give to his father.

Winning a title with the Lions after such a long drought gave Abbas a sense of satisfaction. But it wasn't just the trophy and the glory that made him appreciate the moment for what it was. Actually it was a chance encounter with an eight-year-old boy that made the star footballer realise the importance of it all.

One afternoon Abbas put on a cap and sunglasses and went for a walk by himself at the East Coast. Along the way, he stopped to watch a group of children playing a friendly game of soccer. Abbas noticed that one boy, who was smaller than the rest, was unable to keep up with the others. After a while, the boy gave up and walked away, towards Abbas.

"Hey," Abbas said to the boy as he passed him.

The boy stopped and looked up.

"What are you doing?" Abbas asked.

The boy, not knowing if he should talk to the stranger in the cap and dark sunglasses, stood silently but waited trustingly for the next question.

"Why don't you get back out there and have a go?" Abbas said. "Don't give up."

The boy looked down at his skinny legs and back at Abbas as if to say, "Haven't you noticed I'm too small to keep up with the other kids?"

Abbas said, "Anything is possible if you really try. Did you see the Lions beat Kedah the other night at the stadium?"

The boy nodded. "I was there," he said softly.

"Well, they were confident of winning even though many people thought they couldn't do it," said Abbas.

"That's why I was playing," the boy said. "I want to be just like Abbas Saad but I don't think I will," he added.

Abbas took off his cap and sunglasses and saw the boy's eyes widen and his smile extend from ear to ear.

"Abbas Saad," the boy said in amazement.

Abbas knelt beside the boy. "You can be like me," he said. "I was just a normal kid like you and people told me I would never make it as a footballer. They told me I was too small and after I had a car accident they said my career was over. But I proved them wrong and so can you. Just keep at it, that's all."

The boy's mouth was still open but he managed to say a few words. "One day I want to play for the Lions, like you," he said.

"Well what are you doing here then, go and get 'em," Abbas said.

The boy took a few steps back and almost tripped on a branch as he turned and ran towards the other children playing soccer.

"Thanks Abbas," the boy squealed over his shoulder.

Abbas frowned, then smiled as he noticed something different about the boy. "He's running faster," he thought. "He's keeping up with the others."

On the eve of his trial at the end of September 1994, Michal Vana disappeared, embarrassing the authorities and adding fuel to speculation of his guilt. It was later discovered Vana had fled Singapore for his home in Prague. His bail was forfeited by the Singapore courts and today he remains a fugitive. Legally he can't be sent back to Singapore from the Czech Republic because there are no extradition laws between the two countries. Vana currently lives with his family in Prague and coaches children.

One Night of Glory

Singapore continued its good form into the Malaysia Cup and finished with six wins and four draws. The team remained unbeaten for fifteen weeks. In the semi-finals, the Lions beat Ken Worden's Selangor 3-2 on aggregate and secured themselves a place in the final. Abbas was sitting on a bed in a room at the Pan Pacific Glen Marie Hotel in Kuala Lumpur. It was Saturday night, December 17, 1994 and in a few hours the Malaysia Cup final, between Singapore and Pahang, would be won or lost. But whatever the outcome, Abbas had made a decision about his future—he would be leaving Singapore forever.

There was a knock at the door. "Come on Abbas, it's time to go," one of the Singapore team officials called out. "We're all going down to the bus now," he added.

"OK, I'll be out in a minute," Abbas replied. "I just need a few minutes to myself." Tears welled in his eyes as he put his hands on his head and took a few deep breaths. "Please God, let

this be our night," he whispered. "This is my last game for Singapore. I want to go out a winner." Shaking his head quickly and regaining composure, Abbas jumped off the bed. "Let's do it," he said as he packed his football boots into his bag.

The bus ride seemed to take forever. The traffic had built up steadily in the past hours as thousands of fans made their way to the massive Shah Alam Stadium. Recognising the team bus, some of them waved and banged on the windows. Inside, Abbas sat alone, unaware of the commotion outside. Like most of the other players he had little to say but the voices in his head were nagging. At first just whispers, drowned out by the noises of the surroundings that had become so familiar to him before a game. Abbas sat silently as he let the wave of emotion take on a life of its own. He knew, just like all the other times, that he was powerless to stop it. His heart, his soul, his very spirit remained focused on the job ahead but those voices, those constant, nagging voices kept asking, "What if we lose?" Even Abbas, who as a professional sportsman was fearless and who on the field had the ability to look adversity in the eye and triumph, was completely and hopelessly at the mercy of the voices. As he closed his eyes and let his head flop against the cold comfort of the dusty window, he tasted fear—and it tasted good. "It was a strange feeling. I was scared, but I wasn't that uptight," he remembers.

In the dressing rooms, Abbas sat down and stared at his teammates and wondered what was going through their minds. "I kept trying to think positive," he says. "I hoped they all had the same thoughts as me. I wanted to stand up and tell them what to do and how to play and how we couldn't lose again. But deep down I knew I didn't have to tell them anything. And if I did, then they shouldn't have been in the dressing room that night. So I kept to

myself. Douglas was cool, calm and collected—on the outside anyway. He said we had done the hard work and we just had to play our normal game. Stick to the game plan. I didn't think about scoring, I just thought about playing well and being in the right place at the right time. There were many things going on in my head. I felt sick when it crossed my mind that we could lose but I felt charged thinking about what it would mean to win."

Deafened by the thunderous roar of the 81,000 strong crowd—50,000 of them Singaporean, the No 9 shivered with nervous tension as he ran onto the field. The stage was set. The referee blew his whistle. The battle for the hotly contested Malaysia Cup had begun. After a tentative start, both teams settled into the game. The nerves were showing but Abbas was running his heart out and it was evident he could turn the match in Singapore's favour.

"When I was on the field, I thought this is the same feeling I've experienced in two previous Malaysia Cup finals for Singapore and we had lost both. I said to myself, 'Forget about it and focus on winning.' I had to make it happen. It was going to be a great night or a tragic night because it was going to be my farewell. I had to play my normal game.

"When I first touched the ball I knew straight away I would have a good game, I felt the best I had for months. After five minutes I knew it would happen for us, we were on top and Pahang looked lost."

Then, in the twenty-fifth minute with Singapore on the attack, Abbas stamped his authority on the game and finished off a classy move he had started deep in Pahang's territory.

Kicking to Saswadimata Dasuki, who was unchallenged on the right, he charged towards the Pahang goal. Saswa, on the fly, floated the ball into the danger zone which was being protected by four Pahang players. Singapore's Nazri Nasir threw himself at the ball before it brushed past his head and on to the trusty right boot of Abbas. Then, in the blink of an eye, Abbas thumped it into the top of the net.

The stadium erupted and Singapore pulsed with the combined enthusiasm of a nation. Abbas rose his arms in triumph and sprinted across field. The Pahang players shook their heads. It was going to be a long night.

"That goal gave me the power and drive to keep going full steam ahead," Abbas says. "I was fully charged and nothing could stop me or the team—Singapore was on a roll. From then on I knew we could keep going forward."

His second goal came in the fifty-fourth minute when he left the opposition for dead in the midfield and tapped the ball past the goalie following another Singaporean onslaught.

For his third in the sixty-fourth minute, he outran and out-classed two defenders before beating the goalie and deftly chipping the ball into the right hand corner of the net.

But it wasn't until his striking partner and best friend Fandi Ahmad scored and sealed victory, that Abbas had a change of heart which would alter the course of his life.

Ironically it was Abbas who set up Singapore's last goal in the sixty-sixth minute when he made a break and sent a pass, like a guided missile, to Fandi on the left who chested the ball and casually slammed it home into the corner of the net.

"Fandi and I had an incredible understanding on the field," Abbas recalls. Most of the time we didn't even have to look to know where each other was. It was uncanny, when we were attacking we knew each other's moves and positioning. That's why we became such a force in the region. The 'Twin Terrors' is what they called us because we terrorised the opposition."

The scoreboard flashed: Singapore 4, Pahang 0. The crowd danced with joy. Abbas was named man of the match capping off the greatest game of his career.

The Malaysia Cup was Singapore's for the first time in fourteen years. The Lions had tried and failed in 1990 and 1993. In 1994, they not only succeeded but crushed Pahang, recording the biggest victory in the Cup's history. The season of shame had ended in glory.

"I ran up to Fandi after the last goal and we embraced. I'll never forget what he whispered—"You can't go, you can't leave us. Thank you Abbas thank you."

"That brought tears to my eyes, he wanted to win so much. 'You've got to stay,' he said. I made up mind right there and then that I was staying in Singapore. I couldn't leave even though I had better offers from Selangor, Kuala Lumpur and Kedah. I just couldn't and in all honesty I didn't want to, especially after the Malaysia Cup win. My heart was with Singapore.

"After what Fandi said everything seemed to change. For the first time I felt like I was really a part of Singapore. That night was one of the greatest moments of my life. We took three times to do it for Singapore but I wouldn't have it any other way. I don't think I had played so well in a final. I'd already tasted Malaysia Cup victory but this wasn't the same because when I won it with



Top: President of Singapore, Ong Teng Cheong, congratulates Abbas and the Lions on their Premier League title, while Omar Ibrahim listens on.

Bottom: Abbas accepts a warm handshake from the Sultan of Pahang and FAM President after his man of the match performance in the Malaysia Cup final.

Johor I didn't play as I was suspended. If we had lost in 1994 I don't think I could have put myself through the sorrow and disappointment again. And I thought that someone else could have taken my position and tried to do the job that I couldn't complete. But it didn't turn out like that and I'm grateful."

After the game, Abbas celebrated with the team and officials at the hotel before retiring to his room with a few close friends to relax and recollect. "It ended up being a quiet night with close friends. I had to get away from all the fuss, so I just sat back in the room and thought about the game and my future. Maybe I was getting old and mature because in the past I would have been out partying for the next week. But that night I just wanted to mellow out."

Singapore had done what most thought Singapore could not when it won the Malaysia Cup for the first time in fourteen years. Abbas had played a starring role. He scored a hat-trick and confirmed his status as one of the all time great footballers in South-east Asia.

But again match-fixing, to some extent, overshadowed the victory. Even the night before the final coach Douglas Moore received a phone call and was told all his players were on the take.

"The bribery accusations were worse than ever during the Malaysia Cup," Abbas says. "Douglas got a call saying five of our players were going to throw the game. There was a lot of pressure in that respect because no one knew if it was true or not.

"But we wanted to win so badly and I wasn't going to let stupid talk affect me. There was no way I was going to lose the final a third time with Singapore, that would have been too much

to take. I knew if we played our normal game and Fandi and myself got the ball within striking distance, we would win.

"We could sense victory early in the game. You could see it in the players' eyes and you could feel it in the air. It was one of the most enjoyable nights of my life. Before the kick-off I wasn't as nervous as previous finals. I prayed before the game but I had a gut feeling we would win. I was more relaxed during that final than in any other final I've played. We were underdogs and Pahang had a great team. They had beaten us before. But during the finals we were on a roll. We hadn't been beaten in fifteen matches. In the final, we had nothing to lose.

"I stayed on with the Lions because we won and because the players wanted to stick together. Fandi, Malek and myself wanted to play out our last years together. We had virtually the same team and some of the youngsters were improving. We thought we could do it again in 1995. We were one big happy family and that's why I came back. I'm loyal and I was loyal to the players and the fans. Seeing 60,000 fans cheering us on at the stadium week in week out I couldn't leave; they would never have forgiven me. If I had left, I would have probably gone to a Malaysian team, maybe Hong Kong or maybe even to Europe. But there was no way I could have played against Singapore after what I had been through over the years.

"There was a lot of built up anger and frustration before the final and when I scored a hat-trick and played a big part in bringing back the trophy for Singapore it made me a happy man. I saw the happiness on the fans' faces after the final and to me that's worth more than a million dollars. There were tears of joy, people were hugging strangers, we had changed people's lives for the

better and we were bringing people of different races and religions together. When the whistle blew to end the match, I just stood there for a moment and took it all in. It made me forget everything, all the bad things. If life could always be like that moment, then life would be perfect."

But what would follow for Abbas Saad was anything but perfect. The Lions' Malaysia Cup victory was a headline grabber for weeks across the region. But it was comparatively insignificant compared to the match-fixing and football related dramas that were just around the corner. And because of the ensuing problems the Malaysia Cup final was to be Abbas' last game for Singapore in Malaysian football and possibly his last in any final.

As pressure mounted from Malaysian soccer and anti-corruption authorities for Singapore to clean up match-fixing, the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau continued its probe into the national team. It soon became clear that Abbas was at the top of the list. The FAM issued an ultimatum to the FAS to weed out corruption or face expulsion from the Malaysian Premier League and Malaysia Cup competitions and so the FAS set about exposing the corrupt elements in the sport in Singapore.

Shortly after the Malaysia Cup, Abbas signed a two-year contract with Singapore which could have seen him play out his career with the Lions. With endorsements and sponsorship totalling hundreds of thousands of dollars, he would earn close to a million dollars. He was on top of the world. It was a difficult decision to make because he had received even bigger offers from two Hong Kong clubs, one offering him S\$26,000 a month, as well as a few other offers to play in Europe.

But despite all the success in 1994, his meteoric rise to glory was to be matched by his fall from grace in 1995—A year which would prove to be his lowest yet. In the space of six months he went from a heroic match winner to a convicted match-fixer—banned from playing the game for life.

He thought everything he had gone through in the past was forgotten. He thought the worst was over. But it was just the beginning. What had surfaced during the 1994 Malaysian Premier League and Malaysia Cup seasons was to become the biggest match-fixing scandal ever seen in the region.

Abbas was to be charged and tried for match-fixing in what was to be Singapore's most prominent and publicised scandal in years. Those at the top wanted heads to roll and roll they did. Abbas Saad's was one of them. His head hasn't stopped spinning since.

The Lions

He will be remembered for being one of the greatest footballers to grace the playing field in Asia. But Abbas Saad would never have achieved so much without his team-mates, especially the Singapore Lions. Over a period of five years he played with and became friends with a variety of talented, dedicated and not so dedicated Lions. Sometimes the camaraderie between them was unlike any other Abbas has experienced, at other times the team spirit was non-existent. When Abbas refers to the Lions—the good times and the bad—he never lets a sentence pass without mentioning the likes of Fandi, Malek, Alistair, Sundram, and even Vana. All of these players made their mark on the game and on Abbas—for different reasons.

When Abbas came to play for the Lions in 1990 it took him a few weeks to fit in. Apart from the language and cultural differences, the Aussie striker with the big reputation and bigger than average ego had to prove himself to his new team-mates—both as a team player and as a friend.

"It took me a while to slot into the team, not only on the field but as someone the others could trust off it. In the first few weeks no one could understand the way I spoke and I couldn't understand them so we communicated with hand gestures and smiles and that was good enough for all of us. We all got on well, I mean there were a couple of players who were a bit reluctant to accept me but that was probably understandable considering I was an Australian and perhaps to some of them I was taking the spot that could have been filled by a local. It was easy for me to fit in on the field. Their style of play was a little different but the standard wasn't what I was used to. At first, I only lasted forty-five minutes because of the humidity. I couldn't play a whole game, I just didn't have the stamina. So I would run my heart out in the first half and do as much damage as possible."

Abbas' reputation off the playing field was tainted by a number of incidents during his playing years with the Lions in Singapore. Most would agree they were minor hiccups, just part and parcel of growing up and having fun. But certain officials in the team management, who were not used to such a personality, such an upfront and often cheeky player, took offence to Abbas' attitude.

He didn't do himself or his reputation any favours during one trip in 1990 when, by mistake, he came knocking at the coach's door after a big night out—at 3 a.m. It was the morning after an away match in Malaysia and as usual Abbas had been partying all night with a local girlfriend and was the last one to leave the nightclub.

"As the story goes, I got back to the hotel really late and I couldn't remember which room I was staying in and I didn't have my keys. When I finally found the room, which I thought was

mine, I started making a racket, banging on the door and yelling out, 'Alistair, open the bloody door before I get into trouble.' The next thing I knew the door flung open and there was my coach standing there, eyes half open and looking really angry. I nearly fell over. I just said, 'Sorry, wrong room.' He told me where my room was and I quickly walked off. The next day we all had a laugh about it but I'm sure the coach and the rest of the officials weren't too impressed. I mean it was harmless fun, a genuine mistake on my part, but it didn't do my rep any good. I know there were a couple of officials who thought I was a bad seed that influenced some of the other players."

Over the three seasons he played for Singapore from 1990, Abbas made a lot of friends—some closer than others. But none were as close or more important than Lions team captain Fandi Ahmad and his former team-mates Malek Awab and Michal Vana.

Because Abbas shared hotel rooms with them during away games with the Lions he got to know them like no one else, except perhaps their girlfriends. It wasn't by choice that he shared rooms and sometimes beds with these players. The coach, more often than not, would pair strikers and midfielders together so that they could talk about the game and discuss set moves and the opposition.

But, according to Abbas, it wasn't always fun and games. And, if he had a choice, he would rather have slept by himself on many occasions to get away from the off key singing and laughing Fandi, the sleepwalking Alistair, the deadly looking Malek and the heavy drinking Czech, Michal Vana.

"I never got a good night's sleep when I roomed with Fandi because he sings in his sleep. He will deny it of course but I swear

he sings—loudly and out of tune. Not only that, but he also laughs in his sleep and I'm sure he will deny that too. So many times I've been asleep in the same room as Fandi and suddenly I'll hear this wicked laughter and I'll jump up scared out of my brain and then I'll look over and see Fandi laughing in his sleep. Sometimes his singing and laughing got so bad I had to wake him up. He would just deny it and tell me off for waking him up. But we never really fought for real. Fandi and I are good friends to this day. We forged a special partnership on the field that put us in a class of our own and off the field we continued that friendship. I've played with some of the best but they don't come any better than Fandi, as a player or as a person.

"As for Alistair Edwards, he was far worse to share a room with. He used to sleepwalk all the time and many times when we were together I would wake up and find him trying to get out of the room. I've had to get up and steer him back to his bed. Once I woke him up when he had been sleepwalking and I asked him what he was doing and he said, 'Nothing, just sleeping.' Alistair is also a very close friend. We've played together for many years and have shared some special times that I will never forget.

"Then there's Malek. He sleeps like a corpse; on his back, arms by his side and eyes open. The first time I was in with him I tried to wake him in the morning because I thought he was dead. He doesn't make any noise and lies really still. But even when you try to wake him he doesn't move because he's a heavy sleeper. No wonder he had so much energy to play hard and fast every week. Malek is a laugh a minute and we have had some top times. So now everyone knows why sometimes I didn't play or look my best every time the Lions played. It was because my best mates kept me awake all night."

But the one player who, more than any other, would change Abbas Saad's life and career forever was Michal Vana, a player for whom age and injury was signalling the end of his own career and who would find the promise of easy money irresistible. In spite of Vana's role in his own downfall, Abbas remembers him for his ability as a player and as a good friend.

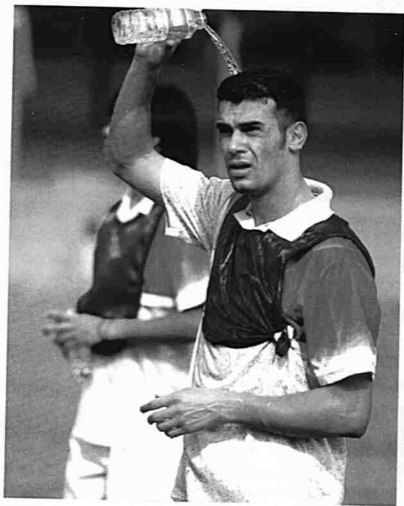
"As for Vana, well, he likes a drink and I haven't been in a hotel room with him where he hasn't raided and emptied the mini-bar. He's a lot of fun, a very individual type of guy and I like him for that. We had our ups and downs over the years but the good times far outweigh any of the problems we had. He was a good bloke. I reckon Vana, when he was in top shape, was one of the best forwards running around in the region. When he played for Sabah, he proved his worth and as a result came to Singapore and was selected in the national side.

"His only problem was that he was injury prone and he spent a lot of time on the bench. He was a real character though. I know that a lot of people hated him because he was a smart-arse but deep down he was OK. He just didn't fit in. He was very personal and didn't open up to many people and that didn't go down well in Singapore. When he didn't like something or someone he would say so. He spoke his mind and wasn't afraid of the consequences. I suppose he was a bit like me in that respect and that's why we were friends. It's always been difficult for me to keep my mouth shut. My mouth has always got me into trouble. I talk with my heart instead of my head. That has always been a problem but that's the type of guy I am and only now have I learnt to be more careful about who I associate with and what I say to anyone.



Abbas threads another goal through the defence. In 1991 he won the Golden Boot Award for the most goals in the League competition, after narrowly missing out in 1990 when it was won by Alistair Edwards.

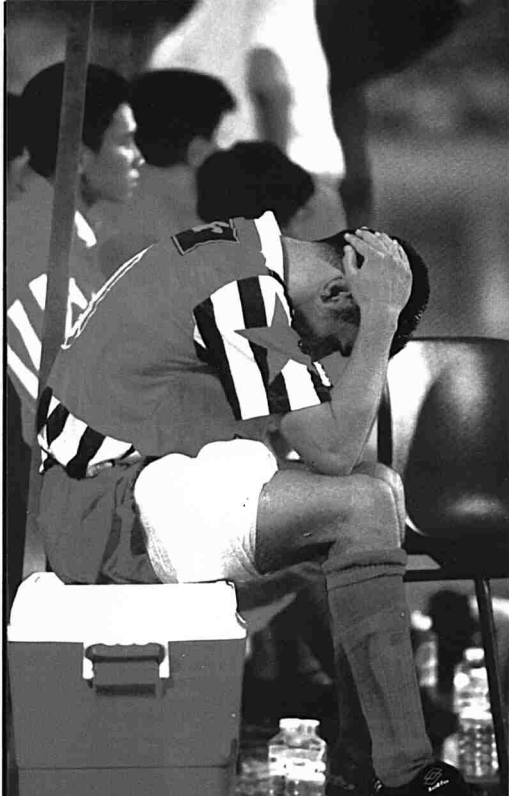




Above: Cooling off at training. When Abbas first trained with the Lions he only lasted twenty minutes before collapsing from heat exhaustion.

Left: Showing off one of the fittest bodies in soccer. Douglas Moore describes Abbas as, "One of the most naturally gifted and fit players I've seen."

Following page: The disappointment shows as Abbas ices a hamstring injury. He would sometimes carry an injury into a game rather than miss a match.



"There was one time when Vana's big mouth almost got him kicked out of the side. He had this fight with the management in 1994 when we were in Brisbane, Australia on a training tour. We were all at a restaurant and he complained that the portion of food wasn't enough and he just went off and abused everyone in the restaurant. We were served chicken breast and they were tiny portions and he got up and said, 'This chicken is for chicken! My son eats more chicken than this!' He almost threw his plate of food across the room. He was ranting and raving and the management were going to sack him but I talked them out of it. Vana did have a point. There wasn't enough food to feed a starving child let alone a football team.

"Vana was a joker and on that same tour in Brisbane he got tagged Superman because at the theme park, Movieworld on the Gold Coast, he dressed up in a Superman outfit and made a fool of himself. But he loved it and so did we. The rest of the boys then tagged me Superboy because I was his room-mate. We did a lot of stupid things when we travelled that most football teams have done at one time or another. We used to lock each other out of the rooms, stay out late, play cards and bring girls up to the rooms.

"We did all those things but when it came to playing the game there was no mucking around. We all played hard. I know many players like Sundram, Vana and others have their enemies but they're still good players and both helped Singapore win important matches."

As far as Abbas is concerned, every match he played for Singapore was important. He always played hard but what made him more determined to win and to prevail as one of the best each

time he ran onto the field was the fact that many of his teammates looked up to him and expected his genius at all times. They may have learnt a great deal from the never say die Australian but Abbas will never take all the credit for the success they shared. He's played with a host of champion footballers, both foreign and local during his years in Southeast Asia. Ask him to name his top eleven, his dream team, and some of his selections are obvious, but some are a little more surprising.

"In goal I would have Singapore's David Lee. He's big and strong and has been around for years. In the sweeper position I'd have Korean Jang Jung, who played with the Lions in 1993 and 1994, with Nazri Nasir. Malek Aweb and Kadir Yahaya as left and right backs. In the midfield I'd put myself in an attacking position with Nasir Yusof. Michal Vana or V. Sundramoorthy on one wing and Alistair Edwards on the other. People might question Vana's inclusion but when he's in form he's a great player. Up front the strikers would be Fandi Ahmad and Johor's Ervin Boban. They're the best players I've played with over the years in the region."

Abbas suffered a lot of injuries throughout his playing career, many of them while running out for the Lions. But he never suffered any, except as a boy, which threatened to put a stop to his career, his natural fitness carrying him a long way. He says he was lucky because as a striker he was a target for many teams trying to put him out of the game—a broken arm, torn ankle ligaments, hamstring strains just some of the telling blows which did see him have to sometimes watch his team from the sidelines.

"Everyone knows I was always a target on the field. Coaches instructed players to take me out of the game. Against Selangor,

who were one of the toughest sides physically, I only ever completed one game and that was in 1994. Not being the biggest striker in the game it was tougher for me to put up with the heavy knocks.

"The biggest disappointment as far as injuries goes was in 1991 when I broke my hand playing in a Malaysia Cup quarter-final match. Apart from that I survived relatively unscathed."

Abbas was kept out of the game for other reasons as well but mainly because of his inability to keep his mouth shut. In 1991, he visited the Football Association of Malaysia headquarters three times and was fined after abusing officials.

"I'm a competitive footballer and because of that I'm very outspoken. I know in my early days I became one of the bad boys of Malaysian soccer because of my back-chatting. But I only ever disputed a decision when I honestly thought my team had been hard done by. Obviously with all the match-fixing problems there were times when I couldn't restrain myself from abusing the officials. I got fed up and after a while I started telling refs and linesmen what I thought. I know that a lot of teams didn't want me or couldn't afford to have me in their side because of my big mouth. They thought because of all my suspensions that I missed more games than I played. When I came back to Singapore I had to restrain myself and bite my tongue, I couldn't let bad calls affect me. I wanted to win with the Lions."

In 1993, Abbas only received two yellow cards throughout the season. In 1994, he had an unblemished record.

"In 1994 the team was at a peak and so was I. I proved mentally that I could control my feelings and with that my game improved. The Lions won both the Premier League title and the



Fandi and Abbas displaying the spoils of victory after the Lions were crowned 1994 Malaysian Premier League champions. During the season the two strikers proved to be the most lethal forward combination in the competition. "We were like brothers," says Abbas, "we played on instinct and we just knew where each other would be on the field and what the other was thinking—we were partners, on and off the field." Three months later the Football Association of Singapore withdrew from the Malaysian Premier League and Abbas was axed from the team, ending the on-field partnership.

Malaysia Cup final. The Lions were my life for such a long time and ending 1994 with two titles was the icing on the cake. And that achievement would never have happened if it weren't for the coach and every single player who gave it their best."

There is no doubt the Lions have missed Abbas since he was axed from the side, a view expressed by many including former coach and now chief executive officer of the S-league, Douglas Moore.

"At the moment no one in Singapore can take his place and because of that opposition teams defensively are concentrating exclusively on Fandi and they are shutting him down. The Fandi and Abbas combination ranks as one of the best ever—they're like siamese twins. In the heat of battle they invented things that cannot be practised at training and that's the mark of a true champion. It's rare for two striking partners to be as close on and off the field. Abbas will be missed. He will be replaced but its doubtful Fandi will find the same connection with someone other than Abbas Saad," says Moore.

With the triumphs of his time with the Lions now just memories Abbas is coming to terms with a life that doesn't include football. Even before the nation had stopped celebrating the Lions' 1994 Cup win Abbas had become embroiled in the controversy that would change the game forever. Soccer was in the headlines but this time the news was not good and the word on everyone's lips was match-fixing.

Match-Fixing

In the eyes of soccer fans across Southeast Asia match-fixing, better known as kelong, has destroyed the essence of a sport which to them was the greatest game of all. These days it is impossible to watch a game without thinking that it may be rigged. If a goalkeeper fails to make a save, it's hard not to look at him without pointing the finger. If a striker misses a penalty, then he's got to be on the take. As fair play and sportsmanship yield to the lure of easy money the football fans' loss becomes the bookies' gain. For decades, many big matches have allegedly been rigged by bookmakers who have cleaned up to the tune of millions of dollars a game. In 1994, wild accusations of players being involved in match-fixing resulted in investigations by the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau in Singapore and the Anti Corruption Agency in Malaysia.

As the worldwide recession of the late 1980s was extinguishing the last excesses of the 'greed is good' style of business management, one industry proved to be recession proof. Illegal soccer betting and match-fixing continued to provide those involved with

huge profits at the expense of soccer fans throughout Singapore and Malaysia. With suspicion comes accusation and by the early 1990s speculation over who was involved and for how much was the talk of the town. Some of the accusations, innuendo and rumours that fuelled the fires of suspicion at this time were close to farce and may have been laughable if it were not for the sad fact that many believed that where there was smoke a fire raged, and for the unfortunate reality that mud sticks.

Former Singapore star striker Abbas Saad was 'on the take' since 1990 and made close to two million dollars from fixing matches in the Malaysian Premier League and Malaysia Cup competitions; his former team-mate Michal Vana paid a bookmaker one million dollars to ensure his safe passage back to Prague after he was charged with fixing games in 1994; and all four Malaysia Cup finals Singapore had played in since 1981 had been fixed.

These are some of the many fictional stories which did the rounds during what has become known as 'the season of shame.' But soccer corruption and match-fixing existed, and in 1994, authorities in Singapore, Malaysia and as far away as England made a gallant attempt to clean up the game. Their investigations uncovered a massive syndicate with connections worldwide and by mid 1995, some of the biggest names in the game had been charged and convicted and some even banished from their countries for corrupting the sport.

In England it was high profile Zimbabwe born goalkeeper Bruce Grobbelaar, former England and Aston Villa striker John Fashanu, Wimbledon's Dutch goalkeeper Hans Segers and Malaysian businessman Heng Suan Lim who made headlines when they were charged in July 1995, with conspiring to fix matches in

the English Premier League. There were startling accusations and alleged video evidence that Grobbelaar took bribes from an Asian gambling syndicate to influence results during his thirteen years with Liverpool.

In Singapore it was Australian striker Abbas Saad, Czech midfielder Michal Vana, former national player K. Kannan, ex-football club president Ong Kheng Hock and referee T. Rajamanickam who were charged with match-fixing in the Malaysian Premier League. A self-confessed soccer bookmaker, who was instrumental in the convictions of those who would later face trial and who admitted to orchestrating much of the match-fixing activity that season, was himself able to avoid having to answer to the court.

In Malaysia, about 150 players and officials were arrested on suspicion of rigging matches in the National League. No player was convicted in court, but to date twenty-five players and two coaches have been sentenced to external exile in remote areas of the country for two years under the Restricted Residence Act which empowers the Home Minister to banish individuals to remote districts of the country without an open trial. Also, fifty-seven players and an assistant coach were suspended for between one and four years.

A month after arriving in Singapore in 1990 Abbas came face to face with the multi-million dollar kelong industry, but it wasn't on the football field, as he might have expected, it was in a trendy nightclub.

"This is going to be a good night," Abbas thought as he and team-mate Alistair Edwards got dressed and headed to the city to celebrate the Lions' big win. How wrong he was. At the popular

nightspot Abbas and Alistair had a few drinks, mingled with the crowd and spoke to fans about that night's game in which Alistair had scored twice.

Everything was going fine until Abbas noticed three wealthy looking businessmen signalling for them to join their party. Abbas and Alistair thought they were fans and joined the group. But after a while the two footballers realised they were more than fans when one of the men told Alistair that he had made their lives difficult by scoring twice in the game that night. Confused, the Aussie duo looked at each other and were about to walk away when one of the men grabbed Abbas' arm and explained who he and his friends were. He then dumped a wad of \$500 notes on the table.

"They said they were soccer gamblers and were betting on matches in the Malaysian competition," Abbas recalls. "One of them said they had lost lots of money because of the score in the match we had just played. I was confused because I wasn't sure what they were talking about. I didn't know that match-fixing was a big part of the game. One of the men explained that kelong had been going on for many years and many players were involved. They then asked if we wanted to get involved and threw a big bunch of \$500 notes on the table. They said it was ours if we wanted to take part. They said to consider it an introduction fee and that there was plenty more if we wanted it. We were dumbfounded. There must have been about \$30,000 on the table; that's about the average yearly income in Australia. I'd never seen so much cash. I looked at it, looked at the men, looked at Alistair and said, 'Let's get out of here.' We didn't know what to do but we left the club and went home. I knew these guys were big time and I didn't want to get involved. I thought it was best not to

report the incident because I thought there was nothing anyone could do and someone might come after me. The whole thing was pretty scary. After that I was never confronted again. I think they knew we didn't want to be part of whatever it was they were doing."

In all the countries and towns Abbas had played football in over the past twenty-eight years, he never knew match-fixing existed until he moved to Singapore. At first he thought it was the low standard of football in the region but he soon realised that certain players, linesmen and referees were making the same strange mistakes week in, week out. That's about the same time he learnt the meaning of *kelong*—a word which had surfaced in football circles and a word he was to hear over and over again in the following years.

But it wasn't just the players, past and present, who he heard were on the take. He even heard some officials in the FAS were involved.

"When I first came to Singapore, I didn't know any better but in the first season match-fixing rumours started about the Singapore team. It was the first time I had come across match-fixing or this '*kelong*' thing. I had overheard that fans were betting illegally on matches but I had no idea players, coaches and even referees and linesmen were involved in rigging matches. I honestly thought it was all talk as a ploy to make us lose, to psych us out, so I didn't take much notice. But I soon realised it must have been of major concern to officials because now and then the management would address the problem and ask us if we had been approached or if we would like to talk to them about the whispers. But I don't think those scare tactics made a difference.

Over the years I've heard so many things about people, well known people, that make you laugh. I've heard lots of players' names being mentioned in match-fixing stories. I've been told who's on the take. Many of them have supposedly been involved for years. But let me say this: it's not just the players, I've been told certain high-ranking officials are involved. The authorities know who the guilty people are. There are many people who have not been touched.

"In my first season there were these people who knew the players and spoke to them before and after games. I don't know who they were, I suppose you call them fans. They had some kind of business going on but I don't know how it worked. I was told some players were on the take and I started to keep an eye on players who weren't putting one hundred percent in. Some were making mistakes which were inexcusable.

"I thought it was the footballers lack of experience but then I discovered that some of these guys could play better than what I was seeing, in particular goalkeepers. I've scored goals that should have been saved. Honestly, my mum could have saved them. But it wasn't just me. I saw other players score and I'd stop and think the goalie should have got to that.

"After a while it was disappointing to see. When people started talking about *kelong* I started looking for it. And after a while you start to believe that it's true. Then my name would pop up in this talk and I'd say, 'No way leave me out of this, I'm not involved.' And people in the streets would say things about match-fixing. I would just ignore them. I just went out there and did my job. As long as I put the ball in the back of the net and Singapore was winning, then that was good enough for me. It made life

difficult for me because as a high-profile player I couldn't do anything about the talk and what I was seeing on the field. I couldn't go to the management and put people in for what I *thought* was wrong. I couldn't accuse anyone of match-fixing without proof and I don't believe people are guilty just because someone points the finger at them."

It would be a lie, Abbas says, to say that no Malaysia Cup final has been fixed. In the past, many big games and their big name players have been bought. Some people believe the 1981 Malaysia Cup final which Singapore lost 4-0 to Selangor was fixed, and as a result, the CPIB investigated. In 1990 and 1993, many people had their doubts about the finals which Singapore lost, both to Kedah. In 1994, before the game between Singapore and Kedah to virtually decide the Malaysian Premier League title, Kedah coach Robert Alberts said a bookie told him his team would lose 2-1. Singapore won the match 2-1. The illegal bookie who made headlines in Singapore with his tales of woe in 1995 told the court that he fixed a number of Premier League games from the start of the season in March 1994. In fact, Malaysian authorities reported that at least eighty-five percent of games that season were fixed.

When Abbas thinks back to his first Malaysia Cup final with Singapore in 1990, he agrees that it could have been fixed.

"There was a lot of speculation that Singapore was bought, but I don't know if we were to blame. I know that we tried but we didn't get it together on the night. I remember I got taken out of the game early on when I was clobbered. It was an ordinary effort on the referee's part. I thought he was biased, he didn't give us a couple of blatant penalties that could have resulted in goals.

Thinking about it now, there's a possibility that he was bribed that night but the same goes for everyone on the pitch. I was on the losing side and the referee often takes the fall for a player's frustration at losing but the only way to know for sure if someone's on the take is to catch him in the act. He was the man in charge and it only takes one bad call to turn a match but that doesn't mean he was paid to do it, or that it wasn't just an honest mistake. One thing's for sure though, no one ever accused the Kedah strikers of match-fixing for trying to score as many goals as they could."

Abbas says he never heard much kelong talk in Malaysia in 1991 but in 1992 it was a different story.

"In 1991, we just played hard and won the double for Johor," he says. "In 1992, people were talking to the coach and telling him some of the boys were on the take. I didn't believe it until we went from champions to nothing in the space of a season. Something was wrong.

"I remember one away game in particular, when Johor played Terengganu, who were a pretty bad side. We went down 3-0 in the first twenty-five minutes and the game was lost. It was unbelievable, players just didn't do their jobs. They didn't run and they didn't defend.

"Then, on the return leg in Johor, they beat us 4-1. It was embarrassing. I knew something was up then. The players were out of position, tackles weren't being made, it was ridiculous. The coach was really upset after the game. He knew what was going on but he couldn't do anything. He just said if anyone wasn't pulling their weight they were out."

Abbas says 1993 was the year that kelong destroyed the game. Back in Singapore colours for the first time in two years he says that just about every game he played was alleged to have been fixed, the talk eventually taking its toll on the Aussie striker who felt like he could not make a single mistake on the field without being labelled a fixer.

"It got to the stage where I would go on to the field and all I could think about was not making a mistake because I knew I would be called a match-fixer. It had a big effect on the team. The pressure got too much for many of the players. Some even refused to play because they didn't want to be involved and didn't want to feel responsible if Singapore lost. I must admit it got to me as well. I couldn't concentrate on and off the field. I couldn't play the way I wanted. It affected our performance and we started to lose. Many of the younger players couldn't handle the situation. Then after a while, we said forget all this nonsense and get on with the game. We motivated one another to play well and win even though there were rumours about players, including myself."

One game in particular that Abbas will never forget was against Kedah in the first of the Malaysia Cup quarter-finals in October 1993. Abbas missed a penalty—the first he'd ever missed—and he was so ashamed by the mistake that he came off the field. The game ended in a 2-2 draw. If Abbas had scored, perhaps Singapore would have triumphed.

"It was nil-all at the time, about forty minutes into the match at the National Stadium," recalls Abbas. "It was a full house and Sundram got felled in a tackle and we got a penalty. I was told to take the shot. The adrenaline was pumping. There was a lot of

pressure. If we won that night we had a good chance of making the final. Anyway, the keeper put me off the shot. He was playing around in front of the goal. Normally I don't look at the keeper. I usually just make up my mind which way I'm going to kick it and go for it. For some reason I kept looking at the keeper and thinking, 'Which way, which way?' But I didn't make up my mind. I started feeling nervous and as I moved in for the kick I thought, 'Go to the keepers left' and as I did he baulked to the right and I changed my mind. That's the worst thing you can ever do. I didn't kick it properly. I hit it straight and hard and down the centre and the keeper dived to the right, stuck out his foot and saved it with his boot. There was nothing I could do. I felt like I had let the team down. I tried not to think about the shot but I was so disappointed. I felt ashamed. Some of my team-mates were coming up and saying, 'Don't worry about it,' but I couldn't get it out of my mind. I don't think I've ever felt so dejected on the field.

"The rumours about me started big time after that night. People were saying I missed it on purpose and that I was on the take. When I missed the shot I had to come off. I was so angry that I had missed and I thought about the consequences and I couldn't handle it. That's the only penalty I've missed in my life. It just shows the type of player I am. I'm a winner. Always have been. I can't stand losing. People expected me to play well that night and I let them down. But the last thing I needed was criticism from the fans. I torture myself enough without all that.

"The rumours about me being on the take were too much. I give my blood and sweat on the field not to be ridiculed off it. As a professional player that's such a kick in the face no matter who it comes from, whether it's the man in the street, the coach or the management. What makes that whole episode so ironic is that

when I was interrogated by officers at the CPIB headquarters in 1995, they asked me why I had missed that penalty. As if to say, 'You missed it on purpose.' Can you believe that?"

In 1994, the *kelong* cancer, as it became known, spread. It was often a talking point at training and before matches. "The money's on us tonight. We're going to win by two goals," coach Douglas Moore would jest to his players in the dressing rooms to ease the tension.

"We even knew who was going to score," Abbas says. "That's how pathetic it was. We would hear talk that players on the other team were being bribed to lose. Douglas used to get phone calls at all hours telling him the outcome of the next match. I felt sorry for him. It was hard enough for him trying to coach us without him being distracted by *kelong* talk. He would ask us what was going on. He asked me a few times if I was involved and I said no. He said he had heard things about me and I would just laugh and tell him not to worry about me. One time he told me someone had called him and said I was on the take. I thought he was joking but he was dead serious. I think he got a bit paranoid, which was fair enough. A lot of us did. I think he spoke to every player about *kelong* during the 1994 season. I think he knew that players, like Vana, were betting on matches. But I'm sure he believed us when we told him we weren't involved in fixing games. We proved that on the field—we won."

Tropical Singapore was without a doubt the centre of business activity for the ingenious but relatively simple match-fixing enterprises which were flourishing at that time. With the republic's wealth, bet-on-anything punters and lengthy football season stretching over ten months, illegal bookies cleaned up all year

round and could afford to pay players between \$15,000 and \$30,000 a game to do as they were told. Authorities say for each fixed match, bookies and go-betweens would enlist the services of players by promising cash, cars and even women. One bookie told a Singapore court during the joint trial of former national player K. Kannan and former soccer club boss, Ong Kheng Hock, that he travelled to Malaysia to bribe players to ensure that they let the Lions win. The same bookie told a court, during Abbas Saad's trial, that he paid former Lion Michal Vana a total of \$260,000 for his help in fixing seven Malaysian Premier League matches from April to July in 1994.

"As far as I'm concerned match-fixing is when someone plays for a scoreline, someone plays badly or does something for money. I never did that," says Abbas. "I've never played a game where I haven't given my best. There have been periods of say one, two or three matches where I haven't been at my best, but I've always tried. Even when I was injured I've wanted to play. I've played with a broken shoulder, a sprained ankle, a torn hamstring and torn ligaments. Why would I bother if I could play whenever I wanted and get paid more money than I ever dreamed of. Being well paid to play soccer is one thing and it's great but I love the game and I love to play the game. There's never a time I don't feel like playing in a match or just kicking a ball around, I do it in my sleep. It's more than a game to me, I'd give up almost anything for soccer but I wouldn't give it up for anything. That's my devotion to the game."

Tell Abbas Saad that he is a convicted match-fixer and he shakes his head as if to say, "No that's not true." Ask him if he has ever fixed a match and he will look you in the eye and tell you, "No, never. I definitely never conspired with anybody to fix

matches. I'm no match-fixer. OK, I admit I told Vana I would help Singapore win, that's all. I knew he was betting on games but that's all I thought it was. He said he was betting on Singapore to win and I believed him. He never told me to go out there and score 'x' amount of goals or to play to this or that scoreline. No way in the world have I ever given, or been prepared to give, less than one hundred percent. When I'm on the field I try to play my normal game and as long as everyone goes out there and plays their hardest that's fine. A lot of times I've played against footballers who haven't given their best. That's not right. But the game has been so good to me and I would never cheat the sport or the paying public. The last thing I would ever do would be to cheat my team-mates. I'd rather die than know that my team-mates and fans think I'm a cheat. Some people might say they would cheat me, but I would have to see it to believe it. I've heard many rumours over the years about my team-mates being on the take, but I'm not prepared to point the finger at any player. Sure, there are things that have happened that I cannot tell you because many well-known people are involved. It's none of my business. I'm sure the authorities know who the guilty ones are. Whether or not they will ever be charged I can't tell you, but I don't think so. They have made an example out of one player and maybe that's enough. Maybe I stayed a year too long but I have no regrets. My only problem was that I trusted too many people. My attitude was 'everything's going to be all right'—today I know that's not how it works."

The Malaysia Cup final in 1994. Fixed or not? Abbas would like to think not, even though coach Douglas Moore told the Lions before the kick-off that he'd been hearing stories that his players were on the take.

"He had a telephone call saying we were going to lose," Abbas recalls. "He said six or seven players were going to lose the game. I'm not sure if that's what the team wanted or needed to hear, but I think it did the trick. I think he had to tell us just in case it was true because he was better off trying to persuade any player who was bribed to play his normal game. But I'm not taking anything away from our team, even though some Pahang players were investigated after the final. We went out there and had a wonderful final and the best team won. No one in that squad wanted to let Singapore down, not after losing the final twice in recent years. It wasn't going to happen. Fandi and I had played in two losing Malaysia Cup finals for Singapore and we couldn't bear to see it happen again."

Despite the ups and downs, Abbas believes the game will never be the same in Southeast Asia. "The bookies have ruined the game in Singapore and Malaysia," he says. "And they have ruined a lot of players' lives. I don't think the players are the culprits. The bookies should be taking the blame. Some players gave in to their demands because they weren't getting paid enough. The lure of big bucks must be hard to resist for young players who are being paid nothing while overseas players are being paid millions."

National coach in 1994, Douglas Moore says he was aware of the whispers and innuendos surrounding games that year. He noticed opposition players who were obviously not trying as hard as one might expect but says he noticed nothing untoward with his players. "Everyone in the team and the officials worked hard to eradicate the problems. It's hard to believe my players were involved in anything because they played so well and fought tooth

and nail to win. When we drew games they went mad for not winning. I'm confident my players were on the up and up," he says.

When national player Michal Vana and referee T. Rajamanickam were arrested and charged with match-fixing in August 1994 Abbas Saad was 'blown away.'

Vana's arrest followed a massive kelong crackdown in the republic by senior Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau officers. Their investigations led them to one of the main players in the scheme—a notorious bookie who decided to sing after he was guaranteed immunity from prosecution. The bookie, whose name was suppressed because of fears for his life, named Vana as one of the players involved in the scheme. He also named former player K. Kannan and Changi United club president Ong Kheng Hock. He also mentioned other players in the Lions team, including Abbas Saad.

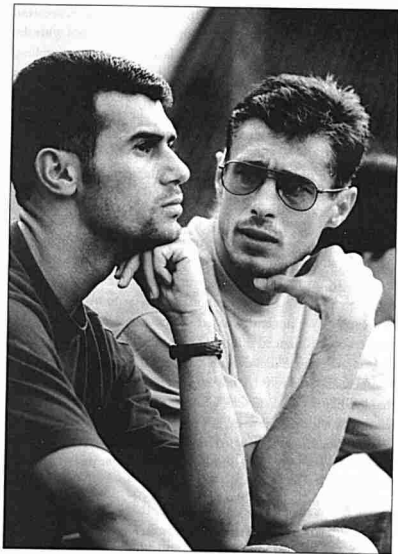
During the trial of Kannan and Ong and later during that of Abbas Saad, the bookie said he took bets on games of between \$60,000 and \$500,000 and rigged matches by paying players in one team to play their best and paying players in the opposing team to let the other side score. The bookie told investigators he had met Vana in a carpark at the East Coast one night in March 1994, after Vana had agreed to assist him to fix certain games. The meeting took place because the bookie wanted another player to help.

Abbas was with Vana the night of the meeting but never met the bookie. Vana later asked Abbas to help Singapore win matches and Abbas agreed. In July 1994, Abbas asked Vana for a loan of \$45,000 because he needed the money to give to his father who

was heading to Lebanon to repair the family home. Vana received \$45,000 from the bookie on July 30. Vana was arrested with the money on July 31 and charged. He faced six charges totalling \$375,000. It was alleged he accepted between \$30,000 and \$45,000 a game from a soccer bookmaker to influence the results of four matches in the Malaysian Premier League. On the eve of his trial, Vana fled the republic for Prague. He later admitted taking the money from the bookmaker to boost his sporting goods business. But he said he did not know the man he accepted the money from was a bookie.

"I wasn't around when Michal took off," says Abbas. "The first I heard about it was in the newspapers like everybody else. I'd seen Michal about a month before he disappeared and he seemed OK. As far as I knew he was going to fight the charges in court to clear his name. I was none the wiser to his future plans of escaping. We never discussed the case in detail. He just told me he was in financial difficulty with his business and was betting on matches to make some extra cash. I kept in contact with him because we were friends and he still is a friend despite all that has happened. When he left it was a shock to all those in the team. I don't know how he got out. A lot of stories were flying around about how he escaped but I don't know. Maybe he shaved his head, went to an island in Indonesia and got out from there. Who knows?"

In fact, Vana told a local newspaper that he used an Austrian soccer official's passport to flee the country on September 28. He said he took a speed boat to a neighbouring country before flying to Germany and then to Vienna before driving to Prague. When he got to Vienna he reported his passport lost and was issued with a new one. He then sent the Austrian passport back to his



Abbas and Michal Vana discuss tactics during training at Jalan Besar Stadium. "We shared a special friendship and respect for each other," says Abbas. That friendship would later lead to his implication in a match-fixing conspiracy.

friend. Ironically his flight to Germany had a stopover in Singapore and Vana had to keep a low profile. Whether anybody helped Vana arrange his escape from Singapore is unknown.

"I don't think that Vana was guilty of what he was accused of," Abbas said. "I don't think he knew what he had got involved in. Sure, he was betting on games and probably making lots of money but I think it's ridiculous for anybody to think he could fix a game himself or that I helped him fix games. From what I understand Michal was betting on Singapore to win. He was approached by this bookie guy and asked to play his best. And that's what Michal asked me to do. 'Play your best,' he told me. He said he would pay me about \$20,000 for doing that. And I said, 'Michal I don't want your money. That's your problem. I play my best all the time anyway so it doesn't matter to me what you're doing.' I've got no idea how much he was betting but it must have been a lot. I don't think any of the other players in the Singapore team were betting on the matches. If I had accepted Michal's offer of money then maybe you could accuse me of doing something wrong, but I never did that.

"Michal was in a lot of trouble with his business and he needed cash quickly. A lot of people were betting on Singapore to win and so was he. He played to win, so did I. I'd say he was one of probably two million Singaporeans who was betting on matches that season. Everyone in Singapore loves a bet, that's no secret. Betting on soccer matches has been going on for years and the authorities know that.

"I'm not much of a gambler and I thought the only betting you could do was on the dogs or horses. The interest in gambling in Singapore was incredible. It's illegal but it's happening all the

time and you can't stop it. I know that a lot of the fans would bet on two flies crawling up a wall. I knew that lots of young fans were betting amongst themselves while the bookmakers were taking in hundreds of thousands of dollars from the public who, like me, were unaware of what was going on. A lot of money was changing hands. As for me, I've always been against gambling. I've had small bets now and then playing cards with the boys but that's about it. I've never even bet on a horse race. So for me to hear about bookies making millions of dollars is frightening. And to think that people believe that players like me are at the centre of the whole scheme. One shot, one mistake can cause someone to lose hundreds of thousands of dollars. I shouldn't be the blame for that.

"We're there to entertain. People shouldn't be betting illegally on the outcome of matches. OK, it was wrong for me to let Michal bet, but I wasn't going to dob him in, where I come from you don't put in your mates. But after a while I told him he shouldn't be doing it because it was wrong and it was affecting me. He would come up to me before games and tell me to play all out and that he was counting on me. But I got sick of him harassing me and I said to forget it. I found out later that the bookie was making money on goal differences. Apparently he was bribing players from both sides. I don't know how it worked. As far as the bookie is concerned, I have never met him. I only found out about him from the papers. I didn't know who he was or what his scam was."

But his scam proved to be a huge operation involving millions of dollars a match and after he confessed all to the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, arrests and convictions mounted.

On the sworn testimony of the bookie, referee T. Rajamanickam was jailed in October 1994, for eight months and fined \$1,000 for accepting \$5,000 from the bookie for another referee to be lenient to the Singapore team in its match against Kelantan in April that year. The referee was also found guilty of receiving \$1,000 as a reward for arranging for the referee of that match to be lenient.

On the sworn testimony of the bookie, former national player K. Kannan and ex-soccer club boss Ong Kheng Hock were convicted, jailed and fined in March 1995 of conspiring to offer national goalkeeper David Lee \$80,000 to help reduce the winning margin of the Singapore team in its match against Perlis in 1994. Singapore won the match 2-1, after which coach Douglas Moore told local journalists that keeper David Lee should have saved the Perlis goal. In September 1995, Kannan and Ong's joint appeal was dismissed by the High Court. Kannan was jailed for eighteen months, Ong for thirty months.

On the evidence provided by the bookie to authorities, Abbas Saad was charged in March 1995. His three-week trial was unlike any other in the history of Singapore.

Forty-Eight Hours

Abbas thought he had seen the last of the CPIB following his sixteen-hour interrogation in 1994. But in February 1995 he was to be picked up again and questioned almost non-stop for forty-eight hours about his involvement with Lions team-mate Michal Vana in a multi-million dollar match-fixing scheme. During the interrogation he was suffering a fever and never slept. He was questioned by eight officers at all hours and by the end was physically and mentally exhausted. He says he was told he had nothing to worry about and as a result signed three statements which were later used against him at his trial.

Following Singapore's historic Malaysia Cup win, Abbas signed a two-year contract with the Lions and returned to Australia for a short holiday in early 1995. On January 22 he started training again in preparation for a two week tour of New Zealand. Things were looking up. He stood to earn close to a million dollars over the next couple of years from playing and endorsements and the

Football Association was pushing for his Permanent Residence (PR) so he could take part in the Southeast Asia (SEA) Games in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in December.

On Sunday, February 5, Abbas went to bed early. He wasn't feeling the best. He had the flu and it was the month of Ramadan, the fasting period for Muslims. But he was happy with the direction his career was taking and was feeling more settled than he ever had in Singapore. He drifted off to sleep thinking about the following week's trip and how good it would be to start playing again. The next morning at around eight o'clock there was a knock at the door of the eighth-floor Paterson Towers apartment he had recently moved into.

"I was living with a family and the maid answered the door. She told me there were officers who wanted to see me. I was sick with the flu but I got up and they asked me to come down to the station with them. They had a look around my room and asked for my bank statements."

Abbas was taken to the station and interrogated about his involvement in match-fixing by eight officers for forty-eight hours. He was left in a small, airconditioned room without windows and says that he wasn't allowed to sleep at all, often being asked the same questions over and over again.

Abbas, suffering from the flu and with a high fever, said he was insulted during the interrogation. He says one of the investigating officers asked him if he was a member of the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation) because he would not give in to their demands.

"One of them said I was in the PLO. I couldn't believe it. I was insulted and it made me frustrated and angry. I told them I

had given them all the information they wanted and that I wanted to go home. The officers said I was alert throughout the interrogation but I was sick as a dog and they knew I was sick because I told them so and I kept turning off the airconditioner."

Abbas will never forget those hours he spent in the CPIB headquarters. He can remember every second and still thinks about it daily.

"The room was small, white and cold. There was a little window in the door but no others. It was cold and I had to sit on a plastic chair most of the time. Once they gave me two pillows to rest on but I never got a chance to sleep. Every time I dozed off I was woken up and asked the same questions. I felt very sick because of the fever and also I was fasting.

"After a while they became angry with me and one officer who I had not seen before came into the room, scolded the officers for wasting time, banged his hand on the table and threatened to expose an alleged affair I was having with a married woman. But there was no affair. I've said all along I had no choice but to sign the statements because of the threats. I didn't want anyone to get hurt. I didn't want to take the chance of being responsible for the break-up of a marriage. They (the officers) told me I had nothing to worry about. They assured me everything would be OK and I believed them."

Finally, he says, sick and exhausted, he signed two statements which he says he did not read. Later he went back to the CPIB and signed a third statement in which he stated that information contained in his two previous statements was true and correct and given voluntarily.

Those statements proved to be crucial to the prosecution case during his trial because in them he admitted that Vana had approached him and that he had agreed to help Vana win three matches for Singapore. In doing so, the judge would decide, Abbas had been part of a conspiracy to fix soccer matches. Although the defence argued that by agreeing to help Singapore win, he was just doing his job.

"It was hard being with the police. The officers never let up. They were very persistent. They tried to mix things up and get me to say things I didn't mean. It was very frustrating because I was sick and tired and just wanted to go home. I was physically and mentally exhausted and in the end I signed their statements. But I never read them.

"They even criticised my football. They said I only played hard when I wanted to. They said they would bring in all my friends and question them. I've been through some tough times, but this was right up there with the worst of them. I still have nightmares about those forty-eight hours and I wake up in a cold sweat. Every day I'm reminded of that place and I keep asking myself, 'Why? Why me?'

"But I don't think I'll ever know. Maybe I got too big in some people's eyes. I had a cult following, I lived a good life, I had lots of girlfriends, I was a star but I was a foreigner. I don't know exactly what the circumstances were that led anyone to believe I was involved in match-fixing, it's a mystery to me."

Abbas was released from the Bureau's headquarters but his passport was impounded because the investigation was continuing and the authorities didn't want him to 'do a Vana' and flee the republic.



Hours after his interrogation at CPIB headquarters Abbas arrives at training. Behind him is the CPIB officer directed to follow him. After the trial Abbas returned to the CPIB to collect some personal belongings and was greeted with handshakes and pats on the back. "There's no hard feelings," he says, "they were just doing their job and they did what they had to do."

"Knowing Singapore's tough laws really scared me and I can see why people might think I would try to get out like Vana did. But there was no reason for me to even think about doing that because I had nothing to worry about, or that's what I thought. I didn't think for a second I would be charged with anything, I just thought I was being questioned for information or as a witness to some other case.

"If I was going to get out I would have gone straight after the Malaysia Cup. I went home a few times and could have gone to another country and even when they took my passport I could have left because I had a Lebanese passport."

But there was little chance he could have skipped town, even had he wanted to. After his lengthy interrogation Abbas was placed under CPIB surveillance until the end of his trial.

When the story about his CPIB drama hit the press, Abbas organised to meet with Lions team manager, Omar Ibrahim, and FAS Executive Secretary, Tan Eng Yoon on February 9 to discuss his problems. He had no one else to turn to and thought they would help him out. He trusted them and to Abbas they were like family.

During the private meeting, among other things, Abbas spoke openly about his detention and interrogation at the CPIB and about his involvement with Michal Vana. Mr Omar and Mr Tan told him they would try to get his passport back so he could go to New Zealand with the team.

"I had been part of a team and even though there might have been problems now and then with personality clashes or tempers fraying it was usually like one big family in the Singapore team.

After a while you get pretty close to the players and the management and without any family there, I turned to them when I had problems. We helped each other out, that's the way it was.

"So when I was feeling down after I was interrogated for forty-eight hours I went to see Omar and Tan Eng Yoon for guidance. I was in a flat spin, I didn't know what was going on and I needed their help. Anyway they sat me down, in Mr Tan's office, and I spilled my guts and let them know everything that had happened at the CPIB and what I knew about Vana. They told me everything was OK and that I should stop worrying."

What they didn't tell him was that they were secretly taping the conversation under instructions from the CPIB.

"Later, when I found out at my trial that they had taped me, I was speechless. I thought Omar Ibrahim was a close friend. He was a father figure. He was the one who hugged and kissed me when we won the Malaysia Cup final. He was the one whose house I used to go to for dinner. His wife treated me like a son and I treated her like my mum. I loved his children. Then he did this to me. What can I say? No words can describe the way I felt and still feel. The worst is knowing, and them knowing, that I approached them so they could help me, but little did I know that they were helping the police make a case against me. I wasn't upset because I might have told them something I didn't want the police to hear, I was angry because they went behind my back as if they didn't trust me. I told them everything, I had nothing to hide."

Despite the FAS booking an airline ticket in his name, Abbas missed the Lions' training tour of New Zealand after the CPIB refused to release his passport. It was clear the authorities weren't

going to risk letting him travel because they feared he would not return to Singapore. But what he didn't realise at the time was that this dilemma was to become the very least of his worries.

"I told them they could have anything they wanted, but just let me go to New Zealand. I hadn't been charged so there was no reason for them not to let me go. But they wouldn't budge, I guess Michal Vana's actions reflected on me and they didn't want to take the risk that I might try to skip town. But I still didn't see what all the fuss was about, I just thought I was being prevented from going overseas with the team because of some bureaucratic hold up."

A month later Abbas' career with the Lions was to end in sensational circumstances when Singapore announced its permanent withdrawal from Malaysian soccer. As the sun was setting on the face of football as Singaporeans knew it, a new day was dawning for Abbas Saad. Yet this day was to become the darkest he would know.

The End Of An Era

On February 22, 1995 the FAS released the following statement: "At a meeting with the Deputy President of the FAM, Tengku Abdullah on Tuesday, 21 February 1995, the FAS officially informed the FAM that it would not be participating in the M-League. The FAS has taken this decision after carefully reviewing the events which took place recently and also in the longer term interest of soccer in Singapore. The FAS believes that this decision is in the best interests of both parties, and ... has expressed its appreciation to the FAM for its past support and understanding. The FAS will be revealing its plans for a revamped league soon and looks forward to the continued support of all our soccer fans to make this new league a success."

Despite Michal Vana's arrest and the investigation of Abbas, the Football Association of Malaysia was poised to evict Singapore from the Malaysia Cup and Premier League competitions because it believed Singapore had still not done enough to eradicate match-fixing from the game.

But before the FAM made its decision, the FAS pulled out of the tournament—while the team was in New Zealand—and began working on plans for a new local competition. The FAS released a statement which seemed to raise more questions than it answered but the decision had been made. Soccer in Singapore was at a crossroads and the direction it would take meant big changes in the lives of players and fans alike. Abbas was having lunch with a girlfriend at Al Forno Trattoria on Thomson Road when he received a call notifying him of Singapore's pull-out. The lunch date ended abruptly.

"I lost my appetite," he says. "I felt sick. I wondered what my future was in Singapore."

Abbas was called into the FAS and was told of the plans. His contract was terminated and he was handed \$12,000, equivalent to one month's salary. Although he managed to negotiate an additional two months' pay to compensate for the termination it was a sad way to go out—there were no handshakes, no thank yous. Abbas was shattered. No longer involved in Malaysian soccer, the FAS had decided that foreign players would not be required in the Singapore squad. Representative football would now concentrate on the SEA games and only Singaporeans were eligible for the national team.

"They must have known they were going to set up their own league and get out of Malaysian soccer months before the announcement because a decision like that could only come after it had been given some serious thought. The players were kept in the dark, we knew nothing. I thought it was a bit rough because it left me and Jang Jung, the other foreign player, with nowhere to go. I had received many offers to play in Australia, Hong Kong,

Holland and France but it was too late when we found out. It was a simple case of, 'Singapore's out of the Malaysia Cup and so are you.' The thing that hurt the most was that no one even shook my hand or said thank you. They didn't even really explain why.

"At first, they said, 'We will give you a month's pay' but I had to fight for another two. I mean I was losing close to a million dollars, taking into account wages, bonuses, advertising and endorsements. Personally I don't think the FAS made the right choice. But then again, if the FAS didn't jump, they probably would have been pushed."

Abbas believes the new Singapore Professional Football League will be a winner—but not for a few years. He says the teams will have to be built around top foreign players if the S-League hopes to attract big crowds.

"I don't think Singapore fans will get the standard of exciting soccer that they're used to. Singapore was on to a good thing, just as the team was on a high and the standard of football was improving. I think hundreds of thousands of people were against the pull out. It changed their lives. All of a sudden they had nothing to look forward to every week. It's the saddest thing that's happened in sport in Singapore. It was a selfish decision by a few people. They should have had a referendum. It was upsetting for all the players because we wanted to defend our titles. It took four to five years to get the game back on track, to get people interested in Singapore soccer once again. Then all of a sudden ... nothing.

"Malaysia Cup and M-League football was like a religion to many fans. I don't know if the S-League will be able to win the fans over for a while. There will have to be a lot of top foreign

players and the money will have to be competitive otherwise a lot of them, and some of the national players, will go over the border to play. Some of them have told me they don't want to play in the S-League. They would rather play in Malaysia."

For the next two months, Abbas had to sit and wait for his passport to be returned as well as organising his PR paper work. If he could get residency, he thought, then he could rejoin the Lions and take part in the SEA Games.

The CPIB investigations continued—officers set themselves outside his condominium block and followed Abbas day and night.

"They told me they would be following me. They went everywhere I went. To nightclubs, to restaurants. It was quite a laugh. All my friends got to know them. I used to chat to them. They were football fans. I lost them many times. Not on purpose. I would sometimes lose them in the traffic, but I would wait for them to catch up. When I left the house I would tell them where I was going so they wouldn't lose me. I didn't have much privacy but they were just doing their job."

On Saturday, April 1, Abbas was arrested. He thought it was a bad April Fool's joke. It wasn't.

"It was an incredible day because I was told I would be getting my passport back, so I went down to collect it. I wanted to put my form in for PR as soon as I could," he says. "Then they told me they were going to charge me."

Abbas was charged with conspiring with Michal Vana, a soccer bookmaker and others unknown, to fix the results of matches in the FAM Premier League in March and April 1994.

"I went down to the CPIB and the investigating officer, David Tan, said, 'Sorry, but we've decided to charge you.' I said, 'What for, what have I done.' He read me the charge and I just looked at him and thought, 'You bastard.'"

It was the beginning of the end. Abbas was taken to the Tanglin police station where he was officially charged and bail was set at \$100,000. He was systematically fingerprinted and photographed. He was bailed to appear at the Subordinate Courts on Monday, April 3.

"The arresting officer tried to persuade me to plead guilty. He said, 'Do us all a favour and plead guilty and get it over and done with,' and I said, 'You'd like that wouldn't you?' I said, 'You don't know what you're getting yourself into. I will fight this to the end. The trial will be bigger than O. J. Simpson's.'"

When he made his first appearance at the Subordinate Courts, wearing a crisp ironed white shirt, polished black shoes, beige pants and paisley tie, Abbas looked anything but the passionate and boisterous player Singapore had come to know and love.

Refusing to answer reporters' questions, he strutted into the courthouse looking nervous but feeling confident. Inside he sat in the public gallery alongside dozens of people, many of whom had come not to see him but to appear before the court. They all stared, pointed and whispered, "There's Abbas Saad," unaware of his predicament. Even hardened criminals handcuffed in the dock waved, smiled and called out his name. But Abbas could barely raise a grin let alone a hand and, for one of the first times in his life, his face turned red with embarrassment. When the judge called his name, he stood with his lawyer, Edmond Pereira, and

nervously licked his lips. Bail was continued at \$100,000—his first appearance was over in five minutes. He would walk free from the court for now, or so he thought.

While Tony Goldman and Florence Chan, the couple he lived with at the luxurious Paterson Towers, put up his bail money, Abbas was detained and escorted by two police officers to the cells downstairs. What made the situation worse was that he was handcuffed and put in a cell for five hours with an alleged murderer.

Remembering the incident and the way he was feeling at the time, Abbas says if he wasn't the man he is, he might have thought about taking his own life.

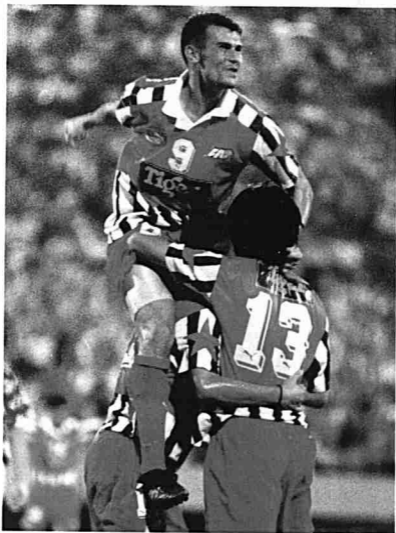
"I was so embarrassed, so ashamed, I kept thinking what my family would think if they saw me sitting here handcuffed in a prison cell. I was upset but I kept thinking I hadn't done anything wrong, I'm innocent. If I wasn't as mentally tough and didn't love life as much as I do, then suicide could have been a possibility. It was hard to deal with what I was facing but then I really didn't know what I was up against. I couldn't understand how it had come this far so I had no idea where it might finish up.

"I'm just glad those close to me stuck by me. I'm forever grateful for the support of people like Tony and Florence, the guys from Journey Promotions, Fandi and Malek and the fans. I know the public believed in me. It was the most disappointing time of my life but life had to go on.

"When I was in the cell, I started chatting with this guy who told me he had stabbed a man to death. He said he had a wife and child and he made me promise to call his wife when I got out. I

didn't have a pen and paper but he gave me his number and I tried to memorise it. He said to tell her that he was alright. He explained to me why he had stabbed the man. He was going to jail for a long time and he knew it. When I was released, I went back to my lawyer's office and I remembered the number. I called this man's wife and told her not to worry and that her husband was OK. I said, 'You don't know me but your husband says to tell you he loves you and wants you to go and see him.' She started crying and when I hung up, I just thought how small my problems were compared to hers. It made me stronger and more determined to stop feeling down and to get on with life."

Abbas called his parents and gave them the bad news. They all cried together for the first time since leaving their home in Lebanon twenty years earlier. He told them not to worry, but they already were. "It will be over soon," he told them. "I don't want you to worry and I don't want you to come over. I'll be home soon," he said, crossing his fingers.



Above: On top of the world—supported by his team-mates Abbas takes to the air in celebration of another goal and another Singapore victory. "Nothing comes close to the rush of scoring in a big game," he says.

Following pages: 1994—the Lions' most successful season. Abbas led the charge to a Premier League-Malaysia Cup double scoring twenty-seven goals for the season, including a hat-trick in the Cup final.







Brothers in arms—Abbas and Fandi, the 'Twin Terrors', celebrate another triumph.

The Trial

You, Abbas Saad, are charged that you, between March 1994 and 8 April 1994, in Singapore, together with one Michal Vana, one (soccer bookmaker) and others unknown were members of a criminal conspiracy and in such capacity, and in pursuance of and in order to carry out the object of the conspiracy, agreed with one another to do an illegal act, the object of the said conspiracy to wit, fixing the results of the soccer matches in the FAM Malaysian Premier League competition, contrary to Section 5(a)(i) of the Prevention of Corruption Act, Chapter 241 and you have thereby committed an offence punishable under Section 120B(1) of the Penal Code, Chapter 224.

A bead of sweat formed on his left temple as he twisted his neck and adjusted his tie. "These things really piss me off," Abbas murmured as the car he was travelling in turned towards the imposing Singapore Subordinate Courts. "But what really annoys me is that," he said, pointing at the throng of reporters and cameramen charging towards the car. "Here we go again," he thought

to himself as he looked in the rear vision mirror and flattened his spiky hair. The date: May 17, 1995—day one of his highly anticipated match-fixing trial—a trial which was to become the most publicised since that of American teenager Michael Fay, who had been caned and jailed for vandalism earlier that year.

But this trial was different, unprecedented in fact. Never before had a soccer hero, adored by thousands, probably hundreds of thousands of fans around the region, been to trial for match-fixing. Sure, other players had been charged and convicted, but there was a difference. Not only was the accused a foreigner, he was also the man of the moment in the republic, having scored a hat-trick of goals in the 1994 Malaysia Cup final. But what was of more interest was the fact that, according to the authorities, he was the first striker to be charged with match-fixing anywhere in the world. Ironically, it was Abbas Saad's former team-mate and friend, Michal Vana, who was the first professional player in the republic charged with match-fixing, but he had skipped bail and fled the country on the eve of his trial. Of the other match-fixing cases in the past few years, only Vana had escaped conviction and penalties had ranged from hundred dollar fines to lengthy jail terms.

Although Abbas faced a maximum penalty of five years in jail and/or a \$100,000 fine, he was unperturbed. He knew this was going to be a tough case to win, but as far as he was concerned he had done nothing wrong and was confident of beating the one charge. The main difference between this trial and other match-fixing trials in recent times was the fact that there was no evidence to suggest the defendant had received payment for his alleged involvement.

Abbas took a deep breath, nodded to his lawyer Edmond Pereira and opened the car door. The heat took him by surprise as he stepped out. But it was the number of television cameras, newspaper photographers and journalists which made him flinch. "Abbas, are you feeling confident?" a journalist asked. "Have you anything to say?" another shouted. Abbas bit his tongue and kept calm. With his head held high, he blocked out the frenzy, looked straight ahead and walked to the front of the court. Pushing his way through the media pack and the scores of fans, a television reporter ran across his path, entangling a microphone cable around his waist. Abbas cursed, grabbed the line, ducked under it and escaped into the courthouse.

"I didn't need that," Abbas says of the incident. "It was the first day, I was uptight and I just wanted to get inside. But some guy from a television station got his microphone lead in the way. I had to restrain myself from wrapping it around his neck."

The trial hadn't even started, but Abbas was already making waves and possible headlines.

"Everyone knew the trial was going to be big and it was even bigger. I wasn't scared at the time. Actually, I was glad the trial was starting because I hadn't slept well since my passport was taken and I just wanted to get it all over and done with. I know there were people thinking I would skip town like Vana, but I never even thought of doing that. I was no criminal and I wanted to be acquitted so I could get on with my career. If I was guilty and I knew I was going to be locked up, then I would have left. There would have been nothing in Singapore for me. Even before this whole thing happened, a lot of my friends told me to leave because they had heard the CPIB was after me. But I said, 'Why

should I? I've done nothing wrong.' My only concern from March to December was to concentrate on my team, play the best I could and win a trophy or two for Singapore. When I first went to court I desperately wanted to answer all the questions journalists were asking. I wanted to tell everyone how I felt, but Edmond, my lawyer, said to wait until it's over."

Journalists from print, television and radio were covering the trial. There were reporters from Associated Press, United Press International and the British Broadcasting Corporation, as well as a local contingency of journalists all jostling for the best position. From day one, the story was reported around the world—to Australia and as far away as Lebanon.

The trial attracted more attention owing to the fact that both the prosecution and the defence had a number of well known witnesses that read like a who's who of Singapore soccer.

The prosecution would be calling two high profile football officials—team manager Omar Ibrahim and FAS executive secretary Tan Eng Yoon. The defence would be calling national coach (now chief executive officer of the Singapore Professional Football League) Douglas Moore, and the Lions' top player Fandi Ahmad.

"It was strange," says Abbas, "because it reminded me of the days when I was playing—the management on one side and the players and coach on the other."

At 9:30 a.m. in Court Number Five the prosecution called its first witness—a notorious soccer bookmaker and key player in the trial. Abbas sat in the dock with his arms folded as the bookie was brought into court from the witness room. Abbas didn't take his eyes off him.

"I thought, 'What's this guy going to say?' I knew who he was but that's only because I met him when I was interrogated at the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau. I was told I had met him at the East Coast one night with Michal to set up the fix, but that was news to me."

Judge Khoo Oon Soo immediately suppressed the bookmaker's name because the bookie said his life had been threatened and his car had been vandalised.

The bookmaker told the court he met Vana one night in March 1994, before the season had started, at a carpark near the East Coast Lagoon Food Centre to arrange the fixing of matches in the Premier League and he wanted another player to help out. Vana told him Abbas was willing. Abbas shook his head constantly during the bookmaker's testimony and whispered to his lawyer to voice his disagreement. The meeting in the carpark was to confirm Abbas Saad's involvement, the court heard. But the bookie said he never spoke to Abbas that night, although he did say he saw Abbas sitting in Vana's car. "Everyone knows Abbas," he said jokingly. The bookie also admitted that he was suspicious of Vana and doubted if Abbas knew anything about the scheme.

Abbas recalls: "I went with Michal and some other players from the team to the East Coast for dinner. Afterwards, Michal drove me to a secluded part of the carpark and told me he was going to meet someone. I said alright. I didn't ask him who it was, I just said OK. Vana got out of the car, came back a few minutes later and we left. I asked him, 'Who the hell were you talking to?' He said, 'A friend, that's all.' We went back to his apartment at Bayshore Park and he told me what was going on.

"He said this guy had approached him to help win matches for Singapore. I didn't understand, I said, 'What? that's our job.' Michal told me that if I helped him I would be paid \$15,000 to \$20,000 a game. I rejected it straight away. I said, 'Michal, I don't want the money. I'm not interested in your offer.' It was the first time someone had offered me money for something like that. Then he told me he was betting on matches and needed my help. He said all I had to do was go all out and help win matches for the Lions. I said, 'OK that's what I always do anyway. The Football Association employs me to do that.' If I'd said no it would mean I was not going to try and win matches for Singapore, how could I say no? He was a friend of mine. He was having some financial problems. I just agreed to help a mate. It never crossed my mind that what he was doing might have been match-fixing. It wasn't kelong as far as I'm concerned and three matches after that night I told Michal to leave me alone because I wanted nothing to do with his problems."

The bookie, who admitted rigging games by manipulating odds and bribing players from opposing teams, said he paid Vana \$260,000 for helping him fix seven matches in the 1994 M-League season. He also said he did not know if Abbas ever received any money. But the court heard that Abbas did approach Vana for \$45,000 later in the season. Abbas says he wanted to give it to his father who needed it to repair the family home in Lebanon. "I asked him for a loan," Abbas says of the incident. "I had helped him out before and I was just asking him for a favour. I often asked other players for money as well. We all loaned each other money when it was necessary. But I never got any money from Michal. I got some of my own and borrowed \$31,000 from Fandi and \$5,000 from Malek Awab."

1 DEAR FRANK ANAND,
 I HAVE SAID BANKED
 THIRTY ONE THOUSAND SEVENTY FIVE
 DOLLARS (\$31,000) ON 1st September 79
 FROM FRANK ANAND.

WITNESSED BY
 [Signature] 1.9.79
 YUSUF AGA BANO

VANA BACKGROUND
 [Signature] 1.9.79
 ABBAS SAAD

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Day two and there was drama away from the trial. Abbas was furious at a report in a local newspaper which said the bookie had paid \$260,000 to Vana and Abbas to fix matches. The bookie only said in court that he had paid Vana the money. He did not say that he had paid Abbas any money. His lawyers wrote a letter to the editor of the paper, asking that he made sure reporters covering the trial were accurate.

"I wasn't happy with the way the media covered the trial in the first few days. Some of them got it wrong from the first day. My lawyer sent the newspaper a letter telling them to make sure the facts were reported but he didn't ask for a retraction."

The bookie's testimony was only the tip of the iceberg for the prosecution case, it still had a few things up its sleeve—like a secret thirty-minute tape recording of a conversation between the

accused, national soccer team manager Omar Ibrahim and the Football Association's executive secretary, Tan Eng Yoon. The defence team found out about the tape only two days before the trial started but didn't know what it contained. On May 19, Lions team manager Omar Ibrahim told the court that he had secretly taped the accused making certain admissions about his involvement in the match-fixing scandal. Mr Omar said he was instructed to do so by the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau. During the conversation Abbas told them he had agreed to help Vana to win matches for Singapore but Abbas swore he "never received a single cent."

"The tape and the crap that went with it was pretty hard to take. The taped conversation caused a lot of problems. Not just for me but for all those involved. I just told them the truth. Omar was a close friend of mine. He considered me part of his family and I considered him part of mine. The last thing I expected was for him to secretly tape me talking to him and Mr Tan about my ordeal at the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau. I mean, that conversation was confidential. I went to them because I didn't know who else to turn to. I had just been interrogated for two days without sleep and food and I had to tell someone what had happened. I was confused because I didn't know what I was in for. They kept telling me I was involved in match-fixing. So I went to see Omar and Mr Tan to tell them what happened when I was interrogated and to let them know just what had happened between me and Michal."

On the tape, played in court, Abbas explained what happened between him and Vana and told how after three matches he asked Vana to leave him alone:

"I said, 'Listen Michal,' I said, 'You asked me for a few matches, I don't feel right about it, it's enough is enough.' You know what I mean? Like, er, 'I don't want, you know, I don't want, don't come ask me that because I'm not, my head is not clear.' You know what I mean? Although I played my normal game but still, at the back of my mind, something tells me it is not right. So I said, 'Forget it.' So after that, he (Vana) never, he never bothered to, er, he never done anything like that."

The taped conversation was admitted as evidence on May 19, the same day a 'trial within a trial' started to determine the admissibility of three statements Abbas had signed at the CPIB during his interrogation.

But before that, Omar Ibrahim, the day after he gave evidence about the taped conversation, took the witness stand and accused Abbas of threatening his and Mr Tan's life. He later made a police report. In court, Omar, shook in his boots as he spoke of the alleged death threats:

"My life has been threatened by the accused, Abbas Saad ... I am concerned and I fear for my safety and for my family's safety ... I'm here as a prosecution witness to help the court with this trial. I'm seeking the assurance that I and my family will not be harmed."

The night before, Abbas had spoken to the Lions' assistant team manager K. Kandasamy on the telephone and had voiced his frustration about Omar and the secret tape.

"The night after Omar admitted in court that he had taped me without my knowledge, I rang assistant team manager K. Kandasamy about the case. During that call I got upset and told him I would get Omar for what he had done. I just said it in the heat of the moment. I didn't mean anything by it. I was frustrated and disappointed at what had happened in court that day. Omar and Mr Tan know I wouldn't hurt them. They said in court that I

had a big mouth. I've always had a big mouth. I shoot it off on the soccer field, everyone knows that I say things on the field but I never carry them out. It's just that I couldn't believe what Omar did. At the end of that first day we listened to the tape and I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I remember looking at Omar and Mr Tan straight in the eyes and they looked away. They couldn't look at me."

When questioned in court about the threats, Tan Eng Yoon stated, "I didn't feel any danger or threat because I know Abbas and he is a very impulsive person." Although the threats made by Abbas certainly didn't help his cause, they were generally regarded as idle threats borne of frustration and anger at the deceit used in obtaining the tapes.

The eight day 'trial within a trial' heard defence evidence which suggested the accused did not give the three CPIB statements voluntarily. The defence said Abbas, during his forty-eight hour interrogation by eight officers, was threatened into signing the statements by an unknown elderly Chinese man with thick eyebrows, glasses and a heavy voice. Senior CPIB officers were paraded in court and Abbas identified the director, Chua Cher Yak, as being the man who made the threats.

The defence said Abbas gave in and signed the statements without reading them after he was badly treated. Edmond Pereira said it appeared the statements were prepared beforehand, containing words which Abbas could not pronounce and did not know the meaning of, like *gist* and *tantamount*. Abbas said he was told that if he didn't cooperate, the officers would expose an alleged affair he was having with a married woman and bring in the woman's husband for Abbas to explain. Abbas denied any

affair, but agreed to sign the statements because he was hungry, tired, sick and did not want to get his friends involved. He said the officers told him he would not be in any trouble because he had not accepted any money and would be free to go after he signed the statements.

Eight CPIB officers, who interrogated Abbas, denied that any threat or inducement had been made. The judge eventually ruled that Abbas was not forced to confess and that his statements were given voluntarily. He said the alleged threats were groundless and spurious. In the statements, Abbas admitted helping Vana "to go all out and score" in three FAM Premier League matches against Terengganu (Singapore 3-0); Negeri Sembilan (1-1 draw) and Sabah (Singapore 3-1). But Abbas insisted he did not receive any money for helping Vana.

"Looking back, once the statements were admitted, I didn't really have much of a chance," says Abbas. "The statements say that I agreed with Michal. I did agree to help win matches for him but that's it. After three matches I told Vana off and asked him not to bother me anymore. The court saw it differently. Being in agreement meant I formed part of the conspiracy with Vana and the bookie."

As the trial progressed, the public and media interest grew. During the first week, the fans converged like they would to the National Stadium to see the Lions play. Every day Abbas received presents and flowers from well-wishers. Some fans took leave to sit through the trial, others fasted for him. To many of them he was still a hero—a legend who would remain so no matter what. During the second week, hundreds of fans lined up outside the courtroom to catch a glimpse of their star striker in the dock.

"The whole scenario was so unreal. I felt like I was watching a movie that never seemed to end. I felt so out of place sitting in the dock with the media and public always watching me and watching my reactions. The worst thing about the trial was sitting back and listening to the crap that was said. So many times my lawyers had to keep my temper down. So many times I wanted to yell out and tell people to tell the truth but I had to restrain myself. I don't know how I would have got through it without the support of the fans. They were great motivation. It was good to know they were still on my side. I couldn't believe the attention the case was attracting. So many people wanted to get into court to hear what was going on. It gave me hope. I used to go home each day after court a little happier knowing I had the support of so many people."

Defence witnesses, outgoing national coach Douglas Moore, and Singapore's number one player, Fandi Ahmad, took the witness stand late in the trial.

Moore told the court Abbas was like the "Maradona or George Best of the region." He said Abbas always tried his best on the field. In 1994, Abbas had an "absolutely phenomenal season," Moore told the court, and added:

"To my mind, Abbas loves the game of football. I'm never going to accuse Abbas for not trying his best throughout the season. He can be a pain at times but that's his nature. He has enough sense to realise the game has been good to him. I knew all along of the talk of kelong. I was looking for the odd mistake by the goalkeeper, silly mistakes by the defenders but I was not looking out for forwards not scoring."

Fandi told the court Abbas was like a brother, that they were partners on and off the field. "We have an understanding and respect for each other," he said. Says Abbas: "Fandi and Douglas

told it as it was. They told the truth. I played hard all the time. I played to win. To win for Singapore."

After the soccer bookmaker's startling confessions, the trial within a trial, alleged death threats, an identification parade, stories of ill-treatment and the testimony of about twenty witnesses, the court drama which had more theatrics than an episode of "L.A. Law," drew to a close. The prosecution and defence delivered their final submissions, arguing the extent of Abbas Saad's involvement in the conspiracy.

Mr Pereira told the court that following the meeting with Vana in March at Vana's apartment, Abbas had heard nothing about the alleged conspiracy until April 12. It was then that Vana had told Abbas, before the home game against Terengganu, to make sure Singapore won because he had money on the game. Singapore won the match 3-0 and Abbas scored one goal and Fandi two. Vana also approached Abbas with the same request before the home match against Negeri Sembilan on May 6 when the result was 1-1, with Vana scoring the goal, and also before the away game on May 10 against Sabah which Singapore won 3-1, Abbas one goal, Fandi two. But, Mr Pereira said, Abbas was not happy with Vana and decided to, "tell him off once and for all" after the Sabah game. Vana agreed to Abbas' request not to approach him and the matter ended there.

He told the court that it was not an illegal act for his client to agree with Vana to help Singapore win and that Abbas did not know of an agreement between the bookie and Vana. There was no "meeting of minds" between the three and that he "hence cannot be said to be in agreement to support the contention of criminal conspiracy." To sum up, he stated that:

"... the act of the accused in agreeing to score goals and help Singapore win their matches by itself cannot be said to be 'in pursuit of a common object or design giving rise to the inference that his actions must have been co-ordinated by arrangement beforehand.' ... when the accused agreed to the suggestion by Michal Vana, he was agreeing to do what was expected of him, that is to score goals for Singapore, since he was employed as a striker for the Singapore team. That in such circumstances ... there was no 'corrupt intent or element.' The request for a loan of \$45,000 had no bearing or connection with the earlier events ... that is unrealistic and without merit."

Mr Pereira said there was no evidence suggesting that the \$45,000 Vana was carrying when he was arrested was for the accused. He said also that the statements Abbas gave to the CPIB should not be relied upon and that Abbas had been implicated because of the way officer David Tan had crafted the statements.

Deputy Public Prosecutor, Ong Hian Sun, claimed that the accused knew that Vana was asking for his help in connection with a scheme to fix matches. Mr Ong said Abbas also knew it was wrong for Vana to accept money from anyone other than the FAS. He said Abbas withdrew from the scheme after three matches because he was aware that he was doing something wrong. He said that Abbas admitted that when he needed the money for his father, he asked Vana because Vana had promised him \$15,000 a match to help. Mr Ong further submitted that:

"... the accused is lying and that he never assumed that Vana was merely betting on the games. It is a clearly absurd and illogical assumption and the accused could not explain how he jumped to such a conclusion. It is clear from the outset that Vana had laid down his cards clearly on the table. Vana told the accused quite unreservedly that he was being offered money to play all out in matches. Even if we were to accept the accused's present version of what Vana told him, Vana was said to have told the accused that someone approached him

to make some money, to help Singapore win and to score as many goals as possible. Vana was certainly not saying that he was offered an opportunity to wager his own money by placing bets on the games, which certainly makes no money when one loses. Vana was stating in no uncertain terms that he, as a football player, was offered money in return for scoring as many goals as possible. He asked the accused for his help in order to accomplish his mission. It is submitted that the irresistible inference is that the reason he (Abbas) asked Vana for \$45,000 was in return for the favour he had done for Vana. This favour was in relation to his agreement to help Vana in the three matches."

All that remained was for Judge Khoo Oon Soo to make his decision.

The tie felt a little better, a little looser today. It was Saturday, June 10 1995—the final day. Abbas felt tense but relieved that the trial was coming to a close. "These ties aren't that bad after all," he said to his lawyer, breaking the ominous silence. The car pulled into the court's carpark and just like the first day, the world's media rushed towards the Aussie import. "And I'm starting to get used to this mob as well," he quipped. Edmond smiled. They stepped out of the car. "Anything to say before the verdict Abbas?" a reporter asked. "Nothing now but I'll have something to say when I come out later," Abbas replied confidently, signing autographs and shaking the hands of many of the hundreds of fans who had been queuing outside the court since six o'clock that morning.

Judge Khoo entered the court at 10:04 a.m. and in just twenty seconds had delivered a verdict:

"Mr Abbas Saad I have considered the evidence ... the defence has failed to raise reasonable doubt. Therefore, I find you guilty and convict you of the charge."

As he spoke, the public gallery gasped and a group of teenage girls started crying. Abbas clenched his jaw and stared straight ahead.

"I didn't know what was going on right at that moment. It was like a dream, hazy and unclear. I just remember thinking, 'Why?' I held my head up and looked the judge straight in the eye, but my legs nearly gave way. They were like jelly."

Judge Khoo adjourned the trial for an hour to consider the sentence following a plea of mitigation by the defence. Edmond Pereira told the court to take into account that it was unknown for a striker to be offered an inducement to fix the outcome of a game. Referring to letters from Australian coach Eddie Thompson and Australian Soccer Federation national development officer, Steve Darby, he said it was the first case of its kind where a striker was said to have been offered money to score goals for his team and be prosecuted. In his letter, read to the court, Thompson stated that:

"In my professional opinion it would be a waste of time to attempt to influence the result of a game by offering a striker an inducement. ... I have no factual or anecdotal evidence of a striker being involved in a game-fixing scenario. I have no doubt that other experts in the field would support this opinion."

Edmond Pereira went on to say that there was no evidence to suggest that the accused had influenced the outcome of the games he had played in by agreeing to "go all out and score" because that was his job. But it was the reality of what the conviction meant to his playing future and his reputation that weighed most heavily on Abbas Saad's mind—a point made all too clear by his lawyer:



After the guilty verdict and sentence was delivered Abbas left the court flanked by his lawyer, Edmond Pereira, and a police escort. While media and fans gather around him his face reflects his feelings as he comes to terms with the realisation that he may never play soccer again.

"As a result of this conviction, he will not be able to play professional football again. That itself is sufficient punishment for this young man. The conviction will not only bring untold shame to him in Singapore but also in Australia, where he is also an acclaimed player in Sydney."

As Abbas waited for the judge to determine a sentence, some of his closest friends raised more than half a million dollars to be used for bail if he was jailed. Fandi Ahmad took \$150,000 in cash and a \$100,000 cheque to court that day and one fan, a forty-six-year-old businessman, also waved a \$100,000 cheque to help pay the fine.

"In twenty minutes they came up with that money for me," says Abbas. "They didn't want to see me go to jail and there was a rumour that the prosecution was going to ask for \$800,000 bail if I was locked up."

His cousin Ali Reda, who lives in Singapore and was a defence witness, was the only member of the family who attended the trial. Abbas had begged his parents not to put themselves through the ordeal.

"I decided not to let my family come, although they desperately wanted to be there with me. But I thought it would make the situation worse. I didn't need the extra pressure and stress. My mum would have died seeing me in the dock. I spoke to them every night to let them know what was happening. They kept saying they would catch the next flight over but I told them not to. It was tough because mum was sick at the time and dad said she was crying all the time. I tell you, if anything had happened to my mum because of this, God knows what I would have done. I reckon I would be in jail. I would have done something. I would never forgive Singapore for that."

Abbas hadn't slept much during the trial. Not just because he couldn't, but because he spent most nights with his lawyers going over and over evidence and discussing the trial and what lay ahead.

"I don't remember all that much. It's such a blur. I was very tired and strained at the time. I spent so many hours with my lawyers. I have to thank my lawyers for all the effort they put in over the many months before and during the trial. I could not have got through it alone. I don't think I used my brain so much in all my life. I had to remember everything. All the little details. Edmond said if we were to have a chance of winning he had to know everything. I had a lot of nightmares. I got grey hairs and I aged a few years. I've seen Heaven and I've seen Hell and I don't recommend Hell to anyone.

"I honestly thought at the start of the trial that I would get off. The case against me wasn't strong. Even up until the day of the verdict Edmond asked me to go over the mitigation with him in case I was found guilty. I almost refused."

Judge Khoo returned from his chambers with a dead-pan expression on his face. The muffled sounds of voices silenced with his authoritative entry above the rest of the crowded court room. There was standing room only, Abbas' only relative, Ali Reda, was unable to get into the courtroom and was forced to wait outside while the verdict and sentence were being delivered. Judge Khoo read from his computer printed judgement, "In assessing sentence, I have taken into consideration the following factors ...," he began.

In passing sentence, Judge Khoo said soccer enjoyed a huge following in Singapore and the integrity of the sport had to be

maintained above all else. He added that Abbas had played a minimal role in the conspiracy and that he had never received any money for agreeing to try and score goals for Singapore in Premier League matches.

"It matters not whether the conspirators succeed. It certainly matters not that the criminal conspiracy was for the good of the Singapore team. Criminal conspiracy to fix the results of soccer matches cannot be condoned regardless of whether it is for a win or a loss. However, the accused's participation in the criminal conspiracy arose because of his desire to help Vana. This was of course very foolish on his part. The accused never received any money and he pulled out of the criminal conspiracy after three matches. He is a first offender with an unblemished record. It is certain that his professional career as a footballer would end with this conviction. I am of the view that a custodial sentence is inappropriate and a fine would be an adequate sentence."

When determining the amount of the fine imposed, Judge Khoo took the conduct of the defence into account.

"This case went on for fifteen days. It is important to note that this was so because the defence persistently and consistently challenged every piece of prosecution evidence. The only substantial concession it made was consenting to the admission of the taped conversation between the accused and Omar Ibrahim and Tan Eng Yoon. What is of concern to me was the 'voir dire' (trial within a trial). It went on for about eight days and culminated in the three statements being admitted. Numerous allegations were hurled at the CPIB officers. The director of the CPIB and his senior officers were required to parade in court in full view of the public to identify the senior officer who had allegedly threatened him into making those statements. Once these allegations were found groundless and spurious it would be highly inappropriate for me to let that pass by. The director of the CPIB and his senior officers had to go through the humiliation of being paraded in court on at least two different occasions. This is to say the least. One must assume

that the learned defence counsel had done all these on instructions from the accused. In my view, the conduct of the defence, especially in the 'voir dire,' was not an irrelevant factor to consider in assessing the quantum, once the type of sentence has been determined."

Abbas Saad was fined \$50,000 for his involvement in a conspiracy with a bookie, Michal Vana and others unknown to fix matches in the 1994 Malaysian Premier League, but he sighed in relief when the sentence was passed. He suddenly realised he would not be going to jail. He was free, but his life would never be the same, a conviction meant an automatic life ban on playing according to FAS rules and as a member of the Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA) the FAS ban would apply around the world. Nevertheless, the public gallery rose as one, cheering and applauding the sentence. To them the conviction meant little. Abbas was free and that was all that mattered.

Outside the court, the fans rejoiced, sang and read poems about their hero.

*Abbas dear, please be sure,
We wish to make it very clear,
Be strong, extra strong,
We know you are right and not wrong,
Life has to go on from here,
Never put a full-stop dear,
For many beautiful things are ahead of you,
For people like you are only a few.*

—from a poem written by fans to Abbas
on the day he was convicted.

With a five man police escort, Abbas emerged from the court a few minutes later. He was swamped by hundreds of screaming fans who broke into the famous local football song "Ole, Ole, Ole." It was over, but it wasn't over.

Aftermath

"We have informed FIFA of our decision to ban him for life and it has endorsed our decision. This is obvious because FIFA rules state that players convicted of match-fixing will be suspended permanently."

—FAS executive secretary, Tan Eng Yoon.

Financially, the trial cost Abbas a bomb—more than \$200,000 in legal fees. But personally it cost him a lot more.

"I think my problem was that I trusted too many people. I opened my heart to too many people and that brought about this whole mess." With these few select words, Abbas revealed for the first time where he went wrong as he spoke to reporters at his lawyer's office only minutes after the verdict. Looking tired and shaken, he spoke of the relief that the saga was finally over.

"I'm just glad it's over and I'm free. But I'm disappointed with the result. A conviction means I probably won't be able to play

soccer again here in Singapore. The judge said he didn't jail me because I was only a second conspirator. But what does that mean? I was convicted because I agreed with Vana to play my best. It doesn't make any sense. But what's done is done and now I will sit down with my lawyers and make a decision if I will appeal the ban through the courts."

The saga was not entirely over. A day after his conviction, Abbas was arrested for criminal intimidation. His arrest followed a complaint made by Lions team manager Omar Ibrahim to authorities that Abbas had threatened his life during the trial.

Abbas gave a statement and was released on \$2,000 bail pending further investigations. Then to make matters worse, the Football Association of Singapore banned Abbas for life from playing or coaching in Singapore. The FAS also wrote to the Asian Football Confederation and the Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA) to endorse the ban worldwide. FIFA later extended the ban but Abbas has yet to receive any official confirmation in writing or in person.

"Every night I go to bed and ask myself, 'Why? Why me?' I never sleep well, I don't think I ever will. I'm always tossing and turning at night. Sometimes I even wake up crying because of the bad dreams," he says.

"Surely they (the authorities) know who the real culprits in this kelong business are. Was it because I was a foreigner? Was it because of my popularity? Was it because there was a lot of pressure by the Malaysian authorities for Singapore to clean up its act? Was I the scapegoat for an entire nation? Did they make an example out of me to detract other players from getting involved?

"All I know is that I've never cheated anybody in my life and friends and former Lions team-mates will vouch for me on that. I gave my best every bloody game that I played. That's the only way I know how to play. For this to happen is crazy. I will never ever understand. I worked hard to put my name where it is in Asia and now this whole drama has destroyed my name, my life. I think Singapore and its people will remember me for the fond soccer memories rather than the match-fixing conviction. They know me as a person and they've seen me play and the players know me and that's the most important thing. And I know myself that I've done nothing wrong to anybody. People can make up their own minds. I have no regrets," says Abbas.

Two days after the trial, Abbas received a telephone call from CPIB Investigating Officer David Tan asking him to come down to the station and pick up a bankcard he had left behind. Abbas called his lawyer who told him not to go. "Don't waste your time, get someone else to pick it up or get them to send it to you," Edmond Pereira said.

"I've got nothing to be afraid of. They don't scare me, I'm going," Abbas replied. Fandi Ahmad drove Abbas to the Bureau's headquarters and waited outside.

There was a deafening silence when Abbas walked through the door and back to where his nightmare had begun. He felt sick as he saw some of the officers who had interrogated him, but he didn't let it show. He met David Tan who handed him his bankcard. And then, for the first time since his arrest, Tan smiled and offered Abbas his hand.

"David said, 'No hard feelings' and wished me good luck. He stuck out his hand. I hesitated but I shook it. 'We will all miss



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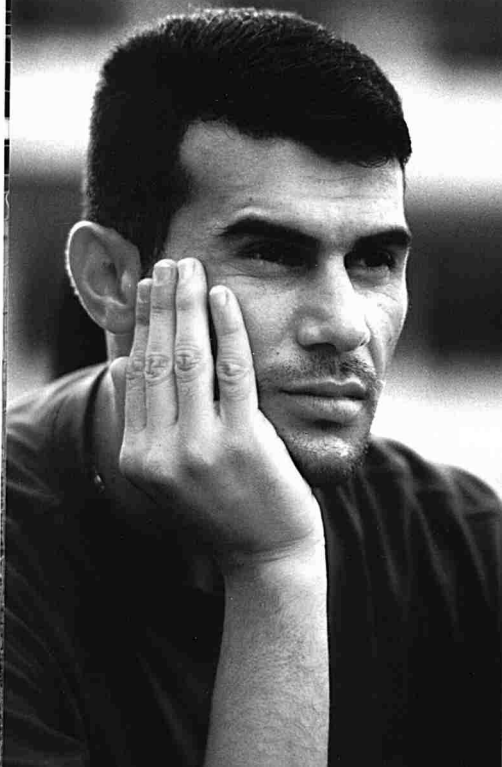




Above: A touching moment as Abbas bids farewell to one of his loyal fans before departing Singapore for Australia, following his trial.

Left: Abbas in happier times, caught in a jubilant moment at training.

Following page: Looking towards an uncertain future. Abbas now has to contemplate a life without football.



you playing soccer for Singapore,' David said. Then as I walked off the other officers came from behind their desks and patted me on the back and wished me all the best. It was such a turnaround from the past few months but I suppose it proved they were human, that they were just doing their job and deep down they appreciated my talents and what I had accomplished over the years playing for the Lions."

Singaporeans made up their own minds about Abbas Saad and the general feeling was that the worldwide ban was too severe. If soccer bad-boy Diego Maradona could be back on the field after serving a one year suspension for cocaine abuse then Abbas, they thought, deserved a second chance.

Many national players too, agreed the ban was heartless and hundreds of football supporters across Singapore set about signing a petition pleading for the FAS to revoke the ban. The petition was devised by a group calling itself the 'Concerned Football Fans.' They appealed to the FAS to reconsider Abbas' future for the following reasons:

- Everybody deserves a second chance. Punishment has been meted and Abbas has paid his dues. To ban him for life is tantamount to punishing him all over again for something he has already paid for in the courts. And above all, let us not ask him to keep paying for it for the rest of his life.
- Abbas is a talented and fine footballer who has much to contribute to the game. We in Singapore remember and thank him for his commitment in the past and wish to enjoy his skills once again. To take him out of football is to ignore his past contributions and all the pleasure he has given to football

fans. Keeping him out will be a loss to the game of football. We look forward to his return to the game.

- Abbas is still young and at the peak of his career. It will be too cruel to end his career prematurely.
- Abbas Saad is a crowd-puller and provides a great deal of entertainment, two important ingredients for a successful S-League next year (1996). We can't imagine an S-League without the likes of Abbas Saad and Fandi Ahmad.
- Notwithstanding FAS's stated policies, each and every infringement should still be reviewed on a case-by-case basis. We feel that there are more than sufficient grounds in this case to warrant such individual review and wavier.
- The players are also appealing for the ban to be lifted. Granting their request will be a morale-booster to the Lions who are seeking to win the SEA Games gold medal this year (1995).

Fourteen national players, including Fandi Ahmad and Malek Awab filed their own appeal to the FAS on Abbas' behalf, stating that the life-time ban was cruel and heartless.

Abbas' lawyer Edmond Pereira also approached the FAS to discuss the issue, but the association flatly rejected all appeals. "We won't waver or compromise on the issue of match-fixing," FAS secretary John Koh said.

FAS executive secretary Tan Eng Yoon said unless Abbas cleared his name in court, the ban would be enforced. "It is a court ruling and we can't take matters into our own hands," Mr Tan said.

Abbas was never charged with criminal intimidation, but the sorry story didn't end there. Team manager Omar Ibrahim resigned

suddenly from the FAS after the trial. The fifty-three-year-old, who was publicly ridiculed for secretly taping a conversation he had with Abbas and Mr Tan, said he needed a break and wanted to spend time with his family.

But it is believed that Omar couldn't handle the scorn from players and fans over the incident. Before matches at the National Stadium Omar copped flak in the dressing rooms, some players even going so far as to mock him taping their conversations and the crowd would be chanting 'pengkhianat' (traitor in Malay).

Meanwhile Abbas' closest friends organised one of the biggest farewell parties ever—an exclusive \$1000 a table all night bash at the Concorde Hotel. His favourite band from the Hard Rock Cafe played, along with some of Singapore's best groups and singers.

There were tears and laughter as a special tribute to the former No 9 was arranged, screening videos of his past triumphs, telling stories of his wild days and paying homage to the legacy of one of Singapore's greatest heroes. Fans, national team players, newly-appointed coach Barry Whitbread and other well known Singaporeans were there to say goodbye to one of Asia's top players.

"That was one of the best nights of my life," says Abbas. "Everyone who meant something to me was there. I had a great night. I didn't want it to end."

Abbas Saad, former Lion and convicted match-fixer, packed his bags and headed to the airport on Sunday, July 2. He was going home. More than 150 fans made their way to Changi Airport to farewell their hero. Some of them showered Abbas with flowers and gifts. Most of them cried.

"It was upsetting," he says. "It was not the way I'd dreamt I would be leaving Singapore."

Fighting back tears, Abbas thanked his loyal followers and signed his last autograph before walking slowly to the departure lounge. Unlike many times before when he had left Singapore with a smile to travel, to live elsewhere or to go home—this time was different. This time he didn't look back.

Four days later, an article appeared in *The Straits Times* newspaper—Singapore's number one daily broadsheet. The column, a comment piece, was headlined with the question: "Why is Abbas the cheat still a hero?" The story led with:

"Crime pays, my friend. Look at Abbas Saad. To some people, he is Singapore's new hero. ... What kind of message are we sending to those Lions who have been quietly doing their job and must have turned down offers to fix matches? That you are stupid for being honest. If you accept money, you can be a star."

"Well, first of all I never accepted money. Secondly, I was convicted of being part of a match-fixing conspiracy, that is, in agreeing with Vana to play my best for Singapore I was part of the scheme. But like I've said time and time again, I was just doing my job. Nothing more, nothing less. I never betrayed my team or fans," Abbas responds.

"Apparently, Abbas will write an autobiography in Australia and return to Singapore to promote it. ... There is always a sleazy publisher waiting to make money out of controversy."

"I never thought of going home to write my story," says Abbas. "I always planned to write it and have it published in Singapore by a respected publisher and that's what I did."

"It was not as if he stuck around valiantly trying to help Singapore win the cup year after year. This was the same man who, after he helped Singapore enter the Malaysia Cup final in 1990, left for Johor the year after to help it win the Malaysia Cup. Then he abandoned Johor for Singapore. Abbas is a paladin. The Lebanese-born Australian has proven clearly he will simply play for whoever pays him what he demands."

"After 1990, I left for Johor because I wasn't wanted in the Singapore team. I came back in 1993 because I wanted to win in Singapore colours. I had better offers to play elsewhere after the 1994 Cup final but I still signed for another two years. No one can accuse me of not being loyal," Abbas says, clearly stung by the accusations and misinformation contained in the article which concluded by again intimating that Abbas accepted money to fix matches.

"If you want a true underdog to cheer, think of the poor, honest Lions who never took money to fix a match. It is about time we turned the spotlight on them, to tell the world who the real heroes are in this game."

"What about those who did take money and were never caught, charged or tried?" asks Abbas. "Go ahead and turn the spotlight on them, it's only fair."

Despite all the arguments, nothing will change the facts—crime doesn't pay. The law says Abbas is a match-fixer and he was fined for it. He is banned for life from playing the game that made him a champion. His future remains unclear.

Friends and Foes

Friends come and go, just ask Abbas Saad. When you're winning and on top of the world, he says, everyone wants to be your friend. When you're losing, many of those so-called friends fall by the wayside. But Abbas doesn't cry over spilt milk. As a star footballer, he's seen it all before. He knows there are some who have used him for personal gain but he doesn't hold grudges against his foes. He forgives those who have double crossed him and he admits he's made plenty of mistakes himself. But even so, there are many people that Abbas will never forget.

Abbas was never short of friends as a child, as a teenager or as an adult. He made friends easily because of his boyish charm, easy-going nature and kind-heartedness. But in Singapore it was harder. He had to adjust to a different way of life, to different cultures and religions. Early on he stuck close to his Aussie striking partner Alistair Edwards. But he soon discovered his disposition was well accepted by the locals. In the space of weeks he made tens of thousands of new friends—most of them football fans.

"When you're on top everyone wants to be your friend. But when something bad happens, like it did to me, only your true friends stick by you. I know who my true friends are.

"In many respects Singapore has been great. I made many friends, lifelong friends and they have helped me get through the tough times. But on the other hand, Singapore has taught me to watch my back and not to trust everyone whose hand I shake. I know I've lived a good life in Singapore. I played the game and won. But in a lot of ways I lost too. I don't know why things turned out the way they did. But shit happens and life goes on. That's the type of guy I am and maybe that's bad. But I have learnt my lesson. Now I don't trust everyone and I wish it wasn't like that. I was happy trusting everyone and being friends with everyone. Now sometimes when I meet someone I think, 'Can I trust you?' or, 'Should I be speaking to you?' I don't like that. I wish it could be different. I think many people in Singapore should be more open with each other. I know that maybe I was too open and friendly with people but I think people don't help each other out as much as they should. It seems everyone looks after themselves first. That's not the way I go about things."

Abbas has many friends he wishes to thank. But there would have to be another book to include all the names. However, there are a few he insists can't go unnamed.

"If it wasn't for people like Tony and Florence Goldman and their beautiful kids I don't know if I could have made it through the trial in one piece. They took me in, treated me like one of the family and gave me the moral support that I needed. I didn't have my family with me so it was comforting to know I had people to go home to who understood me and would listen to me.

"Then there's the Singapore Lions, especially Fandi Ahmad and Malek Awab who I consider my best friends. I have to mention all the other Lions as well and even Michal Vana—he's still a good friend despite all that has happened. He had his reasons for doing what he did. I respect him. He was a top player.

"Then there's people like Douglas Moore, a great coach and now the chief executive officer of the new Singapore League. Robert Lim the assistant coach, Barry Whitbread, now the national coach and Patrick Ang who's the team manager. Plus there are some officials from the Singapore Football Association and the Malaysian Football Association. They know who they are.

"I had some great times with the guys from Journey Promotions—thanks for the memories. Tony Singh has always been a good friend. Patrick, Singapore Airlines best ever pilot, Mark and Andrew from Choices Hairdressing, who kept my hair nice and neat, all the staff at the Hard Rock Cafe, Douglas O and family, Eugene, Yoga, Andrew and family, Edmond and partners, Michael Urukalo—all of these people have been great.

"And last but not least all the fans from Singapore and Malaysia. And everyone else who believed in me and supported me, these people have been my strength and kept me going through all that happened."

Of course when Abbas thinks of his friends there is always one that will remain closest to his heart—the game itself. When Abbas recalls his happier moments, he inadvertently talks about football. Not necessarily any particular game but soccer in general.

"Just being given the opportunity to play is good enough for me," he says. "Even if I wasn't a star, it wouldn't matter as long as I was playing in some capacity.

"But obviously playing professionally has its benefits. Travelling with the Australian Youth Team and playing in the World Cup in Chile was something else. Winning the grand final for Sydney Olympic for the first time in the club's history was an achievement. And winning the double, the Malaysian Premier League and Malaysia Cup final, for both Johor and Singapore, were also some of my proudest moments."

Mention the Singapore National Stadium and Abbas rattles off some of his sweetest memories.

"The National Stadium is my favourite ground. There's nothing like playing on your home ground in front of 60,000 screaming fans—one of the most unbelievable experiences for any footballer. And Shah Alam Stadium in Kuala Lumpur is also one of my favourite grounds. Very impressive. It's hard to explain what it's like out in the centre when there are 80,000 people going crazy. But I can only imagine the atmosphere would be similar to a World Cup final."

Abbas says he also got a lot of satisfaction watching the game improve since he first played in Asia.

"Overall the game has come a long way in the past six years. When I first came to Singapore the state of play was atrocious across the region. There weren't many good footballers. But with the introduction of top foreign players and coaches and the development of local talent, the game rose to another level. The local players have improved out of sight. These days it's a lot faster and more competitive."

It is perhaps ironic that the coaches Abbas has played and trained under are counted as valued friends by him. But in sport friendships are built on respect and regardless of the conflicts

which may have been reported over the years Abbas has always had the respect of those who value talent, skill and a love of the game above all else. Chief executive officer of the S-League, Douglas Moore, finds it difficult to fault Abbas Saad in any way. Moore coached Abbas during Singapore's successful 1994 season and has nothing but praise for the Australian import. Moore feels Abbas was, and still is, a natural. He has incredible ability which is to this day unmatched in Southeast Asia, he says.

"It's difficult to judge how good he actually was because it's possible he was a lot better than we all thought," Moore says. "It's a pity because Abbas was never seen at the highest level like in the English or European leagues but I imagine he would have done quite well there because on his day he's outstanding, one of the best. There's no such thing as a perfect player but Abbas came close. He had God given natural ability."

Moore says he never found Abbas to be any trouble in the squad, despite rumours to the contrary.

"He was a chatty player, a joker, and he would moan and groan now and then about hotel beds or food when we travelled but I never had any disciplinary troubles with him whatsoever. He was the perfect professional in that respect. I never knew him to miss training unless he was sick. It's a tragedy that he's banned for life because he has at least two or three years left in him and in those years would be tougher mentally and that would probably make him an even better player."

Moore is not alone in his praise for Abbas as a player. P. N. Sivaji, national coach in 1992 and 1993, says that Abbas was a complete player.



Top: Enjoying a quiet night with friends. Abbas is grateful for the friendships he has made through soccer.

Bottom: At the Malaysia Cup victory party Abbas shares a joke with best friends Malek Awab and Fandi Ahmad.

"When I coached him in 1993 his commitment was one hundred percent in most of the games and he always played to win. His only trouble was that he was a bit gullible. If he wasn't banned I think he would have at least another five years in the sport. He was a champion, the best in this part of the world, it's sad the way it ended for him," Sivaji says.

Barry Whitbread, the current national coach feels that Abbas had all the ingredients that make a true champion—the fitness, the natural ability and the right attitude. He believes the Lions are less effective without him.

"He won a number of games for Singapore with his skills and goal scoring abilities. I think he was one of the best players in the region. The Lions are missing him today, they have suffered. The lethal Fandi and Abbas combination has been broken and that has left a big hole which has yet to be filled," says Whitbread.

Many would say that Abbas has plenty to be bitter about but it is the mark of the man that he is able to move ahead without harbouring grudges. For someone like Abbas, who has already achieved so much, life is too short to waste time on petty grievances. He feels some people betrayed him but he doesn't hate them although these people are no longer his friends.

"As for enemies, if I have made any enemies I hope those people will forgive me because I forgive them. You can't please everyone in this world and no one's perfect. No matter where you are personalities sometimes clash. I've never held any grudges or hated anybody. People might do something wrong but I forgive people. I believe in giving people a second chance because everyone makes mistakes.

"I know some people have stabbed me in the back or have betrayed my trust and that's difficult for me to accept. I suppose those people have to live with that and maybe they care or maybe they don't. But I don't hate anyone for what's happened. I just don't understand why some people did what they did. I don't even hate the CPIB officers. They were directed to do a job and that's what they did. I can accept that. Even Mr Omar Ibrahim I have forgiven. I hate what he did, but I don't hate him. As for the bookie involved in the whole saga, I would rather not give him the time of day. He confessed to being the mastermind behind the scheme, put in a number of people and was granted immunity from prosecution. Today he's a free man and probably won't be charged. Somehow I don't see that as being fair."

A New Beginning

He had hoped it would be a new chapter in his life without the problems of the past coming back to haunt him. But upon his return to Singapore, that's exactly what happened. Today he is left wondering if he will ever be forgiven for his mistakes.

After almost three months in Sydney relaxing with his family, enjoying his first winter in five years and catching up with many of his friends, Abbas returned to Singapore late on Sunday, September 17 to start a new life—and a new career. The decision to come back wasn't easy. He had a new love in his life and was forced to leave her behind, if only temporarily to begin with. Abbas met her at a classy Sydney cafe and the two hit it off straight away. He spent the next few months by her side and wasn't looking forward to returning to Singapore and leaving her behind. He was feeling like he did in 1990 when he left his fiancée behind, but he knew he had to go—there was some unfinished, and some

new business to attend to. Abbas had gone into partnership with a lawyer friend and two businessmen to open a new nightclub—with a famous dance troupe as the main attraction. Abbas had to be in town to promote it. Hot Bod—The Club, on the water's edge at Singapore's trendy Clarke Quay, opened to the public in October 1995. It's the first of its kind in the republic and the stars of the show are six muscle-bound hunks and four curvaceous women who have charmed a predominantly female crowd worldwide with their provocative dance routines.

Abbas did all of the club's promotion—he was the face of the club, using his high profile to sell the concept and for a while that worked in his favour.

"I went into business because I didn't have anything else to do at the time. I couldn't play soccer. Before my contract was terminated and I was convicted I had plans to open a coffee shop on Orchard Road and a soccer academy with Fandi. Now that doesn't look like happening. So when I was offered the chance to be involved with the club I jumped at it."

As always, Abbas was back in the headlines on his return. No one was at the airport this time but most knew he was back in town. The day he arrived a story about the club appeared in the local tabloid, *The New Paper*. Back in the papers the day before, making headlines the day after and arranging magazine interviews a week after that. It seemed like the good old times when he was playing, except he was being photographed wearing a tie and not football boots.

In early October Abbas' face and familiar Aussie voice were back on television when he appeared promoting his club on an entertainment show trailer. The night the story was to appear,

Abbas set himself up in front of the television with his business partners and explained how the story would be great in helping the club to get off to a good start.

At 8:30 p.m. on Wednesday, October 4 the programme went to air without the Hot Bod story. An announcement preceded the show: "We would like to inform viewers that the Abbas Saad story has been withdrawn from the programme."

Abbas was astounded and tried calling people he knew in the industry to find out why. About fifty irate viewers called the station that night asking the same question. Abbas' business partners thought it was great. "More publicity, more controversy and more people will know about the club," one of them said.

No one from the show contacted Abbas until mid-morning the following day. They explained the segment was not appropriate, but Abbas thought maybe it was personal.

"I don't know why. I've paid my dues. Can't I just get on with my life?"

The papers had a field day. "Abbas segment canned," one headline read. "Why drop Abbas interview?" another questioned. But those headlines were nothing compared to a comment piece which appeared the following Monday in *The New Paper*.

"Soccer cheat kicks off again," the headline spat. The reporter opened with the question: "How do you solve a problem like Abbas Saad?" The article went on:

"...he (Abbas) is back in Singapore and creating waves on the social scene again. This truly is a sign of greatness in a man ... or ignorance in a community. ...Has everyone forgotten those sleepless nights cheering the Lions to Malaysia Cup glory, only to be slapped across

the face with a corruption scandal? I haven't. ... But when somebody who was fined for dribbling with the very life-force of Singapore sport comes back to make more money in Singapore, you begin to wonder: Does crime pay? It doesn't. And it's up to every soccer fan who felt cheated to drive that point home when the doors of Abbas' club open."

"I have paid for whatever I have done wrong," Abbas says. "What more is there for me to do? I just want to be able work and make a living. I don't want to be driven out of the country. I don't want to be ridiculed, to be made an outcast. I want a second chance. That's not asking for much."

Confident of playing football again, Abbas and his Singapore lawyers are working on an appeal with the support of the Australian Players' Union to present to FIFA in the near future. Abbas hopes to be given the nod to play again. "If not now, maybe in a year's time," he says.

Meanwhile, Abbas remains a convicted match-fixer. But he would like to live in Singapore and has applied for an employment pass so he can work legally for a long period and settle in the republic.

Now instead of playing on Saturday nights, he sits at home and watches the English Premier League on television and cheers passionately for his beloved Manchester United. His favourite player is none other than the volatile Eric Cantona, who in many ways is a lot like Abbas himself. Abbas concentrates on the action and comments on the various players' skills and faults. "Go, go, go," he says, as Cantona makes a break down the midfield. "Shoot!" he screams as Cantona gets within striking distance. "Yes!" he smiles as Cantona scores. "See what happens when you give someone a second chance?" he says half jokingly. But deep

down you know he means it. "There's a void in my life and it won't be filled until I play again. I have at least five years of good football left in me."

But nothing positive looks like happening for Abbas until he clears his name in court. He knows that will be difficult and costly and he wonders whether it would be worth the time and effort.

Meanwhile, only time will tell if the flamboyant footballer that Singapore once regarded as its own, will get the chance to thrill the island republic again with his breathtaking soccer skills and off-field charm.

"Singapore is my second home. I want to play soccer again and I want to play in Singapore for Singapore."

For Abbas Saad, football is everything. It's what has brought him his proudest moments, his darkest despair and his most jubilant triumphs. It's as much a part of him as his pride and his perseverance. It's in his blood, it's his lifeline, it's his soul. It's the essence of the man that he is today and a shadow of the man that he will become tomorrow. Love him or loathe him, one thing is certain—the name Abaas Saad will always be remembered. Perhaps, like the fans say, his name will reign again. As the saying goes, tomorrow is another day and maybe for Abbas, tomorrow will be better than today.