

RUGBY
A MALAYSIAN CHAPTER

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A MALAYSIAN CHAPTER

NG PENG KONG

12 AUG 2003

NASKAH PEMELIHARAAN
PERPUSTAKAAN NEGARA MALAYSIA

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Cover: Yellows' flanker Ng Peng Kong rushes to assist team-mate Gee Boon Kee (No. 4) as he is being tackled by Blacks' Pang Kong Ying in an intra-Cobra match at Pantai, University of Malaya. (*NSTP photo*)

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*To my daughters, Nee and Dee,
for being my best friends and the two
most wonderful people in my life*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ng Peng Kong's appetite for rugby was whetted at St. Michael's Institution, Ipoh under the guidance of the Irish Christian Brothers. Subsequently, he went on to represent the University of Malaya, the Combined Old Boys' Rugby Association (Cobra), Selangor and Malaysia. He captained Malaysia in 1975.

During his playing days, Peng Kong was also actively involved in the administration of the game. Besides being the secretary of Cobra in 1969 and again in 1971, he was also the Organising Chairman of the Cobra Tens on six occasions during its early years.

Peng Kong served as secretary of the Malaysian Rugby Union (MRU) for three consecutive terms beginning in 1973-1974 season. In later years, he accepted the MRU's invitation to be its Director of Development.

However, he resigned after a short stint over policy differences and concentrated on his duties as president of the Selangor Rugby Union (SRU), a position he held for three consecutive terms. Peng Kong was first elected as president in 1983. In that same year, he was also a vice-president of Cobra. It was his strategy to accept the dual role in order to remain in touch with the pulse of rugby at the club and the grassroots levels, thus ensuring that the policies he formulated as chief of Selangor rugby were relevant to all. After he stepped down as the SRU president, he returned to serve Cobra again as vice-president in 1987 and 1989.

His retirement from the game as player and administrator was given prominent coverage by the media. In *Peng Kong calls it quits after 18 years in the bruising game* (*The Malay Mail*), the news report among others stated, "He will be missed. For Peng Kong was an aggressive, hardworking flanker and a great asset to any team. He used these qualities to great effect." In that same news column, Peng Kong was quoted as saying, "It's (rugby) the best

sport for boys. It's action-packed, fast and very challenging – intellectually and physically.”

His unorthodox views on and radical prescription for rugby, which he held since his days as MRU secretary caused him to be the proverbial thorn in the flesh of rugby officialdom. Peng Kong is convinced that his temporary isolation policy with its incremental international exposure, which he mooted when he was the MRU secretary, would invigorate rugby unlike the grandiose schemes favoured by the MRU, chasing the elusive Asian and World Cup glories. He has won only a few converts to his cause and so he remains to this day, a strident voice in the Malaysian rugby wilderness, still advocating for a reformed MRU.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although this book is based mainly on my own personal experiences as player and administrator, my discussions with several former rugby colleagues helped tremendously in the recollections and reflections of many past events. In this regard, I am most grateful to Kassim Aziz, Choo Ah Chye and the late Ibrahim Busu. They gave freely of their time. In reliving these bygone days, I felt that I could have touched them by merely stretching out my hand as they drifted across my mind, the events were so astonishingly fresh and vivid that they could have happened just yesterday.

I must also record my thanks to Mrs. Ung Khek Cheow for giving me access to her late husband's rugby memorabilia. It is indeed a treasure trove of priceless information. The rugby fraternity is surely indebted to Mr. Ung Khek Cheow for his labour of love in the collection and preservation of these rugby records. Without his well-kept records, rugby would have been poorer as it would have been almost impossible to fill some huge gaping holes in its history.

It would be remiss of me not to thank Arkib Negara Malaysia and the *New Straits Times Press* for their assistance. I spent many hours at Arkib Negara Malaysia sifting through the old newspapers for relevant materials. The staff was most co-operative and efficient. The *New Straits Times Press* has been kind to give me permission to reproduce a number of rugby photographs from its library. These photographs are historically significant and have added a significant dimension to my book. The photographs are marked *NSTP* in this book.

In addition, I would like to express my appreciation to Alina Rastam for her views and suggestions on the first draft and to Esther Tan for her assistance in the tedious work involved in the compilation and the publication of this book.

To Juanna Reid, I owe my special thanks. Being a rugby buff herself, both Union and League and a fan of the Wallabies, she offered invaluable advice that has helped to shape the final manuscript. She is a former Michaelian who turned up at every St. Michael's rugby game to cheer my team-mates and me as we plodded around the park in pursuit of the oval-shaped ball.

However, this book would not have been possible in the first place but for the encouragement and prodding from my daughters, Lenny Vi-lynn and Audrey Vi-ane, affectionately known as Nee and Dee respectively by the whole family. These pet names were coined by their late grandmother. Both of them convinced me that I should not let my accumulated wealth of knowledge on rugby wither away. And to ensure that this book see the light of day, both of them took turns to nudge me along whenever they sensed that I was on the verge of capitulating and throwing in the towel on the book. I am now grateful that they had kept me on task.

PREFACE

I am aware that this book is the first of its kind, its compilation of materials, other than from my own experiences and from Mr. Ung Khek Cheow's records, was a daunting and time-consuming task. I had to collate information in bits and pieces over a long period in a seemingly 'Black Hole' due to rugby's lack of documentation, often emerging empty-handed. It was a test of patience and determination. The precious little that I managed to lay hands on, especially the written accounts of particular events, was like winning the jackpot. I have acknowledged their authors in the appropriate chapters.

Rugby has a great and rich history in this country. Whenever I attend any rugby function, every former rugby player and official without exception can be heard busily telling their rugby experiences and anecdotes to the younger generation. I felt compelled to document some of these precious gems as much of this oral history will soon be lost forever if not recorded on paper. Hence, my effort in writing this book is an attempt to preserve what many of us, rugby buffs, hold dear.

Apart from the historical aspects, I am also hopeful that my book will inspire budding rugby writers to use it as a source of reference to launch other rugby books, be it a commentary on my works or to take issue with my perceptions and analysis of events. Perhaps, this book may even inspire students enrolled in sports studies in the Malaysian tertiary institutions to write rugby dissertations. One of the topics could be on the accuracies of my findings. I hope a few of them will response to this challenge and in the process help to further enrich the literature on the great game.

I must reiterate that my book is not a comprehensive history of local rugby. I am aware that there are differing views and opinions on the numerous events that had happened. Consequently,

I have entitled the book, *Rugby – A Malaysian Chapter* and not *The Malaysian Chapter*. It is precisely on these grounds that I hope my book will encourage many other rugby veterans, who I never had the privilege of crossing path with during my rugby days, to write to me about their experiences and other significant events. Their rugby knowledge and anecdotes may yet appear in an addendum to this book, if not in a revised version, which could bring us nearer to a book on *The Malaysian Chapter*. My address is 29, Jalan Setia Kasih, Bukit Damansara, 50490 Kuala Lumpur, e-mail npk8723@pd.jaring.my

Meanwhile, it is my sincere wish that my book for all its worth is taken in the true spirit of rugby. And that there is acceptance that agreeing to differ is an honourable concept.

Ng Peng Kong

16th August 2003

Kuala Lumpur

CHAPTER ONE

THE CHALLENGES AND THE CONSPIRACIES

Rugby is touted as a game for ruffians played by gentlemen. This reputation has been gained by the seemingly rowdy behaviour of opposing players knotted together riotously, gesticulating with their strong arms, shoving and tugging at each other in an attempt to win possession of an oval-shaped ball. The contest for the ball in the maul, the ruck and the scrummage has largely contributed to this unwarranted image of rugby as a ruffian's game. To the uninitiated, the incessant physical encounters between players are both unruly and barbaric acts. But these acts are, in fact, carefully orchestrated manoeuvres permissible in the game, the stratagems of the respective teams.

Occasionally, such intimate bodily encounters erupt in fisticuffs and brawls between the opponents, particularly in keenly fought matches. In tense situations with a hair's breadth separating the ultimate victors from the vanquished, and when excitable men engage aggressively in a contest to win the ball, their bodies hard pressed against each other, it merely requires an accidental swing of the fist to ignite a conflagration. Such an encounter can be likened to powder kegs with short fuses. Inexplicably, in most cases, uncontrolled violence and madness do not ensue because the gentleman, Dr. Jekyll, somehow emerges from the ugly Mr. Hyde. It must be acknowledged that where some players are concerned, the transformation into gentlemen takes a little more time.

Perhaps, for the majority, the instilled discipline of keeping tempers in check stems from the knowledge of the irreparable injuries players can inflict on each other. Players know it is imperative for them to exhibit exemplary control throughout the game: a game by its rough and tumble nature is already potentially incendiary. This tight control on emotions must be maintained even on occasions when the player is being physically punished by

deliberate fouls. On the contrary, the player must absorb the punishments unflinchingly like a thorough gentleman imbued with rugby's *Spirit of the Game*. It is just as well that most players abide by the code of gentlemanly behaviour because if this code were not observed the crippling injuries players could suffer would result in no one being able to enjoy the pleasures of rugby.

I was first initiated to rugby during my school days by Reverend Brother Patrick of the religious order of La Salle at St. Michael's Institution, Ipoh. He kept impressing on the boys the need to always maintain a high sense of discipline and to act as gentlemen at all times in the field. He also extolled rugby's cherished spirit of amateurism.

This spirit of amateurism is being put to an acid test as the spectre of professionalism rears its ugly head once again. Rugby's early brush with professionalism began in the middle of the nineteenth century when twenty-one English clubs broke away from Rugby Union over the issue of whether monetary compensation should be given to players who lost wages by taking time off from work to play. This rebellion resulted in the birth of Rugby League Football, a thirteen-a-side game in contrast to the fifteen in Rugby Union. The game is played to slightly modified Rugby Union rules.

The advent of a professional Rugby League Football did little to stifle the rapid growth of Rugby Union, the more popular of the two codes. Rugby Union's code of amateurism was more than able to stand its own until recently when it started to make adjustments to accommodate the rising tide of professionalism that had inundated most sports. Its cherished spirit of amateurism is now seriously being eroded as increasing numbers of players are turning professionals these days.

Rugby is typically an English game which has since its inception been enthusiastically embraced and promoted by prestigious English public schools and universities. The game had its beginnings at Rugby School and was later taken up by the Cambridge and the

Oxford universities. Subsequently, it spread to other institutions of higher learning, establishing itself largely as a bourgeois game.

Rugby was and still is a game played largely by the English middle class. Most Malaysian students aspiring to further their studies in the United Kingdom would have read in the university brochures about rugby's elitism in campus sport. This was also the case in the local institutions of higher learning in the early years of tertiary education where rugby had a large following consisting of diehard supporters of both genders.

Legend has it that rugby was born in 1823 when William Webb Ellis, an English schoolboy at Rugby School, took the ball in his arms and ran with it during a football game. About this time, a significant political development was unfolding in the Malay archipelago involving Webb's countrymen and the Dutch, both colonial powers. They were embroiled in a territorial dispute over their respective spheres of influence, which finally led to the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824. Under this Treaty, the English gave the Dutch all its interests in Indonesia in exchange for the Malay Peninsula. Hence, this Treaty not only paved the way for the British colonisation of the Malay Peninsula but also brought rugby in its wake.

The English colonial administrators, who were steeped in the aristocratic traditions of the English public school where the game of rugby dominated, introduced 'the ruffian's game' to this country. These 'gentlemen colonialists' came ostensibly as advisors to the Malay Rulers and eventually entrenched themselves as the *de facto* rulers. Rugby was their exclusive social game for many years. Typical of the prevailing colonial mood, no attempt whatsoever was made to encourage the locals to play alongside them. Little did they realise that they provided the local populace with much amusement. The latter enjoyed witnessing the gladiatorial struggles between two teams of '*orang puteh*', (white man) frantically bashing one another up within a specified time period. The locals viewed this form of white man's antics as a treat - an entertaining Punch

and Judy show - and egged them on for a possible pugilistic demonstration, thinking that the supposedly superior and cleverer white men had gone temporarily insane under the hot tropical sun. The mad Englishmen!

According to reports in the newspapers of those times, rugby was first played in this country in the late nineteenth century. There were several newspapers in circulation then but all of them were parochial in their outlook, reporting only on events happening in their respective territories. The *Selangor Journal* was one such daily. It carried more rugby reports than others of its ilk because of the game's greater popularity in Selangor. An article reviewing sporting events in 1892, published in the *Journal* on 13th January, 1893 which briefly mentioned rugby caught my attention. This was the closest I could get to the beginnings of rugby in this country. However, the actual date remains elusive. The *Journal* was launched in 1892. Needless to say, rugby could have been played in this country much earlier, from the time when other British colonies were formulating their rugby rules. Canada, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia were already establishing rugby clubs in the 1860s.

However, I have not been able to find any other material related to rugby's beginnings in Malaysia despite investigating many sources, including the treasured personal collections, mainly newspaper clippings, newsletters and research papers of several ex-rugby officials and former players. These rugby treasures, whilst in my possession, caused me great anxiety and many sleepless nights. I was certain that their owners would have me mob-lynched if I were to either lose or damage any piece! I know it would infuriate me if anyone were to lose even a tiny bit from my own collection. Having diligently scrutinized the stacks of yellowing and dog-eared documents lent to me, I concluded that the late Ung Khok Cheow's collection of rugby memorabilia is the most priceless. His collection comprises antiquated official rugby records, research papers and souvenir programmes. Some of these programmes date as far back as the 1930s.

In the collection is a sketch by Hind Marsh, probably a rugby enthusiast, to commemorate the end of the 1933 rugby season. The sketch shows a group of workers dismantling the rugby uprights and preparing the ground for cricket. One of the workers is driving a pair of oxen with a heavy roller in tow to level the pitch. They are being supervised by an elderly, bare-footed Tamil mandor, unshaven and wearing a battered hat to keep off the sun. Accompanying the sketch is a quaint Bahasa Melayu caption with some misspellings, "*Mana orang berchakap lagi main Rugby? Sekarang sahya msti bikin siap padang main Cricket*" ("Who's still talking about playing rugby? Now I have to get the field ready for cricket.")

In that same collection, I also found another sketch by Marsh of a rugby ball bouncing in front of a packed grand stand in Singapore's Anson Road Stadium with the caption, *Wait for the Bounce! It's Deceptive!* It has the name of the MRU and of the match – North versus South, January 27th, 1934 – written across it. Judging from its layout, it has all the ingredients of being a likely cover for the souvenir programme of that game. Interestingly, I came across another souvenir programme for this particular match. The cover has *Official Programme* marked on the top and it features an advertisement of the then popular cigarette brand, *Capstan: Navy Cut*. Are there really two programmes for that match? Which body approved that one with Marsh's work? The Singapore Rugby Union, an affiliate of the Malaysian Rugby Union (MRU), was the host to that North versus South Annual Classic match.

The North versus South Annual Classic fixture, which started in 1928, was the climax of the rugby season. The best players from the teams competing in the HMS Malaya Cup were picked to represent their respective zones. Under the HMS Malaya Cup format, the participating teams were grouped into either the North or South Zone. The venues for the first four North versus South Annual Classic fixtures were rotated among the states. In 1932, however, Singapore was chosen to be its permanent venue, except the two years, 1941 and 1947, when Kuala Lumpur staged it, and Kuala

Lumpur the venue for the HMS Malaya Cup final, a *quid pro quo* arrangement. The Singapore Rugby Union continued to host the competition until its break away from the MRU in late 1965 in the aftermath of Singapore's separation from Malaysia.

This rugby secession caused much ill-will between the MRU and the Singapore Rugby Union, which had been a founder member of the MRU. The MRU president, Joe Potter, criticised his Singapore counterpart, Neil Cassey, for springing this decision on the MRU at a crucial time in the midst of the preparation to stage the 1966 North versus South Annual Classic at Singapore. The venue was shifted to Penang eventually. However, after Negri Sembilan played host to it in the following year, the Annual Classic was abolished.

Despite this break up, Singapore Civilians continued to participate in the HMS Malaya Cup but on an invitational basis, the invitation was a formality as the annual renewal was taken for granted. But with Singapore now being a sovereign and independent state, a tricky situation cropped up when it implemented an anti-long hair campaign, making it hard for visitors with long hair to enter the city-state. Under the HMS Malaya Cup system of competition, each team had to play host on alternate seasons. The state teams that had to travel to Singapore for matches were apprehensive that some of their players' hair-do might not pass the test at the immigration checkpoint. It was then the fashion to sport long hair.

This concern was raised at a MRU meeting that was convened to finalise the 1974 tournament fixtures. Surprisingly, many delegates spoke on the need to comply with the Singapore hair ruling and one elderly gentleman even lectured me when I stood against them. He was quite offended by my remarks that the Singapore Rugby Union must ensure unconditional entry for the visiting teams, failing which Singapore Civilians would have to play on Malaysian soil or forfeit its matches. I also categorically maintained that this principle should apply to the Singapore-based military team as well although it was an affiliate. The tournament was after all under the jurisdiction of the MRU. But no team was denied entry in those

years when the long hair ruling was in place. I did not receive any complaints. However, I was prepared as MRU secretary then to translate my stance into policy if the situation had warranted it.

In those times and up till the early 1970s, souvenir programmes were produced by the MRU and its affiliates to commemorate their respective rugby fixtures. The primary purpose was to raise funds. These programmes, which sold for a nominal fee of between fifty cents to a dollar, were treated as entry passes to the venues where the games were played. The advertisers, mainly companies dealing with cigarettes and alcohol, paid vast sums to virtually underwrite the cost of the matches and whatever little surplus there was went into the respective union's kitty.

These souvenirs have become valuable collectibles. They feature thumbnail sketches of the players and, more often than not, are accompanied by interesting articles. Nowadays, souvenir programmes that are as tastefully done are rare. Generally, present day programmes merely contain advertisements and formal welcome messages from the teams' respective presidents and the patrons.

Coming a very close second to Ung Khek Cheow's collection is Choo Ah Chye's personal collection. Ah Chye had the distinction of being the first Asian captain of the Perak rugby team and was one of the youngest players ever to play in the North versus South Annual Classic. The souvenir programmes from his playing days, beginning in the early sixties, are especially notable. Coincidentally, both Khek Cheow and Ah Chye hailed from Anderson School, Ipoh. Khek Cheow was the disciplinary master and Ah Chye, a ruggedly built student, standing at over six foot, his obvious rugby protégé!

From 1892, based on the *Selangor Journal's* earliest report on rugby, the game gradually rose to prominence until the late 1970s and many alleged that thereafter it started to go downhill. I would attribute this decline mainly to the delayed ripple effect of the great expatriate exodus (both civilian and military) from the rugby scene in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the insidious ever-widening

circle reaching its zenith many years later. By then, the successive waves and the unseen treacherous undercurrents had already weakened some of rugby's institutions, due to the attrition of experienced manpower, and the fact that replacements were hard to find. Such a concern was often raised at rugby meetings but the volunteers with the right credentials came by in trickles, insufficient to fill the vacuum created by the exodus.

It was a paradoxical situation for though progress was being made, this progress was built on an unstable foundation that lacked sufficient manpower to buttress it. This shortage of experienced personnel in subsequent years could no longer sustain those already faltering rugby institutions. When the collapse finally happened, it stirred up thick clouds of dust and chaos that persisted for many years and when rugby reached the grand milestone of its centenary in Malaysia in 1991, the MRU was blissfully ignorant of the event. The auspicious date passed like a thief in the night. There was not even a brief communiqué marking the occasion.

Anyway, centenary or otherwise, there was little cause for celebration. Rugby had already become the 'sick man' of Malaysian sports. It had fallen from its pedestal of having been one of the two giants in local sports, the other being soccer. The chorus of dissent grew louder since then with the dissidents relentlessly campaigning against the MRU, claiming the overt signs of decay were everywhere, school rugby was not what it was before, crowd support was dismal, standards of play were abysmal, state rugby unions were almost defunct and media publicity was conspicuous by its absence. These allegations caused debates among rugby pundits, former players and ex-officials. Occasionally, the press joined in with commentaries often leaning in favour of the anti-MRU lobby.

Predictably, die-hard MRU supporters did not take kindly to such virulent attacks, dismissing the allegations with derision and the imperious wave of the hand. They vehemently argued that the sport was on the road to recovery, pointing to the increasing numbers of

rugby competitions in the country. However, when some of the allegations were substantiated, the pro-MRU lobby insisted that the incumbent MRU office bearers should not be made scapegoats, arguing that previous rugby regimes were responsible in the first instance for permitting the rot to set in.

A good point! But most were disappointed that many of the personalities who ascended the MRU presidency after the great collapse, especially those who held office for consecutive terms over many years could not reinvent the MRU to usher in a rugby renaissance of sorts. Prior to 1968, it is observed that all, except two, held office for a single term of one year. J. C. M. Bell and D. Farquharson were the exceptions. The former, the first president, held it for two consecutive terms probably to put the newly established body on a firmer footing and the latter resurrected a defunct MRU after the war and held office for three consecutive terms, ensuring its recovery. Farquharson had previously served a term as president in the pre-war season of 1934-1935. After 1968, the position was a reverse mirror image, all the presidents, except two, held office for more than a term consecutively.

Whatever the opinion as to rugby's state of health, neither pro- nor anti-MRU factions, including the MRU itself, can deny that rugby is desperately struggling to emulate the progress of soccer which has grown by leaps and bounds to its present day professional status. Ironically, rugby and soccer began as organised inter-state competitions at about the same time following the presentation of trophies for both these sports by the officers and crew of the British battleship, *HMS Malaya*, in 1921.

Many have said that such a comparison between the two sports is grossly unfair. Personally, I am in total agreement. Culturally, Asians are not attracted to rugby because its rough and tumble image is anathema to their generally genteel disposition. Moreover, most of them do not have the physique for the game and even worse, the laws governing the sport are perceived to be highly technical and confusing and there are too many stoppages to make

it an entertaining spectacle for the spectators. Soccer, on the other hand, is merely a kick and run affair with simple rules that everyone can comprehend.

And more importantly, parents unknowingly help in soccer's promotion by playing some sort of ball game with their young at some stage in the latter's growing up years. They often coax their children "to kick it around." This is not so with rugby. Most parents perceive it as a rough game. These parents also have the inevitable attitude: no child of mine is going to injure himself in such a dangerous sport. This mainly explains soccer's meteoric rise in popularity with only minimal effort by its cohorts whereas rugby has to be in the hands of energetic and innovative officials who are able to continually create an environment conducive to its growth and development in a hostile and barren Asian terrain.

Extremists on both sides of the rugby divide had stirred up a tempest with their protracted debate which often bordered on acrimony. With so much tension generated and passion running high over the years, a safety valve was urgently needed to diffuse the growing frustrations and anger. Fortunately, this led to the emergence of a group of concerned rugby personalities who decided to challenge the incumbent MRU president and his council in the elections of 1996. Through this move, they swept away the cherished albeit unwritten rule that there was to be a no-contest for the MRU presidency. This rule was religiously observed during the colonial era when it was revered as a convention and over the years the MRU had attempted to nurture and calcify it. However, it achieved only partial success.

Many deemed the challenge to the presidency in 1996 a sacrilegious act, an open rebellion but the rebel group claimed it had little choice as the MRU had not made the slightest attempt to consider matters from its perspective. On the contrary, the rebel group asserted the MRU seemed ever more determined to turn a deaf ear to the deafening clangour of criticisms. This group, however, was not the first to ignore the no-contest rule.

In 1961, Penang Rugby Union intimated that it would like to nominate a candidate for the MRU presidency at the last council meeting before the annual general assembly. This immediately drew a response from the incumbent president, A. G. Mackenzie. He explained that the convention had always been for the new president to be proposed by the retiring president and the proposal was then placed before the MRU general assembly. Usually, the retiring president was given the privilege of picking his preferred candidate. He would make his choice after considering which state rugby unions had, in the immediate past, fielded a MRU president. He would then consult past MRU presidents and the nominee would normally be chosen from the ranks of those experienced in rugby affairs at either the state or the federal level.

This process was similar to an apprenticeship system where only candidates who had gone through the rugby mill would be considered, thereby making it virtually impossible for outsiders to take the helm. However, this rigid apprenticeship system was done away with in 1968 when Tan Sri Taib Andak became the president. Tan Sri Taib Andak had never served in any rugby capacity prior to his presidency.

Following A. G. Mackenzie's clarification of the process, the Penang Rugby Union withdrew its nominee. Mackenzie then proposed J. Aitkin of Negri Sembilan to be the new president because of the latter's vast experience of working with the MRU and also with the Johore and the Kedah Rugby Unions. Aitkin was elected by acclamation at the MRU general assembly in that year.

It was a great relief to the MRU to know that its jealously guarded convention, tended over many decades, had escaped unscathed. But the sigh of relief had hardly abated when, two years down the track, the convention was put to the test again. Penang Rugby Union was again the culprit and this time round it adopted a recalcitrant stance, backed by the Kedah Rugby Union. Both unions were adamant that their nominee, Group Captain J. R. Coulson of the Singapore Services should be considered for the

MRU presidency as he was, according to them "knowledgeable and his election would be a mark of appreciation of the services rendered to rugby by the many servicemen". To be fair to Coulson, he was a reluctant candidate. This proposal was an act of defiance. It was not withdrawn in spite of the explanation given by the outgoing president, Ng Wood Kan, regarding the existence of the no-contest rule. Ng Wood Kan had earlier, in keeping with precedent, recommended J. W. Cashin, the former Singapore Rugby Union president, to succeed him.

The two candidates were put to the ballot with J. W. Cashin garnering 17 votes to his rival's 3. There was one abstention. Cashin's landslide victory clearly demonstrated that the MRU was not prepared as yet to abandon its tradition of a no-contest for the presidency and those who agitated against it did so at their own peril.

In 1996, more than three decades after the Cashin win, Dato' Azmi Khalid, an ex-rugby player and parliamentary secretary in the Prime Minister's Department led the challenge for the presidency. Being a shrewd politician, he sensed a perceptible shift in the MRU thinking on the no-contest policy. Moreover, he had the backing of many prominent rugby personalities. The impending contest was much publicised. It was the talk of rugby circles for weeks. In the contest, Dato' Azmi Khalid was attempting to replace Dato' Zaman Khan, a senior police officer, who had held the presidency for more than a decade.

The challenger's camp launched a great campaign, securing assurances of support from many quarters. Delegates from state rugby unions who would not normally attend a MRU general assembly pledged to come and personally cast their votes, even if this meant flying from some remote states to Kuala Lumpur, the meeting venue. The early tallying of potential support pointed to certain victory. However, some members of Dato' Azmi Khalid's camp turned Judas at the eleventh hour. To this day, the dissidents constantly mock the turncoats accusing them of being responsible

for rugby's allegedly irreversible decline, reminding them that their hands are tainted permanently with rugby's blood.

Dato' Azmi Khalid lost narrowly by the only two postal votes cast in the meeting and these came from the two MRU council members who were unable to attend. The use of postal votes was permitted under the MRU constitution. It specified that the "council shall have power to decide on a postal ballot only on special occasions." If the delegates were conversant with this provision, then they could have engaged in a lively debate whether the meeting was special enough for the acceptance of postal votes. The ambiguity of the proviso 'special occasions' was definitely inviting a difficult discussion. But the real loser in the bruising challenge was the no-contest convention. It was now seriously dented. The challenger's loss by a whisker would more than likely embolden other aspiring candidates to mount their challenges in the future.

The no-challenge convention was also nearly undermined in the 1974 elections but for different reasons. The MRU council was responsible for the near fiasco when a contest between Sulaiman Amin and Dato' Shariff Hassan appeared imminent in the wake of Dr. Hui Weng Choon's decision to relinquish the presidency after three consecutive years. Dr. Hui announced that he had no one in mind to succeed him. This announcement triggered a scramble. In their anxiety to have the impending vacancy filled, some MRU council members took it upon themselves to approach their favourite personalities. Past experience had shown potential candidates required much coaxing.

Unfortunately, such well-meaning efforts were not well coordinated resulting in two senior civil servants accepting the offer a few days before the elections. Realising this inexcusable blunder, the MRU council worked furiously behind the scenes, scurrying helter-skelter to resolve a situation, made more delicate by the fact that both these individuals worked in the Malayan Railways, one as general manager, the other his deputy. Everyone in the MRU was on tenterhooks.

A unpleasant contest might have developed with repercussions in the administration of the Malayan Railways as well! To add to the problem, the MRU council was evenly split in its support of the two individuals, both factions were engaged in a tussle demanding the other withdraw its nominee with the minutes ticking away. A few informal meetings were hurriedly held in an attempt to resolve this stalemate. Dr. Hui Weng Choon, the president, kept reminding members to keep cool heads and to be reasonable. Out of sheer desperation, he even asked me if I could speak to both the candidates who were officers in the Malaysian Administrative and Diplomatic Service. However, being in that Service myself, I did not have the gall to do so since they were both very senior officers.

I was then serving my first term as MRU secretary and was very glad that I refused to be co-opted into supporting one clique or the other. As a novice in national rugby politics, I felt I was better served in attempting to consolidate my position, cultivating the confidence of the warring parties in rugby's variegated corridors of power where intrigues abound. I was in no doubt that when groups of officials with different loyalties and agendas come together, there was bound to be a degree of politicking.

Much to the MRU council's relief and possibly the Malayan Railways' as well, the senior personality in terms of age and professional status, graciously agreed to step aside, thus averting the embarrassment of a contest. I believe it was Dr. Chan Onn Leng, a council member, who finally consented to be the emissary to persuade Dato' Shariff Hassan to delay his bid for the presidency. Despite later serving as MRU secretary to both personalities, I never ventured to inquire whether they had an inkling of their impending tussle. I found both affable and jolly men who conducted meetings in a paternalistic and often jesting manner. Judging by their friendly disposition, they might have just laughed off the contest had it ensued, an anti-climax to the anxieties of the power brokers in the MRU who undoubtedly had spent sleepless nights!

The no-contest rule continued without a hitch after deputy general manager of Malayan Railways, Sulaiman Amin, served a year and was succeeded by the general manager, Dato' Shariff Hassan who served for four consecutive terms from 1975 to 1979.

Sulaiman Amin and Dato' Shariff Hassan were of the same height but the latter was better endowed physically. He was rugged and rotund, always with a smoking cigar protruding from his pouting mouth. He walked with a laborious gait as if weighed down by his rotundity. His jet-black hair was neatly swept back and held in place by huge quantities of hair cream, giving it a gleaming sheen. His loud voice might have seemed rude to someone not familiar with him. But he will be greatly remembered for his generosity to rugby, exemplified by his donation of a handsome trophy of solid pewter at the start of his presidency in 1975. When asked to name the Cup, he replied, unhesitatingly, his booming voice reverberating through the meeting room, "What else, call it the MRU Cup." This announcement was greeted with applause. A magnanimous gesture indeed as he could have politely hinted, as most donors would have, that it be named after him.

It was on my return from Holland in late 1972 that I was asked whether I was keen to serve the MRU as secretary. I was at the Institute of Social Studies, Den Hague for a year on a Dutch scholarship. This was an invitation that any rugby man would find difficult to turn down. I felt greatly honoured, as I was still wet behind the ears, a green horn, insofar as rugby administration was concerned. Yet, the rugby overlords had virtually handed one of the most coveted positions to me on a silver platter. I was keenly aware that there were many senior and experienced officials at state and federal levels who also wanted the post and who, unlike me, had grassroots support. These hopefuls, however, did not dare make the move without the crucial nod from the powers that be, the omnipotent MRU council!

I suspected that the MRU council approved of me because of my involvement in the Combined Old Boys' Rugby Association,

(Cobra), as secretary in 1969 and 1971 and not because of my professional background as an administrator. This suspicion turned out to be valid. Cobra was then in control of the MRU. The incumbent MRU secretary, Dr. Fong Wah Fatt, happened to be my neighbour at Section 5, Petaling Jaya, his bungalow perched on the hilltop looking down on my humble rented abode sited in a gully. His nightly *mah-jong* sessions were a constant irritation, causing unwelcome lapses of concentration in my preparations for the Public Service probationary examinations, which I had to pass in order for my appointment in the Malaysian Administrative and Diplomatic Service to be confirmed.

I was often driven to the verge of rushing up the hill to confront him, demanding peace and quiet. I did not realise then that he was the MRU secretary and a Cobra founder member. Being new to the locality, I had no opportunity of getting acquainted with the neighbours. Had I given in to that impulse, it would have put paid to my budding ambition to have a role in national rugby, either as a player or an administrator. A chiding by a young upstart would definitely not have been taken kindly to and Dr. Fong might well have vetoed my nomination when it was discussed at the MRU council.

This was because the council bestowed upon itself the right to recommend suitable candidates for vacancies in the council for the general assembly to endorse. Candidates who were not approved by the council found the odds heavily stacked against them in the elections as the council always exercised its votes *en bloc* for its preferred personalities. Some alleged that the council adopted this practice to ensure that its grip on power would continue to remain strong. Others argued that *en bloc* voting by the council was necessary because of the dearth of good potential candidates. It would be risky to depend entirely on nominations from the floor without prior vetting of the nominees' suitability. This practice was also widely employed by other rugby bodies, from state rugby unions to clubs, to the extent that it became the norm in rugby administration.

The MRU council then had a large and unwieldy membership consisting of elected officials, a nominated representative from the Malaysian Society of Rugby Union Referees and ex-officio members. The elected officials were: president, honorary secretary, honorary treasurer, honorary assistant secretary and a vice-president representing each affiliated state/service rugby union. It was customary for the presidents of the affiliated unions to be elected as MRU vice-presidents. All past MRU presidents were automatically appointed as ex-officio members.

Curiously, the MRU did not have a treasurer until the 1959 season when at the end of his presidency, O. H. R. Beadles put up a case for it. He felt that the post was imperative to enable the MRU to formulate an effective financial policy. Hitherto, an already overworked secretary was managing the accounts. A. G. Mackenzie was appointed the first MRU treasurer. Two years later Beadles, then a past president, took over from Mackenzie as treasurer when the latter became the MRU president. When I became the MRU secretary in 1973, G. H. R. Jenkins was the treasurer. He was the last remaining expatriate in the MRU - the last of the Mohicans!

Jenkins was a reticent person. He hardly spoke up on many of the issues that were raised in the MRU council meetings. He felt that those issues were directly of concern to Malaysians and he did not wish his intentions to be misconstrued since he was a European. But he controlled the purse strings judiciously, demanding minute breakdown of estimated expenditures before the required funds were released. As Jenkins was a conservative accountant, the MRU books were neatly kept and always updated, the entries legibly inscribed in black ink.

As delegates to the MRU general assembly were also drawn from this council fraternity, and with the MRU vice-presidents leading their respective state/service union delegations, one need not be particularly astute to notice the obvious - the council and the general assembly were synonymous! Hence, instead of being inquisitorial and demanding explanation and accountability from

the council, the general assembly, rugby's highest policy making body, was at most times docile and compliant. It gave its imprimatur to most of the council's recommendations without much dissent.

But what else could the presidents of the affiliated rugby unions do? Each president was already deeply implicated in his capacity as a MRU vice-president in all the decisions of the council under the doctrine of collective responsibility. Whatever objections there were to the issues tabled at the general assembly as well as the election process, should have been raised at an earlier stage, at council. Those who did not attend the council meetings could not plead ignorance, as minutes of such meetings were circulated to all members.

On several occasions, in my capacity as MRU secretary, I observed that many presidents of the affiliated rugby unions would not hesitate to keep in check the outspoken members in their own group, preventing them from making attempts to rock the boat at meetings. These presidents were in fear of being criticised and branded weak if they appeared unable to stand with their council. Unfortunately, many of them rarely attended council meetings, thus allowing by default a small group of elected officials, particularly the MRU president, to wield enormous and absolute power.

During my first two terms as MRU secretary, the Selangor Rugby Union (SRU) president, Mohd Ashraff, was the only affiliated member who attended council meetings regularly. In his young days, Ashraff was a fearsome full back for the Selangor All Blues who was able to bring down opponents twice his size. He was a fanatical rugby man. Despite his tracheostomy, the consequence of a near fatal accident in 1969, he was not deterred from being actively involved in rugby affairs. Ashraff was injured in an accident somewhere near Tampin, on his way back to Kuala Lumpur to attend a Cobra committee meeting at Gan Kong Eng's flat in Brickfields later that evening. His car was a total wreck and it was a miracle he survived.

I heard of this accident when I attended that committee meeting as Cobra secretary. In those early years, every married Cobra committee member was obliged to offer his home on a rotational basis for Cobra meetings. Cobra had no place yet to call its own. And the wives were always glad to prepare the customary sumptuous spread for the committee before the start of any of those meetings. Kong Eng's charming wife had prepared an elaborate meal that evening but everyone lost his appetite after hearing the bad news.

Ashraff owned a petrol kiosk, the Bumi Oil Company where he also managed his taxi business. He was always punctual at the kiosk, turning up at three sharp in the afternoon to supervise the changeover in work shift of the taxi drivers. Knowing his routine, I would present myself at the kiosk around that hour whenever I had rugby matters to discuss with him. Usually, there were several such matters as both of us were actively involved in Cobra and the MRU. In addition, he had the SRU to contend with. When he won the Cobra presidency in 1971, beating Kim Tai past the post, I was elected secretary for a second tour of duty. I stood for the post at his request as he wanted a trusted right-hand man.

At the conclusion of the official rugby discussions, he would talk about his playing days. There was one particular incident in the All Blues Cup that he often repeated. It is etched in my memory. It was during the Selangor versus Singapore game at Singapore in 1953 when a kick at goal caused the crossbar to come crashing down. Ashraff related how he stood, boots and all, on the shoulders of his skipper, Boris Piotrowski, to put the cross bar back. He was of course implying that the rugby players of his time were made of steel.

Ashraff made his last appearance as a rugby official in the HMS Malaya Cup final at Victoria Institution in early January 1975. It rained that evening but he insisted on performing his duties until the final whistle. Some say he caught pneumonia that day. It was on my return from the Chinese New Year holidays in early February

that I received a call informing me that Ashraff was hospitalised at the Lady Templer Hospital, Cheras. He was in a coma. I rushed to see him and spent some time at his bedside. He was reduced to mere skin and bones, a ghost of his former self. I held his hand and rambled on about rugby. Occasionally, I felt his grip tightened as though conveying his agreement on some issues. When I told him that it was time for me to leave, he held tightly to my hand as if reluctant to let me go. He passed away a few days later. I attended his funeral at the Muslim cemetery at Jalan Ampang along with a large rugby crowd.

Besides Ashraff, three other presidents who occasionally turned up at MRU council meetings were Jimmy Meikle from the Perak Rugby Union, Lieutenant Colonel Asidin Ali representing the Malaysian Armed Forces and Ayob Saud from the Penang Rugby Union. Jimmy Meikle had a distinguished rugby career, being an ex-HMS Malaya Cup player, a former Perak captain as well as an ex-player in the North versus South Annual Classic. He was usually accompanied by Mohd Isa, the secretary and Ung Khek Cheow, an ex-MRU president. Ung Khek Cheow was the first Asian to head the MRU in 1959.

The poor attendance of affiliate representatives at council meetings was a phenomenon which started in the mid-1960s when state rugby unions were increasingly being taken over by Asian administrators. Was there any correlation between the two developments? Could it be inferred that these new administrators were not as keen and enthusiastic as their predecessors had been, hence their reluctance to travel for rugby's sake to Kuala Lumpur, the meeting venue? In view of this lamentable record of attendance and the fact that the doctrine of collective responsibility as practised by the MRU council had a stifling effect on the affiliates, rendering them straight-jacketed and lacking in flexibility, I recommended in my second term as MRU secretary that affiliate representations in council be eliminated. I also suggested the abolition of the ex-officio appointments. Both proposals were approved as part of a major constitutional overhaul in 1975, with the affiliates voting in

favour of them. They realised that it was pointless to retain their membership in the council as MRU vice-presidents which was already proving to be a sham because of dismal attendance. Many years later, the MRU had a change of heart on this issue and reinstated the past presidents and the presidents of the affiliates as ex-officio members.

In fact, I would now go a step further to recommend that the present practice of electing a council should be replaced by electing the president only. The president elect is at liberty to handpick his own council whose members should have no voting rights as they are not representing the affiliates. These members are only answerable to the president and they serve at his pleasure. This would ensure that the president and the council members are birds of a feather. In this way, the president would have no legitimate reasons to ever lament the fact that he could not get the fullest co-operation from council. This system would enable an accurate assessment of the president's achievement during his tenure. Presently, because every council member is elected to office in his own right, he can adopt an uncooperative stance and jeopardise the implementation of the president's favourite projects.

An elected council that suffered from ideological schisms emerged after the hotly contested tussle between Dato' Azmi Khalid and Dato' Zaman Khan in 1996. Two staunch supporters from Dato' Azmi Khalid's camp were elected but they resigned shortly thereafter, claiming that they could not function effectively due to lack of support.

There is no denying that for many years in the 1970s, the MRU council was often referred to in a derogatory fashion as the rugby mafia with Cobra as the Godfather. This MRU-Cobra nexus was unavoidable as Cobra held all the major portfolios in the MRU during that period. Cobra was then on the ascendancy, becoming a household name in rugby with abundant talents not only on the rugby pitch but also in rugby administration. It was attracting increasing numbers of professionals and graduates to its ranks.

But Cobra's predominance in rugby in those years, the envy of many, did not happen purely by accident. It was the result of much painstaking planning by its top officials who were determined to shape the course of rugby in every aspect in this country. To do this, they realised that they would have to hold key positions in the MRU, the Malaysian Society of Rugby Union Referees (MSRUR) and the Selangor Rugby Union (SRU). The control of the SRU was extremely vital to create a conducive and thriving environment for the fledgling Cobra, a SRU affiliate. Beginning in 1967, when Cobra was conceived, the SRU presidency was firmly in Cobra's hands and this iron-clad grip lasted for several years.

When Dr. Hui Weng Choon, a former Selangor player, became the concurrent president of Cobra and SRU in 1970, there was a great upsurge of matches played in both the senior and junior leagues in Selangor. These matches were mainly arranged to assuage Cobra's insatiable appetite for games for its many playing members. Both leagues were scheduled for a total of 244 matches, not counting the friendly games and the HMS Malaya Cup inter-state matches. It was an extremely crowded programme and an unprecedented one in the history of the SRU.

Cobra was able to make use of an obscure byelaw in the SRU league rules that allowed any club with three teams in the junior league to draw not more than six players from each of these teams to play in a team in the senior league. These rules also permitted not more than four national or state players to be utilised in a team in the junior league. Cobra fielded three teams in the junior league in the 1970 season, the Cobra Blacks, the Fangs and the Wasps. At that time, Cobra had six national players and eight state players who were evenly distributed over the three junior teams. These teams rode roughshod over their opponents in the junior competition. Many opponents were greatly dissatisfied as they had to play against Cobra's senior players in a junior game. They demanded the revocation of that illogical byelaw but the SRU league committee under the chairmanship of Ng Boon Keat, a Cobra member, gave

it scant attention. Boon Keat himself was a player in the Cobra Blacks and the Cobra First XV.

The byelaw worked in Cobra's favour as it allowed junior players to play in competitive matches alongside veterans who provided invaluable advice and guidance. It was undoubtedly a well thought out strategy to put the young and upcoming players through a baptism of fire. Cobra had a monopoly that season, winning the senior league and the top three places in the junior league.

Cobra could not have emerged triumphant if it had not been a highly efficient and disciplined set up. In this regard, Dr. Chan Onn Leng deserves praise for his untiring efforts. He drew up a rigorous training schedule that every player had to adhere to. He made physical fitness a Cobra obsession. He was, after all, a fitness freak himself. Players had to run twice round the circular road in the University of Malaya campus before embarking on the slope run, the treacherously steep hill at the back of the Agriculture Faculty and then down again. He recorded in great detail not only the progress of each player in training but also the player's performance in matches in a blue note book. The results of every game were recorded. He was brutally frank in his written assessment of the players. For example, commenting on the Cobra versus Negri Sembilan Pirates match played on 14th October 1967 in which Cobra lost by 21 points, he wrote:

Bad refereeing. Did not stop punching and holding tactics. Team badly demoralized by absence of Adnan (no excuse), Soon Cheng (late). Kheng Huat further added to it by plenty of grumbling and baiting of referee. Yap followed suit. Yap always calls for ball to kick - bad habit. Kheng Huat biggest offender in grumbling. Team went to pieces. Ashraff also instigating team to walk out. On play, Jimmy cost 2 tries on wing. Yap no tackling. Sunny too scared to tackle. Wing forwards held back on most occasions. Azmi good in jumps, bad in loose scrum. On spirit - poor, to be demoralized by size. On discipline - poor - Pang and Busu conspicuous on own.

Immediately after every match, the team was assembled for a self-evaluation session. Here, Onn Leng was in his element, discharging his duties as club captain without fear or favour. He first lashed out at those players who had played a mediocre game before he proceeded to discuss the errors in play and their remedies. Such sessions had indeed laid the early foundation for Cobra's rise to greatness, which began in the 1970 season. Onn Leng was the club captain from 1967 to 1969 but he continued to keep written records of every player in his blue book even after he had relinquished the post.

When he went to Britain in 1970 on his sabbatical - he was a medical lecturer at the University of Malaya - he made me responsible for this task. It was a tedious assignment, especially the written assessment of each and every player. At most times, I could not recall what many of them did in the game as I was also concentrating on my own playing. The notations were always sketchy and incomplete. I breathed a great sigh of relief when he returned a year later to resume his labour of love.

This *Cobra Blue Book* may not be on a par with Chairman Mao's little *Red Book* but to its credit, Cobra in those days was courageous enough to have its own book, listing its rugby 'mortal sins' and appropriate 'acts of contrition'. These were to be rote learnt.

I am sure the Cobra players of those years want me to reveal the list of players in the three great Cobra teams of 1970. I am not going to disappoint them. By doing so, it will certainly help to boost their ego. They can boast to their friends and their grand children, "...I was one of the great Cobra players of yesteryear when Cobra reigned supreme". For this purpose, I reproduce *Cobra News*, 11th June 1970:

Because of the great number of intending players and the large increase in the playing membership, the Committee has decided to field three teams in the Milsum Trophy league this season so that everyone can have regular games.

THE CHALLENGES AND THE CONSPIRACIES

However, the senior team will be chosen from out of these three teams and the rules provide that not more than six players can play from each team in the senior league. In this way, senior players can be selected on merit alone. The three teams are as follows:-

POSITION	COBRA I	COBRA II	COBRA III
Hooker	Pang Kong Ying	Mohd Yunus	Cedric Netto
Props	Ibrahim Busu Kim Tai	Brian Miller Francis Chew	Ng Boon Keat Rahman Majid
2nd Row	Megat Najumuddin Gurcharan Singh	S. Sinnappa Azmi Khalid	Yeoh Keng Lock Koh Guan Bok
Flankers	Kon Chee Kong Chan Onn Leng	Kulwant Singh Ng Peng Kong	Wong Lock Jam Gee Boon Kee
Lock	Megat Rus	Zakaria	Adnan Maarof
Scrum Half	Aziz Ismail	Jimmy Yong	Sunny Ong
Flyhalf	Brian Pestana	Aziz Mahmud	Kamaral Ariffin
Centre	Annuar Maarof Jim Allen	Zain Yusoff Low Chok Yin	Ow Koon Chye Barry Hoar
Wing	Chong Soon Khean Richard Lim	Ricky Chai Ahmad Mahmud	Abdul Rahman John
Full Back	Loke Kai Heng	Low Yew Hong	Rory Teng
Reserves	Tan Soon Cheng Yong Bang Kuang Raoul Huet Jack Lee Stephen Lee	Ng Chee Heng Phuah See Lye Gan KongChiew Tan Eu Lin Jimmy Teoh Victor Chan	Sritharan Benny Yeoh Ng Ket Chee Alan Scharenguivel Jaafar Taib Chan Chee Keong
Playing Day	Wednesday	Tuesday	Wednesday

When I first served as Cobra secretary in 1969, I became privy to Cobra's grand designs for rugby. These were frequently mentioned in the committee meetings. I was greatly impressed that Cobra had even prepared an elaborate plan of succession to be implemented over a specified time span. This grand plan was to ensure that

certain Cobra officials were placed in the MRU, MSRUR and SRU or failing that for these officials to infiltrate into these groups. Some of the conspiratorial discussions were held at Merlin Hotel's cosy coffee house and occasionally at the petrol kiosk nearby owned by Ashraff, a Cobra founder member. Both these establishments where many important rugby decisions were made are no longer in existence. The hotel has a new name and is under a different management and the kiosk has been demolished for a multi-storey modern office building.

Truly, these Cobra officials were great strategists and men of vision. They rightly deserved to reap the fruits of their labour and to remain in rugby's driving seat for several years despite condemnation from their critics who cried foul because they were always outmanoeuvred at every turn and left out in the cold.



North vs South Annual Classic, at Kuala Lumpur, 11th January 1947

Front row (from left): G. Llewellyn, Exley, R.J. Maxey, FL Morris, JB Potter (Capt, South), D. Farquharson (MRU president), FCS Tillbrook (Capt, North), Cheong Foon Chin, Tai Swee Kee, AL Barcroft.

Second row (from left): Warman, Gushman, Twissel, Scrine, Dr. J Frame, Deacon, DM Murray, MB Pestana, CWA Murray, JFM Roualle, W. Fox.

Third row (from left): D. McBride (touch judge), J Ferguson, G Bowman, J Aurely, WE Grieve, DM Seward, WJ Lavers (Referee), P Boyle, DE Trevaldwyn, C Wainwright, HO Bennett, J Whitelaw, GWF Brown (touch judge)

RUGBY - A MALAYSIAN CHAPTER



Punch and Judy antics of the rugby-mad Englishmen at their beloved game regardless of weather and pitch conditions, amuse locals... (NSTP photos)



...then this lunacy afflicts their Malaysian protégés who enthusiastically join them in this 'ruffian's frolic' ...yet amidst this tense tussle, there is time for intimacy – a player second from right closes his eyes and puckers his lips into a rosebud as No 7 moves in for a good smooch. Ng Peng Kong (second from left) leans forward slightly to join in the ruck.



...and eventually, the Malaysians find themselves alone in the great 'hooligan's game' stomping, kicking and bashing up each other after the culprits who started it all had long packed up and gone home. In this scuffle, Ng Chee Heng (extreme right) with the reputation of being a 'Glass Eater' finds a moment of tranquillity to show-off his nifty Tango steps. A player in the centre wears an old fashioned scrum-cap.

OFFICIAL PROGRAMME.

MALAYAN RUGBY UNION
NORTH v. SOUTH

AT ANSON ROAD STADIUM,
Saturday, 27th January, 1934.

KICK OFF 5.5 P.M.



*Always
fresh
from
England*



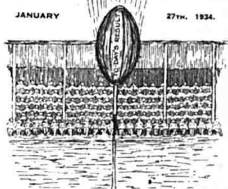
W. D. & H. O. WILLS,
BRISTOL & LONDON

MALAYAN RUGBY UNION

NORTH VERSUS **SOUTH**
ANSON ROAD STADIUM

JANUARY

27th, 1934.



WAIT FOR THE BOUNCE!
IT'S DECEPTIVE!

WINDMILL

The mystery of the two souvenir programmes for the North versus South Annual Classic in 1934. Note the one at the right has "Official Programme" written across at its top. Who was responsible for the unofficial copy?



The Cobra Committee meets at the Selangor Club. Coincidentally, all members are attired in angelic white... but are Machivallean plots being hatched beneath their shrouds of white? Ng Peng Kong chews on a pencil, contemplating on how to report the matters at hand.



Malaya versus Special Services Squadron 1924. First time a Malayan XV took the field.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PLANTERS AND THE SPOTTED DOG

Judging by the prolific coverage given to rugby by the *Selangor Journal* during its short life span from 1892 to 1896, Selangor was extremely active in the game, especially in Kuala Lumpur, the largest town. Apart from reporting the matches, the *Journal* was also predisposed to making known its own observations on the progress of the game. In one issue, it commented that "...the interest taken in this contest (rugby) was increasing..." and in a report of 18th May, 1894 on the Planters versus The World, a match won by the latter, the journal observed:-

...it is certain that there are many men in Kuala Lumpur who would like to play the game but who are afraid of making themselves ridiculous through want of knowledge of the rules. These will shortly be published in the *Journal* when a careful perusal of the same, coupled with a few hints from a regular player should speedily improve the style of play and attract new men. A few well-known maxims should be kept in mind:-

1. Don't pass when within your own 25 as a rule and certainly do not pass in front of your own goal.
2. Don't pass wildly, i.e. do not pass unless you see the man you are passing to.
3. Don't heel out your own 25 unless specially instructed.

Even today, rugby coaches and veterans would agree wholeheartedly on the relevance of these maxims despite the changes that have occurred in the laws of rugby.

In the colonial days, organised sports took a major role in the lives of the young expatriates and working hours for most professions were tailored to provide sufficient time for a game in the evening

before dusk set in. This need to provide ample time in the evenings to play sports was taken into serious consideration even by the Malaysian Government, when in the late 1960s it revised the working hours of all its departments from 8.30am to 4.30pm to 8am to 4.15pm. Some officers from the Federal Establishment Office (FEO) told me that consideration for sports was a major factor in the revision. The FEO, located in the same building where I worked, was responsible to determine the working hours for all government departments.

As a government employee, the hours suited me well. It gave me adequate time to travel to the different match venues in the Klang Valley. The matches usually kicked off around 5.30pm. However, the kick-off time was not very conducive to players in the private sector as they normally left the office at 5pm, during weekdays and had to rush to make the game. If they were key players, most teams considered it strategic to start playing with a player or two short to allow the late arrivals' immediate participation in the game. Otherwise, the reserves would be fielded if a reasonable waiting time had lapsed. During these crucial few minutes when the key players were absent, the opposition would use all its guile to capitalise on its advantage in numbers.

Rugby was extremely popular with the expatriate community in the colonial era. In the pre-HMS Cup days, rugby was played as friendlies, a social past time with makeshift teams. Usually, planters made up one team and civilians the other. Being the world's largest rubber producer then, the country had a sizeable community of expatriate planters. On auspicious occasions, there were matches between a team comprising players from a particular nation and a team made up of other nationalities on the other. This was the case in the Scotland versus The Rest of the World matches held every St. Andrew's Day. Occasionally, inter-club and inter-state matches were held. In contrast to the relaxed mood of the friendlies, these matches were taken fairly seriously.

To the many European planters who had managerial roles in rubber estates, rugby presented a welcome distraction from their weary and mundane work routine in the isolated and remote estates. Some of the large estates were keen to recruit rugby players because these companies were convinced that such individuals would naturally possess the strength of character to endure the loneliness and hardships of estate life.

R. B. Briggs was one such character recruited by the Dunlop Plantations. He was a planter in Nilai District and being a former Harlequins, he was made captain of the Negri-Malacca HMS Malaya Cup team in 1927. He also played in the North versus South Annual Classic from 1928 to 1932. He coached the Negri All Blues in the mid-1930s. The Harlequins Football Club, founded in 1866 in England, is the world's largest rugby club.

Another planter, Dr. Farleigh-Robertson, a rugby enthusiast, bequeathed a sum of money in his will for the purchase of a silver cup for an annual game between Perak and Negri Sembilan. He had once worked in both these states. Named after him, the cup was bought in 1926 and it signalled the start of the Farleigh-Robertson annual competition. Like most other cups, the Farleigh-Robertson trophy disappeared during the tumultuous times of the Japanese Occupation of this country. The rugby fraternity in both these states chipped in for a new cup after the liberation. This cup was later to be replaced by a trophy donated by N. Cleaveland who played rugby in Perak in the 1920s. Cleaveland was a member of the victorious United States rugby team at the Antwerp Olympics in 1920. Rugby was played in the Olympics in 1900, 1908, 1920 and 1924. Hence, the history of the Farleigh-Robertson Cup has a tinge of the Olympic lustre through Cleaveland.

Planters had to begin work before the crack of dawn, conducting the roll call of estate coolies by lamplight. After breakfast, they returned to the field again for a general inspection, supervising the mandors and tappers and they also had to be present at the weighing-in of the latex. There was minimal contact with the coolies after

work, the planter remaining aloof to maintain his reputation, so that his actions would not be frowned upon and he would not be ostracised by his community.

Living in this self-imposed isolation, the planters looked forward eagerly to the off-days, when they would make the long and lonely journey across laterite and dirt roads to towns where expatriates were found in larger numbers to meet up with fellow countrymen. They arrived at these destinations exhausted, sweaty and grimy but after a gulp of a '*setengah*', a local concoction of whisky and soda, a '*gin pahit*' (bitter gin) or a pint of beer, they were refreshed and recharged, ready for a game of rugby.

According to numerous accounts I heard from old rugby hands, most of these planters were highly explosive throughout the match and some appeared at times to grope their opponents. They seemed to be letting loose their pent-up frustrations and libido after many lonely nights' confinement in the estates in the middle of nowhere, with only the cacophony of nocturnal insects in the surrounding jungle for company. Eligible young European ladies, looking for prospective husbands, took the opportunity to congregate at these rugby matches to socialise with the gregarious planters. These ladies were always dressed in their finery, complete with hats and brollies to keep off the evening sun. Such gatherings were attempts to replicate a day at Ascot in faraway England.

After the game, there was the rollicking partying where large quantities of beer and liquor were consumed. Chants of "a *setengah* for the road..." from those already inebriated would wrap up the evening. The rugby-playing planters would then prepare themselves for the forlorn journey home, no doubt feeling sombre at the prospect of another dreary and routine week in the estate before their next sojourn to town and a rugby match.

Of the social clubs around Kuala Lumpur, the Selangor Club, established in 1884 and popularly known as 'The Spotted Dog' became the planters' favourite haunt because rugby was played there. The Club was in those days the hub of rugby activities in

Selangor and the *de facto* headquarters of the MRU until the early 1980s. The MRU was given the privilege of signing chits and running an account like a fully-fledged member. Today, the club is more commonly known as 'The Dog'.

And since I was often seen on the Club's premises as a MRU official and state player, I was and still am often assumed to be a member by the Club's long-serving staff. On several occasions, when dining there with friends who are members, I would hear the older staff tell the young waiters serving my table, "...*jaga dia baik baik, dia member lama...*" ("take care of him, he's an old member.."). It is quite an embarrassment but in spite of my frequent remonstrations, such remarks continue to this day. In those early days, Dr. Fong Wah Fatt often suggested that I should sign up as a member, he was prepared to be my proposer and Dr. Chan Onn Leng my seconder. I procrastinated and in the end became a member of the non-rugby playing Lake Club instead.

There are many stories of how the Club came to be known as the Spotted Dog. A popular version has it that the wife of the Commissioner of Police in 1896 used to drive down to the Club daily with two Dalmatians trotting beside her carriage, a scene that the locals came to associate with the Club. Another story tells of the wife of a certain Mr. Kindersley, a planter, who came frequently to the padang (field) beside the Club, which was then being built, to have a picnic with her friends; two Dalmatians always accompanied her. It became the habit among her friends to enquire whether any of them was invited to picnic at the spotted dogs. Taking cognisance of its canine affinity, the Club's rugby team, a highly respected side, decided some years ago to formally adopt the name, *The Royal Selangor Club Dalmatians*.

I am sure many old timers remember the elderly sarong-clad mamak hawker, energetically frying his noodles, both hands adeptly clutching the ladle at the padang on rugby match days. He fried with so much vigour that the soot-crustured *kuali* (a frying pan) rocked perilously on the stove mounted on a tricycle. The rocking

kuali would surely have fallen off the stove but for mamak's frequent and expert knocks on its rims with the ladle to put it back in place. His business was brisk, the crowds milling about his tricycle parked under a huge tree beside the Selangor Club. Some players were also seen feasting on noodles before the start of a match.

It was indeed a modern day picnic of sorts, probably taking place at Mrs. Kindersley's favourite spot and under the same big tree. Could it be possible that some day in the future, tales of this mamak's noodle-picnic be associated with the Selangor Club, replacing the stories from the colonial era? If so, then it should be called the Mamak Spot!

The other two clubs in Kuala Lumpur, the Selangor Golf Club, mainly patronised by the Scots, and the Lake Club, the preserve of mainly bigwigs from the government service, had no rugby. It was no surprise therefore that at the turn of the twentieth century, the bulk of Selangor Club's membership was the planters.

The membership of these clubs was not easily available to the locals in the colonial days. Membership was offered to a select few on an invitational only basis, as a consequence the local ruling classes and the community leaders were the ones who managed to qualify as the chosen few. Even after Independence, these clubs still did not hold their doors open wide enough for most Asians. Despite their rapidly declining numbers in terms of membership following the expatriate exodus after Independence, they continued to stand defiant as 'oasis of apartheid'. Admission as members was a protracted one for Asians, they had to wait patiently for several more years before they were accepted into these clubs in considerable numbers. In order to expedite the local membership of the Lake Club, the government had to work out a scheme with the Club whereby large numbers of civil servants could become members.

The Selangor Club started as a wooden hut located at the edge of a field known as the padang, which more than accommodated a rugby pitch of international standard. Well-maintained by the Club over the years, the padang became one of rugby's most

venerated grounds despite being prone to floods after heavy downpours. The fire brigade was often summoned to pump out the excess water. In the 1966 season, the padang was water logged on two consecutive occasions. The Selangor versus Kedah match was delayed by fifteen minutes to allow the fire brigade to drain away as much water as possible. Because of this delay, the referee Geoff Findlay decided to shorten, by five minutes, the regulation time of each half. Both teams sportingly agreed with the referee. Kedah lost 16 to nil. Selangor's next match against the Commonwealth Forces North was also played in ankle-deep water and the final score was a draw at 3 all.

A flooded padang caused the 3rd HMS Malaya Cup final between Singapore and Selangor to be abandoned in 1924. It was recorded that the band was playing and the spectators seated when the heavens opened and the ground was rapidly flooded, making it impossible to have a reasonable rugby contest. After a delay to allow the water to subside and to 'shoo off' thirteen ducks, a friendly game was played instead. Singapore won the match 3 nil with a last minute try.

During my playing days in the Selangor state team, I can recall only one such occasion when in a HMS Malaya Cup tie, the fire brigade was called to make the field playable after a storm. The two teams watched from the verandah of the Selangor Club. At the 1969 HMS Malaya Cup final between Selangor and Joint Services, the padang was also flooded but the gang of coolies from the Selangor Club was able to manually drain off the water without the need to summon the fire brigade. I have also heard stories that the fire brigade had also on occasions obligingly hosed down the pitch to soften the ground on extremely hot days when it was baked to rock hard consistency.

Playing on a hard surface is extremely dangerous to players who are likely to suffer serious lacerations after being felled by opponents. To lessen such injuries, the MRU fixed the rugby season from the beginning of September to the end of February to coincide

with the monsoon season. It was strictly prohibited for any rugby to be played during the off-season, a prohibition that was clearly stipulated in the MRU constitution to ensure players' safety. Normally, the last MRU rugby matches for the season ended some time in early January with the HMS Malaya Cup final and the North versus South Annual Classic to avoid February, the hottest month in the year. This constitutional clause on the rigid rugby season was deleted many years ago and the pronouncement on the beginning and the ending of the season has since been left to the discretion of the MRU.

The heavy monsoon rains help to soften the pitch but occasionally the titanic struggles between heavy men in boots churn the field into a slippery muddy mess, making play difficult. Asian players in particular find such soggy conditions not to their liking because they cannot exploit their greater agility and speed to the fullest, as would be the case on a dry field.

The padang, however, was not exclusively for rugby. Covering several acres, it was the grounds for five sports; the section nearest St. Mary's Church was exclusively for hockey and the portion facing the Federal House was for rugby and soccer. Tennis and cricket took up the middle portion. Considered by many to resemble a hangar, the Federal House, housing several government Ministries and Radio Malaya, was then the tallest building in Kuala Lumpur. It was officially opened on 12th July 1954 by Sir Donald MacGillivray, the British High Commissioner for Malaya.

On match days for a particular sport, the Club's coolies started early in the afternoon preparing the required pitch and erecting the appropriate posts. These posts served to announce to the multitude of passers-by along Jalan Raja skirting the padang that there would be a game of either soccer or rugby that evening. Their erection was reminiscent of the hoisting of flags by men-of-war on the high seas, indicating their identities and intentions. As I worked at the Federal House, I often looked out of the office window on the third floor to see what 'flag' was being unfurled for that particular

evening. After the game, these posts were immediately dismantled, leaving that portion of the field devoid of any telltale signs of its previous use.

When the authorities decided to dig up the padang and build the Dataran Merdeka on it in the late 1980s, I was moved by sentimental reasons, having played some of my more memorable rugby matches there, to pen its impending obliteration. I titled it, *The Lost Piece*. The article was published in several rugby magazines. It is reproduced here:-

Somehow, the controversial debate on the imminent demise of the Selangor Club padang now raging in sports circles had turned me into a transient time traveller. For a brief moment, I found myself attired in typical Roman toga, cheering in unison with the frenzied crowd at the combative skills displayed by the dark muscular but slightly wounded gladiator, standing astride his slain victim. His bloodstained sword raised over his masked face acknowledging the crowd's acclamation.

I was at the gladiatorial games in the Coliseum of Imperial Rome when it was the arena for the deadly and bloody sport of human combat. Before I could savour more of the excitement, I was hurtled forward to the 1960s to the Selangor Club padang and the nearby clock tower chimed six.

There I was clad in the fashion of the times, jostling against the howling crowd for a better view of the drama unfolding near the touch line at the far corner of the field. Someone shouted, "it's a try!" Immediately, the crowd erupted into a roar and later rewarded the victorious team with a standing ovation as they trooped off the pitch. That was the end of a rugby match.

Such ecstatic moments had also prevailed for the other sports staged at the padang as hockey, cricket, tennis and soccer. Both the Coliseum of Rome and the Selangor

Club padang had provided much sporting entertainment for the local populace. In the former, the combatants were armed with spears, tridents, swords and other deadly weapons whereas in the latter they depended on their bats, boots and sticks.

The Coliseum is now history, its ruined arena no longer reverberating from the clash of steel, death shrieks and wild applause. The Selangor Club padang is, however, still standing as a prominent venue for Malaysian sports, its lush and verdant turf nurtured by the profuse sweat dripping from the furrowed brows and slimy backs of countless sportsmen and sportswomen through the ages since the colonial era. Hence it is no exaggeration to say that like the Coliseum, the Selangor Club padang permeates with sports history.

When the bulldozers move in, the diggings would reveal at every strata of earth, the remnants of the paraphernalia of the numerous sports, broken stumps, rotting sticks, studs, broken teeth, clumps of hair and, even perhaps, pieces of decaying ears. The last three items no doubt the result of the bitter tussle of rugby scrummages. Probably at a lower level, Hugh Forbes' missing contact lens would be found (Forbes played rugby for Perak and Selangor at centre and often lost his lenses).

Today, the Coliseum stands as a ruined monument in mute testimony to the great Roman past. But despite its infamous reputation built on blood and death, the Romans do not hesitate to show it to tourists and say, "Ah, the Great Coliseum!" Unlike the Romans, however, the local sports fraternity cannot in later years point out to the tourists and say, "Ah, the Selangor Club padang, the nursery of many Malaysian sports!" The reason being there would be nothing to show of that which had been once a prominent part of the local sporting heritage.

The Ascot atmosphere at the Selangor Club padang during rugby matches involving expatriate teams, especially the Selangor Club XV, persisted well into the early 1960s. Hours before the start of a game, emaciated coolies busily ferried on their puny shoulders huge rattan chairs with cushions from the clubhouse to a specially roped-off area in the field. This became the exclusive seating preserve of the Club's supporters who were mainly Caucasians. Moments before the commencement of the game, the Club XV, mostly Europeans and the incidental Asians, like Dr. Fong Wah Fatt, playing at scrum half and Bala Kandiah at Number 8, proudly trooped out of the changing room. They jogged in Indian file across a sixty-yard stretch from the Club to the pitch, cheered enthusiastically on by their supporters. However, once on the pitch, they were jeered at and booed by the supporters of their opponents.

Immediately behind the Club XV, supporters emerged from the verandah of the Long Bar and with beer in hand, they sauntered to the roped-off sitting area. Most of them were formally attired in long sleeves and ties as though they had just come from work. The women folk, also formally dressed, followed the men out. They walked with a gentle gait and attracted sporadic wolf whistles from around the field.

Often I felt that the expatriates' strong presence at such rugby matches was an expression of their nostalgia for the bygone glorious days of the planters and the Pax Britannica. Whenever the Club scored, especially against an Asian team, the applause was rapturous and definitely a few decibels higher than normally the case. The locals, many standing along the touch lines and others seated on the hard wooden field benches, three-tiers high, some distance away from the roped-off seating zone, were not to be outdone. Any score against the Club drove them into a state of frenzy resulting in thunderous clapping and shouting. Some supporters even invaded the pitch momentarily, making arrogant gestures. It was obvious that both groups of supporters were engaged in a shouting competition of their own and enjoying every moment of it.

However, beneath this veneer of sporting rivalry, there was the feeling of prejudice and enmity which commonly pervaded the relations between the Europeans and the locals. The Club felt it needed a convincing victory to maintain its perceived superiority and the Asians, resenting this, wanted to turn the tables on the Europeans. Whenever I played against the Club in the 1960s, first for the University and later for Cobra, I was overwhelmed by such negative sentiments palpable in the field. The vibes from my teammates strongly indicated that they were also infected by those sentiments which undoubtedly pushed each and every one of us to do our utmost to lower the Club's flag.

Fortunately, both sides and their supporters had the good sense and discipline to contain their xenophobia from breaking out into a slandering contest or worse most of the time. I can only recall one ugly incident when pandemonium broke out. This happened during a Selangor Club versus University Blues match at the University of Malaya campus. It was a fiercely contested match, the supporters shouting themselves hoarse. Selangor Club led by three points after merely five minutes of play. Cheered on by the huge turn out of undergraduates, the Blues attacked persistently and was rewarded with a penalty about ten minutes before the final whistle. Adnan Maarof converted, putting the score at 3 all and the crowd went wild. Unable to control their jubilation, some of the Blues supporters invaded the pitch. Despite the appeal by the referee and officials, they refused to leave. Regrettably, one spectator ran up and punched the referee, a Caucasian. The referee immediately ordered the abandonment of the match. Two Asian players, Dr Fong Wah Fatt and Bala Kandiah played for Selangor Club in that match.

The few Asian players who played for the Selangor Club in the 1960s and early 1970s were constantly and unfairly harassed by the local crowds. They were the targets of verbal insults, often vulgar in nature. They, however, were hardly nettled as expected of any man of rugby.

Dr. Fong Wah Fatt, the Club's scrum half, an important link between the forwards and the backs, was the target of cruel intentions. His opponents were determined to knock him out of the game with roughhouse tactics, one of which was to stomp mercilessly on his hand whenever he attempted to retrieve the ball from the base of the scrummage. They thought that this hand-stomping strategy would upset him, affecting his concentration and play, as he could not afford to have mangled hands as a dental surgeon. Injury to his hands would render him unable to ply his trade for weeks. Happily, his delicate hands escaped unscathed, not only to his relief but also to that of his many patients, of whom I was one. Bala Kandiah was taunted as the 'black white man' and whenever he was in possession of the ball, two or more opposing players would gang up, exerting greater effort to pursue and tackle him. The local crowd loved to see him brought down.

In an evenly fought match, the clangour was deafening as both groups of supporters who were already on the edge of their seats, attempted to out shout each other, encouraging their respective teams. Fortunately, during those times environmental lobbyists were unheard of. Otherwise, they would have campaigned for a ban on rugby to curb noise pollution in the city where the Selangor Club padang was situated.

Whenever the University of Malaya played the Selangor Club at the padang, student supporters came in busloads. On arrival, they poured out of the buses, rushing to occupy seats on the wooden field benches. Many of them, noticing the existence of the specially roped-off seating section in the field, grumbled that such segregation, a colonial anachronism, should not be allowed. On one occasion some of them decided to put an end to it by calmly marching up and occupying all the cushioned chairs before the arrival of their customary occupants. The local field hands utterly failed to prevent this invading horde.

It was of course an act of unpardonable mischief but to many students it was a revolution of sorts. Thereafter, all rugby fans,

irrespective of creed or colour, Club supporters or not, sat alongside each other, enduring the hardness of the three-tiered wooden field benches. The seating arrangement was now indeed an exercise in egalitarianism! It was also the harbinger of the end of Caucasian controlled rugby in the Selangor Club.

Nowadays, whenever I dine at the Selangor Club, I can never resist the temptation to visit the Long Bar, the nearby verandah and the adjacent changing room to catch a whiff of the lingering rugby scent even though rugby has been banished to the new annexe of the Club at Bukit Kiara and the Caucasian players had gone home a long time ago. These places were once saturated by the powerful stench of sweaty bodies, soaking wet jerseys (often stained with mud and blood) dirty shorts and soiled boots as after every match involving the Selangor Club at the padang, the two teams would retreat there for drinks and camaraderie. On such occasions, the merry-making was often punctuated by the loud crash of breaking beer bottles that were accidentally knocked down from the tables.

And whenever a gentle breeze wafts through the verandah, coming from the nearby Dataran Merdeka (previously the padang) where great rugby matches between the Caucasians and the Asians were once fought, it seems to cry out the names of Hugh Forbes, Eurof Walters, Ritchie Wood, Tim Sheehan, Neil Payne, Frank Gosling, Peter Dowse, Jon Master, Tom Campbell, John Ewing, Roy Holder, the list goes on, reminding me that they were once greatly feared and respected as rugby players.

CHAPTER THREE

THE COMMONWEALTH FORCES AND THE FIJIANS

Before the Second World War, rugby was strictly a civilian affair. Except for a battalion of the Burma Rifles at Taiping and a fledgling company of the Malay Regiment, both non-rugby playing units, there were no other military units in the country. But this changed dramatically with the declaration of the Malayan Emergency on 18th June 1948 following the spate of terrorist attacks on the rubber estates in Sungei Siput, Perak. The terrorists were staging an open armed rebellion to overthrow the colonial government.

Suddenly, the military build-up gathered momentum, moving into top gear in the 1950s. Numerous battalions from Britain and other countries in the Commonwealth were deployed to this country to suppress the rebellion. Some British colonies also sent their combat men. Many of these battalions had great rugby reputations, especially in the case of battalions from the traditional rugby nations.

The servicemen billeted in Malaya were eligible to play in the HMS Malaya Cup for the states where they were stationed. The military, however, had first priority over them for its numerous inter-unit competitions. Those stationed in Singapore were not eligible to play in the state team. They had to play for an already existing combined military team that participated in the HMS Malaya Cup under an ever-changing banner, first as United Services, then as Combined Services and ultimately as the Joint Services. It was the rugby-playing Duke of Wellington's Regiment that took the initiative to form this combined military team in 1927. Before this, the Singapore team comprised expatriate civilians and servicemen. In those early days of the HMS Malaya Cup, Singapore was already able to raise two teams, one comprising civilians and the other servicemen from the large resident expatriate community and a fairly big British military presence east of Suez.

The MRU did not allow the different battalions to play under their respective banners. Neither did it permit them to play under their national identities such as the British Forces, the Australian Military, the New Zealand Forces and the Fijian Regiment. If they had been permitted to do so, then the tournament would inevitably have been viewed as the extended battleground for national pride and glory, the servicemen being the proxies of their respective national teams, vying for world rugby supremacy.

An attempt was made by the British Forces to enter three Service teams in the HMS Malaya Cup - the Royal Air Force, the Royal Navy and the Army. The proposal was rejected at an MRU meeting in 1947 on the grounds of reducing, "...as far as possible the amount of travelling that would be involved for the participating teams". During that period, the MRU was responsible for reimbursing the travelling claims of the participating teams. The reimbursements came from the total gate collections of four MRU matches, namely the HMS Malaya Cup final, the Civilians versus Services, the North versus South Annual Classic and the All Blues Cup final.

The MRU was already operating on a shoestring budget and to further save cost, members of the visiting team were encouraged to home stay with their hosts. Such a policy proved to be a failure when the teams began to admit Asian players in later years. The Asian players preferred to stay in budget hotels since most Europeans were reluctant to host them. Moreover, the Asians were very likely to have felt like fish out of water in such homes.

The MRU had a scheme for distributing its scarce finances among its affiliates, which is reproduced below:

Circular on Travelling Expenses

The funds available for refund of travelling expenses shall be applied first in satisfying the claim of the Union with the heaviest claim. At the point where that claim equates with the next highest claim, then both claims will

participate in the balance of the funds available until they in turn equate with the third highest which will then participate in the balance and so on, until the available funds are exhausted.

The following Table illustrates this method of distribution.

Total Expenses incurred by Union - say \$5,000
 Total amount available for distribution - say \$3,800

Individual Union Claim	Amounts to be Refunded	Balance to be Borne by Individual
Unions		
Union A 1500	500 + 300 + 100 + 300 + 100 = \$1300	\$ 200
Union B 1000	300 + 100 + 300 + 100 = \$ 800	\$ 200
Union C 700	100 + 300 + 100 = \$ 500	\$ 200
Union D 600	300 + 100 = \$ 400	\$ 200
Union E 600	300 + 100 = \$ 400	\$ 200
Union F 300	100 = \$ 100	\$ 200
Union G 150	150 = \$ 150	\$ 150
Union H 150	150 = \$ 150	\$ 150
\$5000	500 + 600 + 300 + 1500 + 900 = \$3800	\$1500

Undoubtedly, the MRU's decision in rejecting the request for the entry of more British military teams proved most beneficial to many state sides. These states were able to recruit rugby-playing servicemen, thereby strengthening their teams. The rejection was made strictly on financial grounds. It was not an attempt to prevent any further erosion of the HMS Malaya Cup as an inter-state competition which was already impinged upon by the presence of the combined military team from Singapore.

When I was at secondary school in Ipoh in the late 1950s, the town was swarming with foreign troops. I was staying a stone's throw from a large army camp, a monsoon drain separating the last barrack from my house at the fringes of Greentown. Every afternoon

I saw many bare-chested soldiers passing and handling a rugby ball. Often I heard the local crowds at inter-military matches saying, "mad chaps, willing to suffer bodily harm with all that punching, kicking and shoving in the game."

Most of these soldiers were very keen on the game. They would find every excuse to play rugby. For instance, a week after the first troops of the South East Asia Command landed at Port Dickson in 1945 (at the close of the Second World War), a rugby match was played at Seremban with the Royal Navy and Marines on one side and a mixed civilian, Army and Force 136 players on the other. This was recorded as the first rugby game played in liberated Malaya. The rugby-mad spirit of the servicemen was further clearly demonstrated in an incident involving the 4th Queen's Own Hussars. In 1952, terrorists ambushed its rugby team and supporters, travelling in a three-truck convoy on its way to Singapore for an inter-unit rugby final. It was playing against RASC. In the ensuing gunfight, a team member was wounded and hospitalised and three others, (all first choice players), injured. Despite this unsettling incident, the team including the three injured men played in the final. It lost narrowly, 3 to 6.

These rugby-mad servicemen even resorted to enlisting the Gurkhas, the courageous fighting men from Nepal, whenever they ran short of players. Who else but rugby fanatics would have thought of Gurkhas in rugby? I have yet to see one play in a rugby match. I find it difficult to visualise them running in a disorderly pack after a ball and scrummaging about the field, a far cry from their fierce reputation as deadly warriors. There was a combined team of Gurkhas and Royal Engineers that defeated the Police and REME team at Kluang, 35 to 11, with the Gurkhas displaying their gung-ho spirit.

To assuage the rugby addiction of these British and Commonwealth soldiers, there were numerous competitions organised by the Military Command, culminating in the Malaya Area (Commonwealth Forces) Open Inter-unit Rugby Competition. The

champion team from this competition would qualify for the grand Far East Land Forces (FARELF) tournament for all Commonwealth battalions in the Far East. The venues of the FARELF final were rotated among the capitals in the region.

Well-known military bands paraded in all their splendour during the intermission of certain important matches, playing among others the popular tune *Colonel Bogey*. The bands' presence added an air of pageantry much loved by the crowds. The last British military band to play at a rugby function was the Combined Royal Marines Band of the Far East Fleet and *HMS Eagle* at the North versus South Annual Classic match in 1965. It was under the direction of Second Lieutenant J. R. Mason.

When the 1st Battalion Fiji Infantry Regiment of eight hundred and thirty one strong, all volunteers, arrived at Singapore after a ten-day voyage from Suva, Fiji, aboard the troopship, *Astrurias*, Sir Gerald Templar, the High Commissioner for Malaya, hailed the event as a new phase in the fight against the terrorists. Fijian soldiers were greatly admired for their exploits in the Solomon Islands against the Japanese in the recently concluded Second World War, which had earned them the Military Cross and the Victoria Cross. The Regiment brought not only the fabled Fijian courage but also Fiji's universally acclaimed rugby skills. The battalion had five international players within its ranks. Hardly five days after its arrival, it routed the Royal Army Service Corp, winning 19 nil at Nee Soon, Singapore, putting out an emphatic signal to all and sundry that it was an efficient and mean rugby machine. And this was no empty boast.

In their three-year sojourn in Johore, the Fijians played against every possible combination, from club sides to the country's combined rugby strength comprising the best Caucasian players, both civilian and military. Yet none succeeded in defeating them. In one of their last matches, they nearly lost to the Federation XV, an all-expatriate side, at Kuala Lumpur. A last minute unconverted try snatched them from the jaws of defeat and the match ended

in a draw, 11 all. The final score stood at a goal, a try and a penalty for the Fijians to the goal and two tries for the Federation.

After a day of rest following that hard game, they were again on the field, this time against the Malayan Asians. The Fijians' pace, speed and precision play sent the Asian side reeling to a humiliating defeat, 55 to 4. Yeoh Cheang Swi scored the only try for the Asians, a rare feat against the Fijians. Another local player who deserves mention is Boris Piotrowski. He was the only local selected to represent Selangor against the Fijians in a friendly at the Malaya Command Stadium and was singled out as one of the players who played like a Trojan.

When the Fijians set sail for home, they left behind an indelible mark in the annals of combat and of rugby. In the former they were credited with over two hundred kills and in the latter, they had a phenomenal score of 2890 points to their credit, having conceded only 293 points in 75 matches. Of the many scalps tucked under their belt, it is likely that they would remember with great pride that of the South Johore Rugby Football Club. This club offered them stubborn resistance and was able to contain them, when they were at full strength, to narrow wins in two encounters, 17 to 3 and 27 to 11. These margins were triumphs after a fashion. In fact, the Fijians trailed 11 to 5 at half time in the second match. It was only in the last ten minutes that the Fijians managed to tame the South Johoreans. A defeat would have been a tragedy as they had, earlier that season, demolished teams with better reputations: Selangor Services, 67 to 0; Far East Air Force, 47 to 3; Kedah, 44 to 6; Penang, 34 to 11 and All Singapore, 31 to 3.

Yee Peng Sung played for the South Johore Rugby Club against the Fijians. He was a police officer who after hanging up his boots took to the whistle. He refereed in some of the matches I played. He was a soft-spoken man and good listener. On numerous occasions, he listened patiently to my frustrated attempts as MRU secretary to push through certain policy changes. He was deeply involved in the Referees Society. Although he passed away many years ago,

on every anniversary of his death, his family has without fail published an in-memoriam in a daily. These yearly in-memoriams often trigger my recollections of times when he was the referee and I a player.

When Yeoh Cheang Swi and Yee Peng Sung were battling the Fijians, I was still in primary school at the Sultan Ismail English School, Kota Baru, Kelantan. I have deliberately mentioned the state in order not to confuse readers with the other town of the same name in Perak.

Rugby was unknown in Kelantan as the state had neither a sizeable expatriate community nor a Commonwealth military cantonment. I did not meet any foreign servicemen in the town or its vicinity. The only expatriate I used to meet was the judge of the Courts. On auspicious occasions he invited my father, Ng Yeow Hean, who worked in the Courts as his secretary and our family to tea in his large and well-manicured garden. I always felt extremely awkward at these functions, due to their rigid rules of etiquette. Tea had to be gently stirred and sipped, polite "thank yous" said whenever we were served and fruits, including the rambutans, had to be cut rather than bitten into.

The first time I heard of rugby was probably the time when as a young child, I eavesdropped on a conversation among adults at my uncle's grocery-cum-photographic studio shop in a rickety old wooden building near the swift flowing Kelantan River. The river was dotted with *rakits*, the floating boat station-cum-boat house built on piles of bamboo lashed together. Moored along the banks, they bobbed with the currents, a plank serving as the gangway.

Sipping steamy local coffee, some sitting on crudely made stools, the adults were discussing the security situation in the hinterland of Kelantan, the British troops, the fearsome Gurkhas and the Fijians, the last described as 'somewhat looking like an Indian but bigger, taller and stronger.' They were bewildered by the fact that these Fijians were wantonly bashing up the 'white men' at a peculiar game. In those days and until the early 1960s,

there was no local name for rugby. The game became known as '*main bola kana*' (playing the olive ball) because the shape of the rugby ball resembled that of the olive fruit, a local favourite and was referred to as such until the local term '*ragbi*' was coined.

Such was the fame of the Fijians that even my uncle and his friends living in a remote backwater and who were not sports minded in the least had heard of their exploits. The Fijians and their brand of rugby had become folklore. A young man in Penang, Lean Loong Min, was one of the multitudes who, despite not being a rugby fan, was drawn to watching the Fijians out of curiosity after having heard and read about these players. He came away completely blown by their scintillating play. When he was transferred to Kota Baru and lived further down the dirt road from my house, he would occasionally talk about the Fijians with great admiration, frequently mentioning names like Levula, Rokoua and Radrodro.

Retired Lieutenant Colonel R. G. Johnson, an ex-rugby player and former MRU secretary, will never forget Levula who had caused him excruciating pain. In a Penang All Blues friendly game against the Fijians, he went for Levula with a flying tackle, locking the latter's sinewy thighs with his arms in a pincer grip. Yet, Levula stood upright, breaking out of the tackle by tearing apart the tackler's arms with impunity. Johnson collapsed, howling in pain. He was immediately rushed to hospital. "Luckily, the doctor treating me did a good repair job. Otherwise I could be nicknamed, the One Armed Johnnie," he said in his mellifluous voice when relating the incident to me at the Lake Club one evening. But he insisted that he bore no grudges against Levula for that traumatic incident, maintaining, "...it was part of the game." Before I heard this story, I had always had the impression that one of his arms was longer than the other. I had presumed that it was a congenital deformity. Now I know that it was the consequence of the Levula stretch.

Radrodro was the captain of the Fijian team. He was also the reluctant captain of the Johore XV in the HMS Malaya Cup

competition. He made several unsuccessful attempts to pass on the captaincy to others, non-Fijians, whom he considered to be more deserving of the honour. One such attempt was made in the 1956 match between Johore and the Combined Services. When the Johore team was assembled in the Singapore Cricket Club changing room, Radrodro insisted that the players should elect the captain for that match. "Who will be the captain, Baba?" he asked directing his question to one of the eight Fijian players in the team. Baba replied without looking around the room that the honour should be given to the player wearing jersey number three, Lieutenant Roberts. Immediately the Fijians, who outnumbered the non-Fijians, cheered. But Roberts, being a more senior officer, pulled rank and ordered Radrodro to take the captain's armband.

Johore won that match and qualified to meet Selangor in the HMS Malaya Cup final. Powered by the Fijians, Johore had won the championship on two previous occasions, in 1954 and 1955 and was now confidently poised to win it for the third time in a row. As the 1956 final was to be the last appearance for the Fijians before their departure from the country, Roberts who had earlier been appointed captain by the Johore Rugby Union graciously handed over the captaincy to Radrodro again. It was indeed a fine gesture, one that acknowledged the Fijians' contributions to Johore. They had, in a very short space of time, propelled the state from nowhere in the tournament to the top position.

The Fijians ended their yeoman's service to Johore with a flourish, beating Selangor 21 to 9 to set a record as the first hat trick win in rugby in this country. The record remained unbroken for ten long seasons until eventually the Joint Services achieved a remarkable five titles in a row from 1965 to 1969. But nobody had any doubts whatsoever that Johore would have held on to the coveted title for as long as the Fijians stayed.

On leaving Johore, the Fijians left their rugby legacy with the squad of young players who had the opportunity of training with them at Batu Pahat, their base camp. These lads were ingrained

with their bullish attacking spirit. All local Johore players later adopted this strategy. Even in defence, they would run the ball whereas another team would kick for touch to relieve the pressure. This spirit became the hallmark of Johore rugby, earning the players the unenviable reputation of being the big bad boys of rugby. Many of the toughest national players came from Johore. Hisham Rahman was a hard player known for his suicidal runs – he would ram into his opponents like a Japanese kamikaze pilot. Abdullah Ali, a full back, packed a devastating tackle likely to injure anyone at the receiving end. Other Johore players who inherited the Fijian rugby philosophy were Chew Kong Peng, Ng Yui Meng, Yunus Salim and Wong Hin Jee. I have had the privilege of playing against them in local tournaments and alongside them in the national team.

By adopting the Fijian approach, the Johore players were able to stand their own against the powerful expatriate opponents, who were grouped in their zone for the HMS Malaya Cup: the great Service teams of Joint Services, Army (Malaya) and the 28th Commonwealth Infantry Brigade as well as the Singapore Civilians.

Wong Hin Jee was one of the young schoolboys from Batu Pahat who held the Fijians in esteem. When he was in primary school, Hin Jee was determined to emulate the Fijians and set out to become a rugby player and to join the Army. He was successful in both fields of endeavour. He represented Perak in rugby for a couple of seasons in the Under-23 when he was stationed there as a military officer. He also represented Malaysia and was the captain for three consecutive seasons. When he retired from the Army, he held the rank of Colonel.

For its great contributions to rugby, the 1st Battalion Fiji Infantry Regiment was presented with two souvenirs. The first memento, the head of a seladang (an ox) mounted on a wooden shield, was given to the battalion by J. G. Houston, president of the Singapore Rugby Union immediately after the FARELF inter-military competition when it beat the 74th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment RA

of Hong Kong. The second souvenir was a fine tiger skin, presented by the MRU president, H. F. Clements after a MRU testimonial match for the Fijians in Singapore. The Fijians outplayed the All Malayan XV comprising Caucasian players. At that ceremony, the MRU president paid a glowing tribute to them: "These great sportsmen, the Fijians...make their considerable contribution to the game in this country and it will be long before we see a better game, played in the best spirit and enjoyed alike by players, officials and spectators than that in which the 1st Fiji Regiment beat the MRU XV to conclude over three years of rugby in Malaya without defeat."

What has happened to those mementos? If they still exist, the MRU ought to appeal for their repatriation. Probably to the men of the present 1st Battalion, these two items are of little significance compared to the innumerable military trophies acquired from their numerous campaigns. But to the Malaysian rugby fraternity, they are part of an invaluable national rugby heritage and should be displayed alongside the HMS Malaya Cup, now resting snugly in Muzium Negara.

In 1968, more than twelve years after the Fiji Regiment had gone home, a team from Fiji came to tour this country. Its exciting brand of rugby helped to revive the fading memories of its predecessors' style of play among the ageing rugby fans of yesteryear. The matches were well attended. This was followed twenty years later by the Fiji Military Forces who came to participate in the 1989 Cobra Tens. There was great anticipation that this Fijian team would ultimately clash with the mighty Kiwis from the 1st Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment, the reigning Cobra Tens champion in the final.

In order not to disappoint the crowd, the organisers deliberately arranged the draw to guarantee for such an encounter. But the clash took place in the semi-final when the Fijians unexpectedly entered two teams. The much-awaited clash turned out to be an anti-climax with the reigning champion suffering a humiliating defeat. The best

players in the team had already returned to New Zealand in the first phase of the 1st RNZIR's withdrawal from Singapore.

Unfortunately, two incidents involving Fijian players spoil an otherwise entertaining and enjoyable evening of first-class exhibition of Fijian rugby. A Fijian player was sent off for misconduct by the referee in a preliminary match. When the disciplinary committee was hearing his case, his team-mates were loitering nearby, making disgruntled noises. I was the chairman of that inquiry and Dennis Pestana was one of the members. The case against the Fijian offender did not warrant any harsher punishment than a reprimand. But a later incident when a Fijian recklessly executed an acrobatic stunt by leaping over an onrushing local opponent incurred the wrath of the crowd who rose in protest, yelling at him. His boot narrowly missed the victim's head. It was a callous act, a piece of thoughtless showmanship that backfired.

The two Fijian tours, however, could not make any meaningful dent to the bank of respect that the younger generation of Malaysians had built up for the New Zealand Forces and the Joint Services. These younger rugby enthusiasts fed on a rugby diet that was mainly composed of the greatness of these two teams speak of them with awe and reverence, praising their rampaging play and formidable power. But then again, it will only be a matter of time before the prowess of both these teams will also be forgotten and shrouded in the swirling mist of time, an inevitable happening!

CHAPTER FOUR

SEGREGATION POLICY AND THE ALL BLUES

Rugby suffered an upheaval in the early years after Independence when large numbers of expatriates were given early retirement from numerous occupations under a Malayanisation scheme. Many of these expatriates, who were generously compensated, left the country to resume their careers elsewhere. Among them were many rugby men. Due to this exodus, rugby in many states was adversely affected in terms of playing strength as well as in administrative capabilities. Many of the departing rugby men had also served in the different state rugby unions.

Fortunately, this debility was immediately ameliorated in those states which had large numbers of British and Commonwealth troops. More servicemen players were recruited to fill the vacancies. When the military plug was eventually pulled out in the early 1960s, rugby was able to stay afloat in the burgeoning pool of Asian players.

Selangor was the state least affected by the exodus of the servicemen and the civilian expatriate rugby players. On the contrary, Selangor greatly benefited from it. Many of the remaining expatriates from the other regions of the country moved to Selangor, some of whom had played rugby for state teams. By this time, the influx of expatriates into the country had slowed to a dribble and mostly diverted to Selangor which was the centre of foreign enterprise. Most of the headquarters of foreign firms were located in Selangor. Such successive trickles saw the coming of Mike Lamb, George Sutton, Eurof Walters, Tim Sheehan, Dan Ellison and Tim Bagot, to name a few, who were impressive rugby players.

With the concentration of such talents, whose numbers were constantly replenished, Selangor became the last bastion of expatriate rugby in this country, the vestiges disappearing only in the mid-

1970s. Powered by these hefty expatriates, Selangor made seven appearances in the final of the HMS Malaya Cup tournament from 1964 to 1973. But Selangor's march to the pinnacle of national rugby was foiled by the mighty Joint Services, the combined military team stationed at Singapore, in four of those seven appearances. The forces making up the Joint Services were only withdrawn from Singapore in the early 1970s.

In away matches during that ten-year span, the Selangor team, with large numbers of expatriate players, became the target of racial hostility from the home crowd. I sensed the crowd's immense hatred and anger when playing for Selangor in those away matches. Often, the Asians in the Selangor team had to bear the brunt of the opponents' angry and vicious attacks. There was very little doubt that the players in the home teams were playing to the gallery. In one such game at Ipoh, I was the victim who was kicked maliciously without respite after a tackle, the crowd loudly inciting retribution on those they considered turncoats - the white man's lackeys.

Selangor's policy of including non-Malaysians well into the 1970s was severely criticised by many other state rugby unions and the press as not being in line with the national selection policy. The MRU had begun to field only nationals in representative matches in 1970. Selangor, however, did not make any attempt to justify its much-maligned selection policy for it did not see any moral necessity to do so. The existing competition rules did not exclude non-nationals and there was no MRU directive on the issue. Many other states had to field an all-Asian team not out of choice but out of necessity. These states could not find any rugby-playing European in their midst.

Despite the rising chorus of protest, the MRU adopted a non-interventionist attitude. Was this stance the result of Cobra's conspiratorial scheme mentioned previously? The question is a valid one because on closer investigation, it was found that the key officials managing Selangor rugby were also members in the MRU

council. Whatever the reason for the inaction, it gave rise to numerous allegations and scurrilous remarks about the two bodies, the most common being "...a bunch of people with split personalities, one half implementing a different policy from the other..." and "...a collusion between the two bodies to keep it that way for Selangor's advantage."

But a MRU decision in a dispute with the organiser of a revamped All Blues tournament in 1971 regarding the eligibility of players made the official stand crystal clear. In representative matches, the MRU policy was to select only nationals to truly reflect the Malaysian identity in the international arena - a rational and logical policy. But when it came to domestic tournaments and matches, there was no discrimination on grounds of race and nationality. All rugby players had the opportunity to engage in the game - a pragmatic policy. Any reasonable person should have had no difficulty in supporting such rational policies, but because these policies came from a MRU whose key officials were also serving in the Selangor Rugby Union, the views of several other rugby unions, especially the rivals of Selangor, became obscured by emotions, refusing to see the wood for the trees. They were blinded by their moral outrage in what they perceived to be an unfair policy.

It was only in the mid-1980s, long after Cobra had lost influence over it, that the MRU adopted a resolution banning expatriates from representing states in any MRU organised tournaments. And of all places, this decision was taken at the Selangor Club, once the stronghold of expatriate rugby. By that time even Selangor had already been fielding an all-Asian team. It was like bolting the stable doors after the horses had fled. However, this policy was rescinded after a few seasons of its implementation.

Originally, the All Blues Cup was an inter-state rugby tournament restricted to Asian players. It was started in 1934. Such a competition was necessary because the HMS Malaya Cup tournament was almost an expatriate enclave during the colonial era. The MRU

deliberately kept it that way, making it exceedingly difficult for locals to be selected to play in the HMS Malaya Cup tournament.

This prejudice was quite blatant in the case of Lim Keng Chuan. His rugby skills were such that he secured a place in the 1st XV of a school in Scotland in 1914. He was described as "one of the finest schoolboy scrum halves" by Andrew Gilmour, a Scotsman who saw him play. Seven years later Gilmour met Keng Chuan at a cricket match in Penang where the latter lamented that he had no opportunities to keep up his rugby playing. Immediately, the Scotsman put up Keng Chuan's name for the Penang State trial. "You are surely not trying to tell us that the Chinese are taking up rugby?" was the incredulous query from the chairman of the selection committee. It was a stroke of good fortune for Keng Chuan that the chosen European scrum half was transferred to another state and he began his long rugby career with the state team in the early 1920s. He became the first Asian to play in the North versus South Annual Classic in 1928.

Another Asian who managed to play for Penang in the HMS Malaya Cup around that time was Zain Arrifin. He excelled as a forward. In a letter dated 14th January 1973 addressed to Ung Khek Cheow, an elderly English gentleman who retired from Malaysia to reside at Ashstead in Surrey, England briefly talked about Zain Arrifin. He wrote, "My first season was 1921-1922 playing for Perak and I recollect Zain Ariffin, a Kedah civil servant, playing for a combined Penang-Kedah XV either that year or the next; it was then a combined team. Shortly afterwards, Lim Keng Chuan became scrum half for Penang. These were the first Malaysians to take part in Cup rugger but they were not truly 'local' products - Zain had been at school at Dulwich College, London and Keng Chuan at Dollar Academy in Scotland." The identity of this English gentleman remains unknown as the last pages of the letter are missing.

Kassim Aziz who played in the Selangor HMS Malaya Cup team in 1950 told me that Lady Luck had much to do with his selection. The regular scrum half, a senior police officer, was unable

to play most of the time because of his hectic duties as the Officer in Charge of the Police District, Kajang, and the second choice for scrum half was transferred to another state. In recalling this event recently, Kassim Aziz, now aged 75 years, was convinced he would not have made it to the team if there were another European playing reasonably well as scrum half. "It was discrimination, no question about it...but one tempered with the zest to win at all costs and this prised open the door for the few outstanding Asian players to fill the occasional vacancies when no Europeans were available," Kassim responded with alacrity, agreeing with my findings that there existed a tacit rugby policy of discrimination.

He went on to provide more evidence of discrimination in the early years of his state representation, after-match food and drinks were served to Asians in the changing room. The Asians were not permitted into the dining hall of Ipoh Club where the European players enjoyed after-game fellowship. As though having second thoughts, he twitched his eyes and added, "...maybe this segregated arrangement was not a rugby discrimination but one to comply with the exclusive Club rules, non-members have no right to be on the premises." But surely the MRU would have had sufficient common sense to make the necessary arrangements to request its usage of the Club facilities for all its players for that particular evening? This was the case during my playing years in the late 1960s though it could be argued that by that time the discriminatory practice was fast disappearing.

Kassim's face lit up, creased by a broad smile, when he recounted those occasions when he was accorded VIP treatment by his superior colonial police officers on the grounds that he was a HMS Malaya Cup player. He was especially chuffed when he was chauffeured in a police vehicle and provided with armed police escort to travel from Tapah to Ipoh for matches. This honour was accorded to him by Derek Winn, the Officer in Charge of the Police District, Tapah who was, himself, a rugby player. The year was 1949, a period, when the Malayan Emergency was at its height and ambushes by terrorists on lonely roads were a common occurrence. It was apparent

that Derek Winn felt that Kassim, who was then a police inspector at Tapah and Perak state rugby player, was too valuable a 'commodity' to go unescorted to the state capital in case of surprise attacks on the way.

Despite being the national body for rugby, the MRU did little to promote the game among the locals for a considerable time. This task was taken up mainly by the rugby-loving expatriate teachers, both lay and mission. As a group they made a tremendous impact in propagating rugby to Asian schoolboys. Some rugby-playing planters, Servicemen and civil servants volunteered their services as coaches not only to the schools but also to the local teams. One civil servant, B. G. Bradley, a Perak state player who was serving as the assistant district officer of Sitiawan, was the coach to an all-Asian team in Sitiawan which was started by the Omar club. The club, an attap-roofed wooden building raised on stilts, was for government servants serving in the district. When I read that its rugby team was formed in 1923, I was taken aback. I had always been led to believe from the materials available then that the first all-Asian team in the country was from Negri Sembilan. This doubtful claim that has long gone down in rugby's lore will now have to be revised with this revelation. The Sitiawan team was two years ahead of Lander and his Negri Sembilan All Blues, the purportedly first all-Asian side.

I do not expect this revelation to go unchallenged - a Pandora's box has been opened. But I am convinced as a result of my researches that the genesis of Asian rugby in this country came from not one but several cradles that rocked at about the same time in different parts of the country. The Taiping Edwardians, a team of ex-schoolboys from King Edward VII, has a fairly good case to stake a claim as one of the earliest all-Asian team. It probably preceded the formation of the Negri Sembilan All Blues. Rugby was already played in the school in 1922. Soon after, the Birch Rompers of Ipoh was established through the initiative of Mohamed Shariff. Asian rugby could be said to have been sprouting then in scattered and isolated pockets akin to a quilt patchwork of small

pieces of material of different colours and patterns. But the impetus for its co-ordinated growth that galvanised Asians into purposeful action was inspired by the All Blues spirit pioneered by a group of dedicated rugby men in Negri Sembilan. That spirit grew in intensity and spread like prairie fire when a challenge cup was presented for inter-state rugby competition.

According to an account by Oswald E. Fernandez, a former Negri Sembilan All Blues player, it was Paymaster-Lieutenant (retired) D. E. Lander of the Royal Navy, who introduced the All Blues concept when he became a planter in Negri Sembilan:

...in 1925, a few soccer players were sitting on the steps of the Negri Sembilan Club, watching with more curiosity than interest, the training session of a number of European ruggar players. One of them (a soccer player) picked up the ball and ran off with it followed by a number of his colleagues. Passing the ball skilfully among themselves and punting it in all directions, they thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Their action was just a lark, but little did they realise that they were at the very moment laying the foundations of Asian ruggar in this country.

In the club house not far away, Paymaster-Lieutenant D.E. Lander, (Royal Navy, retired) then a planter...watched the incident with a certain amount of interest and his keen eye must have noticed the possibilities of introducing the game among the Asians. When training was over, he called these soccer men together and asked them what they thought of forming an Asian ruggar club. The response was unanimous...and the All Blues Rugby Football Association was soon registered.

There is, however, another version of this story. It is claimed that Pat Sta Maria of the Seremban Treasury, being besotted with rugby, made a list of everyone he knew and managed to cajole them, forty-five in all, to assemble at the station padang for the first practice. So keen and enthusiastic were the Asians to play that

the number forty-five remained the minimum on the Negri Sembilan All Blues roll for many years. Are there really two conflicting versions of the origins of the All Blues? Could it be that the Pat Sta Maria's list was a follow up on Lander's proposal for the formation of an Asian rugby club that was keenly supported by the soccer boys? Pat Sta Maria could have been the rugby convenor. Further research may shed more light on this issue but meanwhile, it cannot be denied that D. E. Lander played a pivotal role in advancing Asian rugby for many years.

It was said that the choice of name for Asian rugby, the All Blues, was inspired by the fame of the All Blacks of New Zealand. Personally, I am unable to read any meaningful connection between the two except that the two names had a similar ring to them and perhaps the powers that be must have felt that with a name like the All Blues, the Asians would emulate the brilliance of the All Blacks. But I am certain that the MRU would have given Asian rugby a name, if the promoters had not done so, to differentiate it from its exclusive brand of European rugby, the HMS Malaya Cup.

When the Negri Sembilan All Blues Rugby Football Association was formed in 1925, Lander was selected to be the coach, Dato Sheikh Ahmad Al-haj appointed the president and Charlie Pinto the captain. Lander was assisted by the Seremban Chief Police Officer, G. S. Macgill in his coaching duties. The Association worked hard to promote rugby in the Asian community. It staged a concert and dance in 1933 to raise funds for the purchase of a trophy costing \$500 for an all-Asian inter-state rugby competition. The All Blues Cup was launched a year later, it saw Perak, Negri Sembilan and Malacca taking part. Perak became the first holder of the Cup, beating Negri Sembilan in the final, 9 nil. Singapore, Johore, Selangor, Kedah, and Penang entered the competition in the following year but Malacca unfortunately had to drop out.

After being introduced to the game, the Asians proved to be most enthusiastic and can be said fanatical exponents of the code. I came across some training schedules for the Penang All Blues

during the time of Maurice Pestana, the captain. The players had an extremely tough training regime - early morning road runs, runs up Penang Hill, evening workouts and friendly matches. The players had to endure such rigour in preparation for the next All Blues fixture.

Ung Khek Cheow went that extra mile with his Perak All Blues team. When Perak was preparing to play Johore in the 1962 All Blues Cup final, he circulated his elaborate *Notes on the Final*, which listed his tips and pointers for every position in the team for players to study. Despite his painstaking efforts, Perak lost that crucial tie.

The teams competing in the All Blues formed their respective state All Blues committees. These committees worked independently of the state rugby unions which were monopolised by the Europeans. But this independence was narrowly confined to matters pertaining to the All Blues tournament only. This unfortunate dichotomy in rugby management and tournaments along racial lines was no doubt a key factor or influence underlying segregation in sports. What else could it be? If it were not so, why then did the MRU not put the All Blues tournament under its jurisdiction from the beginning and provide it with administrative and financial support?

Records show that the MRU rejected a proposal by H. Service, a council member, in 1951 that it should assume control of the All Blues Cup. This control was necessary for the MRU to play a meaningful role in and give the required assistance to Asian rugby. Some enlightened MRU members persisted in this call and eventually the MRU agreed as a compromise with the formation of the All Blues competition sub-committee in 1957, to "...assume some authority on the initial stages of the competition as well as being responsible for the final." This committee was to liaise with the organiser of the All Blues Cup and to provide some form of assistance in certain areas. Before this arrangement, the MRU had only been responsible for arranging the finals and reimbursing the travelling expenses of the finalists from the gate-takings.

Logically, the MRU should have taken charge of the management of the All Blues Cup from the beginning and made it a junior tournament for any player who could not qualify for the HMS Malaya Cup competition. After all, there were also keen Caucasian rugby players in this category. But they were ineligible for the All Blues Cup and therefore had to hang up their boots prematurely, feeling frustrated. Indeed, the unspoken rugby policy of segregation served as a double-edged sword, injuring both Asians and Caucasians alike.

I could not help but believe that the system of segregation was also tacitly supported by the Asian rugby officials of those times. These officials had little hope of breaking into any of the European-governed state rugby unions. Thus, they readily accepted a segregationist system of rugby administration because this ensured them a role. It was not surprising therefore to learn that on the few occasions of consultations organised by the MRU on Asian rugby affairs, the Asian officials unscrupulously accepted the *status quo* to protect their vested interest.

In 1957, there was a move by a group of Asian officials to form the Malayan All Blues Rugby Football Association. This prompted the MRU to invite those behind the proposal to an urgent meeting to explain "their (the organisers) aims and objectives". Obviously, the European-dominated MRU was greatly alarmed at the prospect of such an organisation being formed as this could pose a serious challenge to its rugby authority in the country. There was little doubt that the state All Blues committees would have pledged their allegiance to the proposed new body upon its formation. Had that happened, the new Asian body would have insisted upon a bigger rugby jurisdiction in keeping with its national status.

Fortunately for all, the proposal fizzled out. Otherwise, the policy of implicit segregation would have been replaced by an overtly blatant one with two different national rugby bodies, each controlled by a particular group that would claim that it, and not the other rugby body, was the national one.

Ironically, however, the dual system which had co-existed harmoniously over the years began to display serious cracks when Asians took increasing control of the state rugby unions. Many Asians could not see eye to eye with their counterparts serving in the state All Blues committees on the rugby policies in their respective states. Moreover, they were not keen to continue supporting the segregationist policy of two separate rugby bodies in a state. A Negri Sembilan rugby union official, Teoh Tiaw Guan, spoke of the difficulties between the union and the All Blues committee in his state and recommended that the two bodies merge for the benefit of the game.

The MRU, however, felt this merger was not necessary as the "...separate organisation will gradually disappear as will, in the fullness of time, the All Blues Cup." By making this decision, the European-led MRU displayed its shrewdness, steering a neutral course in an Asian controversy. By putting off the merger, the Europeans hoped to win a little more time to cling on to the last straw for power in a rapidly changing scene. About this time, the Europeans were beginning to lose their influence over rugby at all levels.

The delicately poised dual co-existence came under threat to become more racially polarised when another group of rugby enthusiasts proposed to set up a Malayan Malays' Rugby Union in 1962. This new union was to oversee an inter-state competition for a challenge trophy to be donated by the Assistant Minister for Commerce and Industry. This proposal would throw wide open again the already closing doors of communal rugby, which had been laboriously affected by the passage of time. It was not surprising that it was quickly nipped in the bud by the MRU.

The All Blues Cup tournament was also affected by the winds of change that was sweeping across the rugby landscape. It was becoming redundant as many state teams in the HMS Malaya Cup were admitting increasing numbers of Asian players. But it was the MRU decision in 1963 to introduce a junior inter-state tournament

that caused the All Blues' downfall and with it the All Blues committees in the states. The MRU felt the urgent need to introduce such a tournament for school leavers, particularly those who had represented their states in the Combined Schools rugby tournament to ensure that they kept on playing rugby. For this purpose, it was proposed that the All Blues Cup be the prize for this new tournament whose name was yet to be determined.

This attempt at relegating the proud symbol of Asian rugby of three decades to a lower status was resisted by many former All Blues players. Taking up this battle cry, K. Leembruggen, a MRU vice-president representing Penang, offered to donate a new cup for the proposed junior tournament provided that the All Blues Cup tournament was allowed to continue but as a national inter-club competition instead. While applauding his generosity, the MRU did not accept his offer. To avoid being dragged deeper into the raging controversies, the MRU decided to name the proposed junior competition, *The Under-23 Tournament* with the trophy that briefly replaced the HMS Malaya Cup as the prize. The All Blues was abolished as the MRU felt that it had to concentrate more of its resources to its nascent youth tournament.

However, some die-hards refused to throw in the towel. Long after the All Blues was scrapped and the Cup was collecting dust on the shelf, the rumblings of dissatisfaction persisted. When Tan Chin Beng of the Negri Sembilan Chinese Recreation Club (NSCRC) assumed the presidency of the Negri Sembilan/Malacca Rugby Union, he effectively mounted a crusade to resurrect the All Blues Cup, this time around, as the symbol of an inter-club championship.

Cobra became the first holder of the new-look All Blues competition played at Seremban in early January 1970. It beat the Singapore Blacks, 20 nil. Cobra fielded a makeshift team as all its first choice players were representing Malaysia at the Second Asian rugby championship at Bangkok. Fielding two non-Asians, Martin Frier and Brian Miller, it retained the All Blues title in the second tournament in December 1970 at Penang. In that tournament,

Cobra and the NSCRC XV were drawn in the same group. The match between them was hard and ruthless with play being frequently interrupted by deliberate fouls.

Understandably, NSCRC which was championing the All Blues spirit was upset that Cobra had openly defiled the sacredness of the Asians-only concept by fielding the Caucasian players. It set the stage for the beginning of a turbulent relationship between these two teams. I missed that bruising game by a few minutes because I was stuck in a horrendous traffic crawl at the jetty in Butterworth on my way to the venue. As I paced along the line as a reserve, I heard NSCRC supporters sniggering and commenting that Cobra was so cowardly that it had to hide behind the 'white man's skirt'.

Matters came to a head in 1971 after the NSCRC, the organiser withdrew an earlier invitation to Cobra unless the latter gave assurances that it would not field non-Asians. The pertinent portion of the NSCRC's letter read: -

...however, we still have the pleasure to extend our invitation to you, both as holders of the All Blues Cup for the past two competitions and the leading club in Malaysia, provided you give us your assurance that your club will not field non-Asians for this competition as we are determined to uphold the wishes of the donors of this Cup that it should be competed for by Asians only.

I was involved in this dispute as Cobra secretary at that time. When quizzed by the press on the matter, I replied that Cobra would not compete if the Asians-only clause were imposed because it was against Cobra's constitution which stated that all members were eligible to represent the club. Moreover, it was also against an MRU ruling. Earlier, the MRU had made a press statement threatening to ban the tournament if the organiser insisted on barring non-Asians as the tournament rules approved by the MRU placed no restriction on the nationality or race of players. That warning was given wide publicity in the papers. A large picture of Dr. Fong Wah Fatt, the MRU secretary, with a seemingly cynical smile, accompanied the

news item. Naturally, such stern advice did not go down well with the organiser who felt that the MRU had been manipulated by the unseen hand of Cobra. After all, Dr. Fong Wah Fatt was a Cobra stalwart and so were the MRU president and several council members.

However, I felt that the NSCRC was the aggrieved party in this dispute because of Cobra's volte-face on the Asians-only ruling. It was gleaned from the messages of the presidents of the four participating teams, the NSCRC, the Penang All Blues, the Singapore All Blacks and Cobra, in the souvenir programme of the Inaugural Rugby Quadrangular for the All Blues at Seremban on 17th and 18th January 1970, that all parties had welcomed the revival of the All Blues spirit. Cobra's ostensible support came from these lines:-

It is with great pleasure to note that the All Blues Cup is at last again being competed for by Asian teams....the revival of this tournament signifies an Asian Rugby come back....

Besides, Dr. Chan Onn Leng, a Cobra senior official, even contributed an article entitled *One Aspect of Asian Rugby* in that programme with the opening paragraph:-

The revival of the All Blues Cup is indeed a welcome as yet another glamorous Malaysia-wide event on the rugby calender. But apart from this, one of the significant points is that it is confined only to Asian players.

With such a show of solidarity, the revamped All Blues looked assured of success. But this did not materialise because of Cobra's sudden change of heart by breaking ranks soon after. This Cobra did by fielding two Caucasian players in the second tournament when their inclusion made little difference to its team. Cobra could have easily fielded a powerful all-Asian side from its ample pool of local players. Many interpreted Cobra's public display of intransigent behaviour as its showdown with the NSCRC which was winning accolades for its role in reviving the All Blues spirit.

Or could this dramatic turn-about, a remarkable chameleon act, be due to Cobra's perceived threat to its national rugby hegemony or to its fledging Tens?

As there was no sign of an end to this stand-off between the feuding parties, with MRU and Cobra on one side and the NSCRC on the other, the Negri Sembilan Rugby Union moved in to act as mediator. The NSCRC was an affiliate of the Negri Sembilan Rugby Union. As a result of this arbitration, the parties agreed to a compromise whereby the participating teams had to be represented by citizens-only. By this settlement, the NSCRC had scored a great victory in its cause to confine the All Blues tournament as an Asian preserve. NSCRC had craftily outmanoeuvred the Cobra-dominated MRU which was caught napping as there was no expatriate rugby player with citizenship status around at that time. It was a big blow to Cobra.

When this compromise was reached, I had already relinquished my duties as Cobra secretary. I was in Den Hague, studiously following a course at the Institute of Social Studies and playing rugby as well at the Hague Rugby Club. Otherwise, I would have strongly urged Cobra to boycott the All Blues. Though winning the All Blues Cup was a tempting prospect, it should not have been achieved at such a price where Cobra had to discriminate against some of its members because of colour and creed.

For the record, Cobra won the All Blues on six occasions, the last in 1982 when it easily brushed aside the defending champions, the Singapore Blacks, 23 to 6. After that year, the interest in the All Blues merely evaporated into thin air. No club offered to host the subsequent tournament. This break in the competition cycle proved fatal, severing its jugular. Such a turn of event was, however, not unexpected. During its reign as an inter-club championship trophy, it met with mixed fortunes. Originally, an annual inter-club competition, it later became a bi-annual event as few clubs were prepared to host it. The last minute withdrawal of two powerful clubs, Cobra and Petaling Jaya Club robbed the 1976 tournament

of its glamour. Even its erstwhile supporter, the NSCRC as host to the 1979 meet had to cancel it. The NSCRC management was no longer keen to support rugby after Tan Chin Beng stepped down from state rugby in 1977.

As the competition is no longer in existence, the last holder of the Cup should have returned it to Negeri Sembilan from whence it came. As the state rugby body, the Negeri Sembilan Rugby Union has a beneficial interest to receive the Cup on behalf of the donor, the defunct Negeri Sembilan All Blues and hand it over to Muzium Negara for safe-keeping. It is an important national rugby relic. Some claim that this return was not possible because the Cup had allegedly been lost. What a sad end to a great Cup!

But the animosity between Cobra and the NSCRC over the All Blues ran so deep that it was carried over into the playing field. Cobra and the NSCRC became mortal enemies and every encounter between them was fought at a furious and robust pace. I remember a particular Selangor senior league match played at the station padang, Seremban where the NSCRC scored a shock win over a high riding Cobra, 8 to 6. Cobra had not lost a league game prior to this bruising game. The referee, Yaacob Ujang, had to stop play on several occasions, warning players against questionable tactics and fist fights.

NSCRC's victory was even more creditable as it had to play with fourteen men in the last quarter of the game. One of its players had to leave the field because of his injuries. I suffered a hard kick in the head and retaliated by running through the defence like a hurdler - knees raised menacingly high and defiantly inviting the tacklers, "...come on and get me if you dare". To this day, Mohd. Yunus, an ex-All Blues player and Cobra member who watched the game always reminds me of that 'great hurdler run' whenever we meet.

During the drive back to Kuala Lumpur after the game, I had such a severe attack of dizziness and nausea that I had to stop on the shoulder of a road around Nilai. The earlier kick to my head

was starting to take its toll. I slept, slumped on the steering wheel. Ng Boon Keat, a team-mate and one of the stragglers to return to Kuala Lumpur, drove past with a friend. He took me to his father's clinic in Kajang for a check-up, his friend following behind driving my Volkswagen. I spent that night at Boon Keat's house as his doctor father had recommended that I be kept under observation.

In the return match at Pantai, University of Malaya, Cobra struck with a vengeance to humiliate the NSCRC with a big win, 15 nil. This was a great victory as most of the matches played between the two sides had been extremely close. Later I discovered that the NSCRC was a greatly weakened team as several of its key players had not sufficiently recovered from injuries sustained in the earlier encounter.

Of the many opponents I played against during my rugby career, the NSCRC XV is undoubtedly deserving of mention for its hard and robust brand of rugby. It was unfortunate that when Tan Chin Beng, its chief benefactor, retired from being actively involved in rugby, it fell apart at the seams as if a vital thread had snapped. For its sterling campaigns that had earned respect and admiration for Negri Sembilan as a rugby powerhouse, the NSCRC XV's epitaph should read: 'A great standard bearer of Negri Sembilan rugby for all times.'

The NSCRC is housed in an unpretentious building and is one of the ubiquitous Chinese clubs where *mah-jong* is the main stay. Up till the early 1970s, such clubs usually had large and decorative wooden doors adorning their entrances. These were constantly kept open but the presence of the swing door, normally associated with the saloons in the bygone days of the American Wild West, prevented passers-by along the five-foot way, from getting a full view of the interior. Not that they would have seen much as immediately after the swing door was a large wooden screen obscuring what lay behind it. The screen was centrally placed, creating a narrow passage at both ends for access, between screen and wall.

In the parlour, the ceiling lights, (bulbs with shades over them) were pulled down to dangle about two feet above every *mah-jong* table. Each table was covered with glossy brown paper and the tile cards scattered on its surface. In this setting, every table seemed to glow, the radiant effect accentuated by the general dimness that permeated the room. Lacquered chairs were arranged neatly around the tables. Wisps of smoke wafted through the room whenever the *mah-jong* sessions were in progress. A billiard table was a standard fixture in the front portion of the parlour. The caretaker was normally the amah, attired in a black samfoo. She also served as the tea lady.

Who would have imagined that the awe-inspiring NSCRC XV was to emerge from such a typical Chinese club! Whenever I travel south from Kuala Lumpur, I always succumb to the charming lures of NSCRC, diverting from my route to go into Seremban for a leisurely drive along Jalan Birch to catch a glimpse of the Club. The sight of the clubhouse inevitably rekindles fond memories of the great games I had played against the NSCRC XV and the friendship I had shared with many of its players.

Though a small state and despite not winning any honours in national rugby, Negri's contribution to Malaysian rugby is certainly without peers even to this day. It was from this tiny enclave tucked amongst the three big states of Selangor, Pahang and Johore that the spirit of the All Blues, the catalyst for Asian rugby was introduced. Without this force, rugby could have withered and died in the aftermath of the exodus of the civilian expatriates and the Commonwealth Forces in the 1960s and the early 1970s, as there might not have existed the ready pool of Asian players to fill the void.

Over the years, Negri Sembilan has seen numerous teams come thundering out of its bosom to pose a strong challenge to the teams in the Klang Valley in their determination to raise the Negri banner proudly in the most competitive leagues in the country, the senior and junior competitions of Selangor. After the demise of the NSCRC XV, the Negri Sembilan Wanderers was formed to carry on the Negri challenge. Judging by its impressive progress in recent years,

the Wanderers is fast establishing its reputation as the mythical phoenix rising from the ashes of the NSCRC XV to stake a claim for national rugby honours.

Few can dispute that Tan Chin Beng had contributed significantly to rugby development in Negri. He worked assiduously to successfully revive the spirit of the All Blues at the time when the MRU showed little interest in the matter. He must also be credited with building up a formidable Negri-Malacca state team in the revamped HMS Malaya Cup tournament for junior teams. That team nearly toppled Selangor B at the semi-final stage in the 1975 tournament. Both teams were tied at 6 all after regulation time but Selangor managed to score first in the sudden death play period.

Chin Beng, who expressed displeasure at the game's poor refereeing that saw a player from the Negri-Malacca given the sack, threw a challenge for a friendly re-match to Kim Tai, the president of the Selangor Rugby Union. He was confident that Selangor would be beaten in this re-encounter. The challenge was not taken up. Selangor went on to win the tournament.

As a tribute to the great rugby men of Negri Sembilan, I dedicate this piece entitled, *The Great Negri Challenge*:-

A rugby epic, the Negri Sembilan rugby blitzkrieg, shrouded in the mist of history and fading from the memory of the ageing men who survived it, has to be told for posterity lest it be forgotten. Hopefully, my telling it will also help to inspire the Negri Sembilan Wanderers, an emerging rugby power, to propel itself to greater heights and eventually wrestle the rugby hegemony from the traditional rugby powers.

More than three decades ago, the Negri Sembilan Chinese Recreation Club (NSCRC) assembled a formidable team with the objective of putting Negri on the pinnacle of national rugby. But the numerous rugby fiefdoms in the neighbouring Klang Valley stood in the way. They would

have to be put to the sword first before the other lesser rugby powers would meekly surrender.

Showing great courage and daring, the NSCRC launched the Negri rugby offensive against all its adversaries in the Klang Valley, attacking them in their own backyard. These raids inflicted heavy damage to the prestige and pride of the affected fiefdoms. They retaliated by marching to the NSCRC's lair as a combined force. Encamped in Negri territory, these invading forces put into effect the strategy of attrition, each fiefdom attacking at different times.

Despite this onslaught, the NSCRC defences were magnificent, gallantly marshalled by Mahadavan, Pestana, Dielemborg, Syed Bakar, Sharin Abbas and Edwin Ng (no relation of mine) to name a few. In a raid, Cobra, then the reigning rugby kingpin, had to beat a hasty retreat, losing 8 to 6. It was a great victory for NSCRC, which had played short of a man for the last fifteen minutes as Shamsudeen Hussein had been carried off the field, injured.

Sensing that the retreating Cobra was grievously wounded, the NSCRC gave chase with the intention of executing a *coup de grace*. But it miscalculated and moved too deep into unfamiliar enemy terrain and the crafty Cobra lured it into an ambush at the Battle of Pantai. The NSCRC was almost annihilated, losing 15 nil.

Despite this disaster, the NSCRC was still able to continue its great rugby assault without let up for some years to come. But at the start of a particularly hot season, the sun and the winds stood eerily still, an omen according to the soothsayers that the NSCRC inspired Negri rugby blitzkrieg had vanished into thin air. Intelligence reports had it that there was a coup of sorts at the NSCRC. The coup installed a new Council of Chiefs that was not keen on rugby.

As a Cobra loyalist, I fought in the rugby campaigns against the NSCRC and found it a worthy opponent deserving of mention in the annals of the game.

With tranquillity restored to their borders with Negri Sembilan, the various rugby fiefdoms began to resume their internecine feuds for territory and influence.

Meanwhile, Abdul Jalil, an ex-NSCRC player who refused to abandon the grand design, sneaked into the midst of the warring fiefdoms. He formed a clandestine team in the heartland of his former enemies, recruiting young Negri men from the institutions of higher learning and the work places. He had in fact set up a fifth column and was bidding his time to rise and strike back, this time around from within.

To quell any suspicion as to his motives, he cunningly manoeuvred himself into the folds of the Malaysian Rugby Union (MRU), becoming the secretary for many years. The MRU was the acknowledged supreme rugby leader by all factions.

Finally, his dogged determination and patience at being in rugby's wilderness for many long and forlorn years are beginning to see the light of day. His team, aptly named the Negri Sembilan Wanderers, has been expertly wielding a lethal sword, cutting down many of his traditional foes with impunity.

The team has won an impressive tally of ten titles to date, the more prominent ones are the Jonah Jones Sevens (beating a foreign team, the Australian Liners in the finals and scalping Cobra on the way), the Penang Tens and the Haadyai Sevens. The Wanderers was also the finalist in the Cobra Tens, losing to a South African team.

With such credentials, the Wanderers is poised for greater things in rugby. Will it be able to rekindle the flame from the dying embers of its illustrious predecessor, the NSCRC, to a degree of intensity, which would enable it to set alight the national rugby scene with its scorching brand of rugby?

Indeed, there is hope yet, more so now with Tuanku Naquiyuddin Ibni Tuanku Jaafar as its patron and guiding light for achieving that grand design which eluded the great NSCRC team.



Negri Sembilan All Blues versus The Edwardians of Taiping at Seremban on 18th February, 1928. Paymaster-Lieutenant D.E. Lander (Royal Navy, retired), (centre in the front row) refereed the match.



The All Blues Cup for interstate rugby competition (Asians-only). This picture was taken before the All Blues final in 1950 between Perak and Singapore. The final was also a battle of the Ritchie siblings – Hector captained Perak and brother John the skipper for Singapore. (NSTP photo)



Brian Miller, with arm over Ng Peng Kong, after Cobra's victory in the revamped All Blues Cup final 1970 in Penang. The other player is Marty Fryer. The two Cobra Caucasian players were the cause of the Malaysian rugby crisis; NSCRC was determined to preserve the sanctity of the All Blues confining it to Asians-only but was fiercely resisted by Cobra and supported by MRU.

CHAPTER FIVE

NEW FACETS TO MALAYSIAN RUGBY

When Dr. Lunden-Dunlop became the twenty-sixth MRU president in the 1958-1959 season, the terrorist threat was already on the wane. The worst of the Emergency was over. This period saw the beginning of the withdrawal of foreign troops that were stationed in this country. This withdrawal was to be implemented in phases over a number of years. The bulk of the remaining troops was re-grouped and garrisoned at Terendak, Malacca and at Province Wellesley, Butterworth to await departure according to a time table. However, small detachments continued to be deployed in certain states to meet the prevailing military requirements.

Against this background, Dr. Lunden-Dunlop proposed the enlargement of the HMS Malaya Cup tournament to accommodate two more Service teams apart from the combined military side based at Singapore. The new teams would be the Commonwealth Forces North to cater for the forces stationed at Butterworth and the Commonwealth Forces South for those at Terendak, Malacca. Neither of the two states in which these bases were located could call upon these servicemen to play in their teams. This principle was similar to the Singapore ruling governing the Singapore Civilians and the combined military team.

Dr. Lunden-Dunlop hoped that the creation of these two new teams would not only ensure a keener competition in the HMS Malaya Cup but would also help to promote rugby in the surrounding areas. He was also concerned about the fact that if many state teams continued to rely on Service players, their withdrawal would have adverse consequences on rugby generally and on these states in particular. He expressed this concern in a memorandum to all MRU council members, the relevant paragraphs are reproduced below:-

While the benefit (of Service rugby) to Malayan rugger in general has been very considerable, there have been on the other hand certain definite disadvantages, which I think we should endeavour to eliminate in the future. The most important of these have arisen when a particularly strong rugger-playing unit of the Services has been stationed in one particular state.

The result of this has been that an undue preponderance of Service players was selected to play for the state team. Under the conditions prevailing this was inevitable and natural, but it did mean that keen civilians, who under normal circumstances would have been selected without hesitation, were either dropped or passed over altogether.

If after one or two years the unit concerned were transferred away from that state it might easily be found that the difficulties involved in rebuilding the state team could be very considerable. From a long term point of view states will require to rely more and more upon Asian players and it is they in particular who are liable to become discouraged and to turn to other games if they find that they are unlikely to be selected for their state rugger team so long as Service units are stationed in their state.

The proposal to form the two new Service teams was unanimously accepted. But the issue of Service players in the state teams saw much debate, especially the proposed imposition of a quota. With a large military garrison, it was understandable for Perak to speak out against any restriction in the selection of Service players. Other states, however, were amenable to such an imposition. Some suggested a maximum of five Service players in any state team. It was Wing Commander P. J. Bowen's proposal, which was seconded by a J. N. Hughes that carried the day. The proposal was "...that the inclusion of Service players in state team should be restricted to a maximum of seven (7) in any one team". The ruling

was to be implemented in the 1960-1961 season. Wing Commander Bowen was representing the Singapore Combined Services.

The Commonwealth Forces South later changed its name to Army (Malaya) at the request of the military at Terendak in order to secure greater financial and logistical support from the Army High Command. Comprising mainly New Zealand forces, Army (Malaya) won the HMS Malaya Cup in 1963. However, in 1968, Army (Malaya) was allowed to play under a new banner as 28th Commonwealth Infantry Brigade, a change necessitated by the fact that the team members were picked solely from military personnel based at Terendak under the command of the 28th Commonwealth Brigade Group. To call this team Army (Malaya) would have given the misleading impression that the players were picked from various Army battalions throughout the country. Soon thereafter, the Brigade was phased out of the country, thereby ending its participation in the HMS Malaya Cup.

The Service teams, two from this country and the other based at Singapore, won the HMS Malaya Cup on fourteen occasions. The Joint Services was the most outstanding with six wins, five of which were achieved consecutively from 1965 to 1969. It beat Selangor on four occasions, 1965, 1966, 1969 and 1971, the Commonwealth Forces North in 1967 and the Malaysian Armed Forces in 1968. I was one of the seven Asian players in the Selangor team against the Joint Services in the 1969 HMS Malaya Cup final. The others were Chan Cheng Mun, Ahmad Mahmud, Brian Pestana, Aziz Ismail, Nashatar Singh and Bala Kandiah.

The HMS Malaya Cup competition was then run on a North and South basis with the champions of the respective zones meeting in the final. Selangor qualified for the 1969 final through a difficult and circuitous route, losing to Perak by 18 to 11 in the preliminary rounds despite leading 11 nil at one stage. Luckily for Selangor, Perak faltered with its remaining games, ending up with the same points as Selangor in the North Zone league table and forcing a play-off between the two states. In that play-off at Kuala Lumpur,

Perak, led by Roy Holder, a highly respected expatriate at Number 8, who had played top grade rugby in England, proved to be a great disappointment, losing 20 to 3. Perak's solitary try was scored by Kulwant Singh who, in the dying minutes of the game, barged over in a line out to score. He was later to be my team-mate in Cobra, Selangor and the Malaysian XV as well as a colleague in the Malaysian Administrative and Diplomatic Service.

Kulwant is a Sikh and Sikhism demands that its adherents neither crop their hair nor shave their beards. Consequently, the Sikhs wear a conical turban made up of many yards of linen expertly woven around the head to control the flowing locks and keep the individual neat and tidy. As it would be impractical to play rugby wearing a turban, Kulwant, like other Sikh players, temporarily replaced it with a simple home-made cloth headgear. This contraption was designed like an oversized skull-cap with a protruding centre to accommodate the bunched up hair. The cap was held in position by being strapped around the chin.

It was quite amusing to see these different coloured cloth protuberances on their heads swaying from side to side in keeping with their movements in the field. The Sikhs' banners of war! Often, Kulwant was asked by his team-mates in the changing room before a match, "What style are you wearing your chignon this evening?"

Looking at Kulwant or any other Sikh player wearing the cloth headgear always brought back memories of my primary school days when the Sikh pupils were harassed because of their cloth covered knot of hair. This cloth-knotted hair known as the *gunddu* is worn by young Sikhs who are not yet of age to wear the turban. Mischievous little boys would stealthily creep up behind the young Sikhs, and at the opportune moment lunge to grab the *gunddu* to peals of laughter and giggles, an act most annoying to the aggrieved.

This childhood prank was adopted as a strategy in rugby matches as well. The opponents would grab and tug at the '*gunddu*' of the Sikh players in the scrummages, mauls and rucks. But this time

the despicable act was executed with malice, not in jest. Kulwant had complained to me on numerous occasions about this ungentlemanly tactic that gave him much pain and headaches. I felt guilty as I was one of those who could not resist the temptation of tugging at a Sikh's 'gunddu' in the field. Could this be the reason why some Sikh players eventually cut off their locks and discarded the turban in spite of their religious edict?

In the later part of his rugby career, Kulwant was no longer the conspicuous prey in the field as there was no more 'gunddu' to mark him out. He was, however, not the first Sikh player to go turbanless as many others before him had already sported cropped hair in the field. By the late 1960s, all the Sikh players whom I knew had sheared their locks, making the humble home-made headgear, an accessory peculiarly Malaysian, obsolete.

I doubt if any of the Sikh's unique headgear can be found in good shape after all these years. Many would have been torn to shreds in keenly fought matches and those that had escaped unscathed are probably rotting in an attic somewhere. Nevertheless, the MRU should make an attempt to retrieve any remaining ones and display them in Muzium Negara for posterity. The headgear may be a cheap and simply tailored gadget but it has an inestimable value to rugby history.

Incidentally, did the Sikh players' long flowing beards not get in the way? I am not able to comment on this, as by the mid-1960s, they were already beardless. But I came across a sports letter in the *New Straits Times* entitled, *The First Asians to Play Rugby*, written under the pseudonym of 'An Old Tiger from Ipoh', which among others, touched upon the beard issue: -

It is interesting to recollect that in the beginning, no Sikh boy would dare venture on to the field fearing that one might leave the field at the end of the match minus his beard. However, in that memorable match I mentioned earlier (King Edward VII School versus Negri Sembilan

All Blues) one Sikh proved this could be done. He was Bachan Singh, a court interpreter and one of the members of the All Blues who proved that the beard was no hindrance at all. He covered his beard with a tight fitting pouch and so introduced a fashion carried to this day.

The Sikhs, however, were not the only ones to wear headgear. It was quite common then for players playing as a hooker or a lock to wear one made especially for rugby as protection against head injuries. I will be referring to this issue at a later stage.

Meanwhile, I would like to return to the Selangor versus Joint Services match in the 1969 HMS Malaya Cup final. Norman Siebel of the *New Straits Times* wrote a preview of this final, assessing the probable chances of the two finalists under the headlines, *Lamb's Men Are Not Up For Slaughter*. Of the many local rugby articles that I have had read over the years, I find his piece to be one of the most outstanding, a treasure trove of facts and figures that encapsulates the rugby of yesteryear.

I wrote a commentary on it some thirteen years later which was published in the *Cobra News* of 17th September 1982 entitled, *The Norman Siebel Table* and is reproduced below: -

If there were a sports award for the most imaginative article on rugby, then the one entitled *Lamb's Men Are Not Up For Slaughter* (Mike Lamb was the Selangor captain) by the late Norman Siebel would surely be the choice. What gives this article, a preview of the 1969 HMS Malaya Cup final between Selangor and Joint Services (Singapore) the outstanding quality is the comparative table on the physical attributes of the two opposing teams.

Not often does one come across a rugby article where the opinions expressed are also substantiated by statistics and such a case in local journalism is almost non-existent. Hence, the Norman Siebel article is indeed a rare find.

No other local sports writers have ever adopted such a style nor injected some other innovative approaches in the treatment of their rugby news.

When he published the comparative table, Norman Siebel probably might not have realised that it would some day serve as an important source of reference for researchers on the history of rugby in Malaysia.

It is a storehouse for useful information, and among others, it reveals that heavy packs had been a distinctive feature of local rugby in those bygone days, that large numbers of expatriates had still dominated the State team as late as 1969, and many of these expatriates were outstanding athletes of international repute.

In fact, at the time of the Siebel Table, the era of the heavy packs was coming to a close, as increasing numbers of Malaysians were taking up the game with alacrity and some of them were already besting the expatriates for state honours. The ranks of the expatriate forwards with solid and granite-like limbs, thick neck and the ubiquitous cauliflower ears were being depleted at an accelerated rate.

Notwithstanding their big build, they were also remarkable in being extremely agile as well. Many were good sprinters and one can imagine the deadly power and force they would muster when in full flight. It was brute force in motion.

Yet, the physically smaller Malaysians of those days showed no fear of slamming into such strong opponents, bringing them down with bone crunching tackles. In turn, they were able to absorb tremendous punishment without flinching. In the scrummages, they locked arms with bigger men, in rucks and mauls stubbornly standing their ground against overwhelming odds while in the lines they unceasingly harassed the taller men in aerial combat.

That breed of Malaysians had acquitted themselves with pride and many of them were to become outstanding players in later years. This was a logical development considering their rigorous apprenticeship.

Looking back it is sheer wonder how these Malaysians could have survived, emerging physically intact from such a contest of gladiatorial proportions. The Siebel Table indeed stands as the best testimony to that era.

When a cub reporter came to the field where the Selangor team was practising for the final to collect statistics of the players for his chief, Norman Siebel, who was then the sports editor, Brian Pestana ran up to me, coyly inquiring about my weight and height. He did not wish to be the lightest in the team comprising many expatriates. After a discussion, we decided to give the same figures for height and weight, not realising that Aziz Ismail, the scrum half, at one hundred and two pounds and five foot tall, was the lightest and the shortest in the team.

The Joint Services had a heavy pack of 1485 pounds with an average height of six foot. Fortunately for Selangor, of the seven Asian players, only three played in the pack and two of them, Nashatar Singh and Bala Kandiah were no lightweights either, tipping the scales at 225 pounds and 180 pounds respectively. In fact, Nashatar was the heaviest man in the field. I was the third Asian in the Selangor pack, playing as flanker. With a weight of 144 pounds, I stood out as the featherweight in the company of towering heavy men. In spite of my lightweight, the Selangor pack weighing in at 1483 gave away a mere two pounds.

The Joint Services paraded many players with formidable reputations such as John Pringle Fisher, a former Scottish skipper, Ricky Braybrooke, formerly of Hampshire County and Dolly Dew, an ex-Harlequins to name a few. Many rugby pundits expected Selangor to be slaughtered in that final at the Selangor Club padang, which was enclosed with canvas to facilitate gate collection. But

it turned out to be a closely contested game which ended with the Joint Services winning 6 to 3 on a wet pitch due to intermittent showers which helped to cool down frayed tempers.

In retrospect, would Selangor have won if it had replaced me, the lightweight, with a heavier and taller forward and so obtained a sturdier pack to out push the opponents? Few can dispute that a big, strong and mobile pack is crucial in rugby, more so when playing against opponents of formidable size and strength. Otherwise the lighter pack would be shoved off the ball easily in the scrummages, rucks and mauls, looking like helpless boys against men, with the latter winning effortlessly in the lines as well. Without the ability to gain possession of the ball regularly, a team with the best backs is rendered impotent as no meaningful attacks can be mounted. On the contrary, the backs have to constantly back-paddle defending and tackling the marauding opponents. It would only be a matter of time before these backs break down from complete exhaustion.

I have always maintained that forwards must be powerfully built, particularly strong in the shoulders, arms and legs, and of great height. In addition, they must also be extremely fit, as they have to move around constantly, binding and shoving in the scrummages, rucks and mauls and jumping in the line outs as well. And they have to tackle, rush for the up and under and give chase to the ball, no matter where it is on the field. To me, forwards are like worker ants, busily coping with the numerous chores for much of the game. The three quarters simply stand back and watch, waiting for the ball to come their way.

Any team that hopes to play winning rugby has to have a sufficiently large number of strong and big forwards. I felt extremely comfortable playing alongside bigger men in the team as they not only provided me the 'cushion effect' against the physically imposing opposition but they also somehow pulled me along with their power and momentum in play, giving me ample opportunities to weave my brand of magical tapestry in the field. This, however, does not mean that I was a mere opportunist, lurking in the shadows

of my bigger team-mates. Far from it. I had my fair share of executing bone crunching tackles on the big and strapping opponents and was able to harass them as well.

But when the opposing pack was extremely heavy, with thick set forwards possessing arms as big as the average Asian thighs, I found the going most frustrating, being incessantly on the receiving end of what I would describe as 'the physical softening up process'. The humongous pack, keeping tight possession of the ball, resembled a battering ram, pounding and hitting wantonly at the smaller sized opponents. The latter team, lacking sufficient numbers of beefy men to counteract this simple but effective strategy would ultimately succumb, crushed to pulp in the field.

When an Asian squad took on a European side, the weight and height differences between them were so great that most spectators expected the latter to score a runaway victory. Normally, the Asians were able to match their opponents for the first twenty to thirty minutes, sometimes pinning the latter in their own territory for long spells. But inevitably, the heavy weight of the Europeans overcame them as the game progressed, and the Asians crumbled, holding on desperately to whatever lead they had and praying for the shrill whistle to put an end to their agony. Of course, weight and height alone does not make a team a juggernaut - these big players must also have good skills and a good standard of play!

My experiences in the many encounters against bigger packs, particularly touring sides such as the London Welsh and the Northern Suburbs of Australia have certainly reinforced the belief that Malaysians, being of smaller build, would not be able to withstand the physical might of the Caucasians and the Africans in international rugby. The Malaysians lack neither the courage nor the skills; they just lack the physique to generate the awesome power so essential in a physical contact game like rugby.

For the record, London Welsh steam-rolled a gallant Selangor, 56 to 3 and Northern Suburbs thrashed Selangor 33 to 6. Although

the London Welsh assistant manager, Colin Bosely, picked me as the best player in the Selangor side after the one-sided game, as reported in *A Rugby Lesson from the Masters, (The Star)*. I believe he based his judgement on my determined chase and hard tackles. How else could he have come to that conclusion? There was absolutely no room for Selangor to show any flashes of brilliance. Defence was indeed the order of the day for any vestige of pride to be maintained.

Of course, there are those who, goaded by blind race sentiments, obstinately refuse to acknowledge that generally Asian rugby players are greatly handicapped in physical quarters compared to their Caucasian, African and South Islander counterparts. This group has always maintained that physical size is not crucial if the team were fit and well-prepared technically, citing instances of Asian teams emerging triumphant in encounters with burly British and New Zealand opponents in local tournaments. I do not deny that there were and will be such victories, and hard earned as well, but then such victories have been too few and far between. As the saying goes 'one swallow does not a summer make'.

When Selangor qualified to meet the Joint Services in the 1971 HMS Malaya Cup final, it was again through a difficult and tortuous route, a repeat of the 1969 scenario. But this time Selangor had to replay the Malaysian Armed Forces which it had beaten earlier in the preliminary rounds, winning at 11 to 3. Selangor had to go into that replay after it suffered a shock defeat at the hands of the Commonwealth Forces North, 8 nil in its final group match.

In that play-off, Selangor had to fight hard to subdue a strong Armed Forces team comprising among others, Tan Kim Fatt, Ho Chee Pong and Omar Ahmad. Selangor won by a whisker, 8 to 6 to qualify for the 42nd final in the HMS Malaya Cup series. In that final, Selangor again lost to the Joint Services. Gee Boon Kee, the hard working Malaysian skipper and Adrian de Silva, the dashing centre, were not available to the Selangor team. And I was down with mumps! Could this trio, had they played, tipped the scales

in favour of Selangor? That final was the swan song for the Joint Services as by that time the British forces were already in the last stages of their massive withdrawal from the Republic of Singapore. Thereafter, the Commonwealth Forces North became the sole surviving foreign standard-bearer for service rugby in the HMS Malaya Cup.



Cobra's Jimmy Yong eludes an opponent (in stripes) and passes to the backs with teammates Ng Peng Kong (nearer building) and Adnan Maarof moving swiftly into an attacking mode in a match at the Selangor Club padang.

RUGBY - A MALAYSIAN CHAPTER



Nashatar Singh wears the Sikh's banner of war, a home-made headgear to tuck in his flowing locks in the All Blues Cup match between Perak and Selangor, and below...

...two Sikh players, Puran and Jagjit (at extreme right), sporting smartly cropped hair, look anxiously as a Penang player trips over Selangor's Adrian de Silva in an HMS Malaya Cup match. Ng Peng Kong, second from left, lurks ominously for an opportunity to strike. (*NSTP photo*)



The Norman Siebel Table

SELANGOR

<i>Line-up</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>height</i>	<i>weight</i>
Seamus Cowley	15	5 - 6	165 - 1b
Jon Master	14	5 - 9 ¹ / ₂	156 - 1b
Mike Lamb	13	5 - 10	165 - 1b
Chan Cheng Mun	12	5 - 6	165 - 1b
Ahmad Mahmud	11	5 - 6	136 - 1b
Brian Pestana	10	5 - 9	144 - 1b
Aziz Ismail	9	5 - 0	102 - 1b
Tim Sheehan	3	6 - 0	200 - 1b
Chris Allen	2	5 - 9	170 - 1b
Allan Aitken	1	6 - 0	196 - 1b
Nashatar Singh	5	6 - 4	225 - 1b
Roger Gunn	4	6 - 2	193 - 1b
Eurof Walters	6	5 - 10	175 - 1b
Bala Kandiah	8	6 - 2	180 - 1b
Ng Peng Kong	7	5 - 9	144 - 1b

JOINT SERVICES

<i>Line-up</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>height</i>	<i>weight</i>
John Phillips	15	6 - 1	175 - 1b
"Ginger" Lee	14	5 - 8	161 - 1b
Stuart McVernon	13	5 - 10	192 - 1b
A. L. Toms	12	5 - 10	175 - 1b
A. Lyell	11	6 - 0	160 - 1b
Mike Wilkinson	10	5 - 11	192 - 1b
Ricky Braybrooke	9	5 - 7	192 - 1b
"Dolly" Dew	1	5 - 11	203 - 1b
Granville Balmforth	2	5 - 9	168 - 1b
T. Davis	3	5 - 8	160 - 1b
R. "Tug" Wilson	4	6 - 4	203 - 1b
William Black	5	6 - 4	204 - 1b
D. Mountain	7	5 - 10	176 - 1b
J. Pringle-Fisher	8	6 - 1	194 - 1b
Jim Halley	6	5 - 11	177 - 1b

Taken from 'Lamb's men are not up for slaughter' (*New Straits Times*)



A flooded Selangor Club padang before the start of the 40th HMS Malaya Cup final between Selangor and Joint Services (Singapore), 1969. Workers are attempting to drain off the water. (NSTP photo)



The Joint Services' scrum half passes to his three with Selangor's Ng Peng Kong and Eurof Walters (both in darker jerseys) moving into attack at the 1969 HMS Malaya Cup final at the Selangor padang. Joint Services beat Selangor, 6-3. The padang is enclosed with canvas to enable gate to be collected. Part of the crowd is seated on the three-tiered field bench.

CHAPTER SIX

NATIONAL PRIDE OR PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE?

The MRU Cup was introduced in 1975, replacing the HMS Malaya Cup as the premier rugby tournament. The Commonwealth Forces North and five other MRU selected teams with the prerequisite playing standards had to make the mandatory shift from the HMS Malaya Cup to the new competition. In this change over, the Commonwealth Forces North was allowed to play under a new banner reflecting its national identity, the Australian Forces North, for the first time in national rugby. The team made up of airmen from the Royal Australian Air Force at Butterworth since its days in the HMS Malaya Cup greatly welcomed this name change. Its distinctively Aussie character had been buried in anonymity for far too long, masquerading as the Commonwealth Forces North.

Similarly, when the 1st Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment (1st RNZIR), based at Singapore, was invited to participate in the MRU Cup a few seasons later, it chose to use the banner, New Zealand Forces. During the Malayan Emergency, players from the 1st RNZIR had represented the state teams where they were stationed and subsequently Army (Malaya) when the Regiment was re-grouped at Terendak, Malacca.

Perak was one state that greatly benefitted from the presence of the 1st RNZIR whose rugby players turned out in large numbers for its HMS Malaya Cup team. Among them were H. Wood, R. T. Christie, O. Nepia, B. Sheridan, V. S. Daws, N. Chamberlain, N. Cooper, C. MacPhee, George Blake, J. S. Maskery and Paul McAndrew. The 1st RNZIR was the champion of the Malaya Area (Commonwealth Forces) Open Inter-unit Rugby Competition for five years in succession during the 1960s. Led by Lieutenant Jim

Brown, it was also the defending champion of the FARELF tournament in 1965.

The New Zealand Forces was a formidable team, its reputation made fiercer by the players' energetic performance of the Haka, a Maori ceremonial war dance accompanied by chanting before the start of a game. The Kiwis insisted on its performance even if the start of the game had to be held up briefly. Lined in formation at the centre of the pitch, the Kiwi players, muscular legs apart and bent slightly at the knees, menacingly flexed their strong arms and stomped the ground as they chanted their mantra. Occasionally the chant was punctuated by loud slaps to the sinewy thighs to provide the rhythm. The performance, lasting hardly a minute, was greatly appreciated by the crowd who always roared, "More, more...". Their opponents, however, were neither amused nor intimidated, at least outwardly, judging from their impassive countenance. On the contrary, they stared scornfully at the chanting and gyrating Kiwis, without batting an eye-lid, probably thinking, "Ah, no big deal...".

I was intrigued by this ritual and was prompted to delve into its beginnings. Before a battle, Maori warriors chanted the Haka and each tribe had its own version. But the one made famous by the New Zealand All Blacks came from Te Rauparaha (1768-1849), chief of the Ngati Toa tribe. He performed his Haka after he managed to elude capture by his enemies by hiding in an underground store belonging to a hairy local chief. Te Rauparaha's Haka goes: -

Ka mate, ka mate (It is death, it is death)

Ka ora, ka ora (It is life, it is life)

Ka mate, ka mate (It is death, it is death)

Ka ora, ka ora (It is life, it is life)

Tenei te tangata puhuruhuru (This is the hairy man)

Nana i tiki mai whakawhiti te ra (Who caused the sun to shine again for me)

Upane, upane (Up the ladder, up the ladder)

Upane, kaupane (Up to the top)

Whiti te ra (The sun shines)

Interestingly, the term All Blacks is a nickname given to the New Zealand rugby team by the *Daily Mail* of England during the team's tour of Britain in 1905. The tour was its first major overseas trip when it trampled all over the best of British. Equally interesting is the fact the players and officials of the All Blacks of 1953 were made honorary members of the MRU and a MRU tie was given to each one of them. This was recorded in the MRU council meeting on 16th January 1954. The team was on a stop-over at Singapore on its way to Britain.

The Kiwis are not the only ones to perform a traditional ritual before the start of a game. Many teams in the South Isles such as the Fijians and the Samoans also have their own war chants but these are not regularly performed. Moreover, their performances are considerably less cohesive as compared to the All Blacks.

I remember at a discussion some years ago, a rugby official suggested that the Malaysian team should emulate these teams by performing a local chant. The idea was enthusiastically received and many agreed that it should be the *Dikir Barat*, a popular Kelantanese song and dance performance.

The *Dikir Barat* involves a group of performers wearing colourful costumes and headscarves, sitting cross-legged on stage. The leader, who is seated in front of the group, croons improvised songs while the others sing the chorus, gyrating their bodies, swaying their arms and nimbly twisting their hands to the rhythm. This lively performance is accompanied by Malay traditional music. Of course, if it were to be performed by a rugby team, it would have to be done standing upright, to make it look menacing. Undoubtedly, the idea was raised in jest. But if ever it is to be pursued in earnest, then it should only be implemented when Malaysian rugby has attained a respectable status as a winning team. Otherwise, the performance of any ritual would be looked upon as a lament.

Whilst the New Zealand Forces put up an impressive performance and stamped its class in the MRU Cup and other tournaments, the Australian Forces regrettably did not live up to its country's

celebrated rugby. It had never won the HMS Malaya Cup or the MRU Cup. Many of these Australian players did not possess the physical attributes normally associated with the typical Caucasian rugby player; broad shoulders, thick neck and thighs as huge as tree trunks. They were mainly lean and lanky with tongue twisting names like Sibthroe, Kielpinski, Firr, Vanderstoep, Ponting and Trow, which the locals found difficult to pronounce. But such looks were deceptive; they were an extremely tough and hardy bunch, ploughing relentlessly through the ranks of their opponents to leave a trail of casualties.

In a 1966-1967 HMS Malaya Cup tie between Commonwealth Forces North (CFN), and the Malaysian Armed Forces, the latter making its first appearance in the competition, the referee, Tony Vail, was kept busy issuing warnings to Aussie players for questionable tactics. Wong Hin Jee, the Malaysian Armed Forces skipper and playmaker, had to endure two outrageous body charges which resulted in one of the perpetrators given the sack by the referee. In the latter part of the match, Hin Jee was carried out, bleeding from a head injury. After treatment, he returned with a bandaged head. The CFN won that encounter, 16 to 15.

It was in that same season that the CFN qualified for its first Cup final, the 38th in the HMS Malaya Cup series. Its opponents were the Joint Services of Singapore, making it as the first ever all-Services final in Cup history. CFN lost 15 to 3, conceding a pushover try from a five-yard scrummage despite the fact it was the Aussies who had heeled and had possession of the ball. Accordingly, the news carried the headlines, *Freak try settles dour Cup final (New Straits Times)* and reported that "... (Joint) Services, the more experienced team, steadily applied their greater skill and knowledge of the game to gradually overcome Forces who could not survive by their toughness and willingness alone."

The Australians had a penchant for robust rugby and bulldozing tactics. These methods were often mistaken for rough play. Many teams did not relish the prospect of playing against them, especially

at their Butterworth base as the Australians showed greater aggression in front of their vociferous, beer-guzzling supporters. Despite having many strong and big expatriates in the team, Selangor inevitably emerged from such encounters badly mauled, having paid a heavy price for victory. An expatriate in the Selangor team had his cheekbone broken in one such encounter.

The Aussies had acquired notoriety for being great spoilers of the game, upsetting fancied teams at crucial stages in the competition. They seemed to relish this roguish role. The big teams had the jitters whenever they had to play them as the final opponents to complete the group fixtures. The unexpected would invariably happen despite these teams taking great precautions. On one occasion, Selangor which was defending its HMS Malaya Cup title crashed to a shock defeat at their hands in the 1970-1971 season. Because of this, Selangor had to meet the Malaysian Armed Forces in a play-off which was briefly mentioned in the previous chapter.

I played in the match against the Aussies who tackled ferociously to break up the numerous raids mounted by Selangor. Many of these attacks faltered just yards from the goal line. Selangor's Doug Johnston made a couple of penetrative runs but each time he was brought down barely a yard away from a try. Brian Pestana and Ow Koon Chai were also stopped near the goal line. I was penalised for not making any attempt to move away from the ball after I had fallen on it, a desperate effort on my part to deny the attacking Australian pack an imminent try. I happened to be the last man in defence but fortunately the ensuing kick was not converted. The match was bruising and robust which saw Tom Topping, the Aussie scrum half, leaving the field with a badly dislocated shoulder.

Though the Aussies' consistency of play left much to be desired, it was their unorthodox playing togs that made them stand out in the field. While other teams were attired in rugby's common designs of loops or plain colours, they could have had easily won a prize for the most outlandish attire. Their jerseys were of fanciful patterns and gaudy colours. Often the broad white stripe or the V pattern

across the jerseys gave the impression that they were wearing sashes. Sometimes, the jerseys had a huge white patch around the top that was mistaken for a makeshift stitch-up job.

It is highly likely that these jerseys resembled the Australian Rules Football jerseys. (Australian Rules is a game played with a ball not unlike the rugby ball.) Most of the Aussies were exponents of the Australian Rules and their reflex action to applying such rules in rugby Union resulted in frequent penalties. Many of their potentially dangerous set pieces broke down on this score.

As an affiliate, the Aussies were great supporters of the MRU programmes and attended every general assembly unflinchingly at Kuala Lumpur, coming by road from their base at Butterworth. In an annual assembly where Malaysians had assumed dominance, the sight of mops of fair hair and white faces in the rows was quite incongruous as was the occasional drone of the distinctive Australian drawl. Besides their active involvement in the MRU organised tournaments, the Aussies also participated in many local club competitions. But it was mainly their showmanship in the after-match entertainments that endeared them to the crowd. Often they regaled the audience with their antics and typically Australian songs. *Waltzing Matilda* was a sure bet. Their presence at such functions was never complete without the conspicuous slouch hats, a distinctive headgear of the Australian military. They wore them as a proud reminder to everyone present that they were patriotic Australians.

RUGBY - A MALAYSIAN CHAPTER



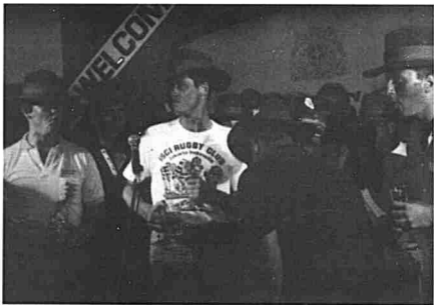
A Commonwealth Forces North player in his 'patched jersey' makes a break from Selangor's Mamat Taib in a HMS Malaya Cup match at the Selangor Club padang. At the extreme right is Brian Pestana.



Ng Peng Kong makes a daring flying tackle to foil an attack while team-mate Adrian de Silva moves in to snatch the ball. At the extreme right is Aziz Ismail. Selangor beat Singapore Civilians, 12-6 in the 41st HMS Malaya Cup final, 1970.



The New Zealanders always insist on performing the HAKA, be it on the field or at a after-match function, to the delight and applause of the crowd...



The Australians, in their slouch hats, always crooning typical Australian songs...

CHAPTER SEVEN

RUGBY PASSION IN SCHOOLS

When it comes to rugby in schools, none could ever rival the fabulous contributions of the expatriate educationalists who were rugby exponents. These amazing men, many using their clout as headmasters, practically turned their respective schools into 'rugby clubs'. They employed rugby as a means to build the character of their students and rugby was deemed as the compulsory extracurricular activity for those schoolboys who had the physique and were especially chosen for it.

These expatriate teachers spent many hours training their teams for rugby honours and such was the importance of rugby to them that it was common for expatriate headmasters to accord players preferential treatment. Players in residential schools were known to have received additional rations. There were cases of rugby players who were allowed to be retained for a second chance when expulsion from school would have been the order for failing in the final class examination. In those days, every student had to pass the final year's test before he gained promotion to the next grade. Failure could mean expulsion.

Sports was an integral part of the school culture in the latter part of the colonial period to the early 1960s. Students excelling in sports were greatly admired and respected. I can still vividly remember the thunderous cheers of the boys every time St. Michael's Institution, Ipoh was given a half day off because of a famous victory in sports. Such announcements were made either at the weekly school assembly or via the public address system installed in every class. Hence, the whole school never failed to turn up to support the school team when it was involved in any important sports encounter with its rivals. Naturally, these supporters looked forward to victory – they cheered enthusiastically urging their team to win because victory came the reward of a half holiday.

And those students who were selected to represent the Combined Schools in any sports had their names announced as they stood proudly in front of the assembly. On occasions when such announcements were made through the public address system, their class teachers and classmates would rush up to congratulate them.

But it was not all carrots, the stick was also employed by these educationalists on those players who irresponsibly failed to turn up for their games. There was an occasion at St. Michael's when two players who failed to turn up for a inter-school fixture were immediately expelled after receiving six of the best before an assembly. They, however, were reinstated after an appeal by their anxious parents. It could have been a tactic of the Brother Director to instil in the boys the concept that loyalty to school must always be upheld.

At St. Michael's, there was a balance between play and work. Both physical and mental sanctions were imposed to ensure academic pursuits were undertaken seriously as the sporting ones. Those who failed in their yearly examinations suffered not only the ignominy of being canned in front of the class but also the embarrassment through the public display of the full transcripts of their yearly examination results. To add to the humiliation, failures were highlighted in red. These transcripts were exhibited in the foyer, next to the school hall for the whole year to be replaced only by the next year's results. Open Days and Sports Days were particularly traumatic to those who did not fare well in their studies as they had nowhere to hide their discomfiture. Visiting students would make a beeline to the exhibition gallery and gleefully note the results of people they knew. The message was clear – study hard to avoid public disgrace! Such an exhibition was terminated at the end of the 1950s when St. Michael's and other missionary schools became part of the national education system.

The sports-loving expatriate educationalists believed that sports and studies were complementary as "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy". But the first of equals among them were

undoubtedly the rugby-loving colonial teachers. They were obsessed in their quest to replicate the rugby traditions of the English public school to their local institutions. Dr. D. E. G. Lewis made Victoria Institution Kuala Lumpur a respected rugby side. J. M. B. Hughes, a Welshman, helped to raise the rugby standards at Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK). After his posting to Penang Free School as headmaster in 1957, Hughes wasted no time in making his new school a great rugby side. Meanwhile, Neil Ryan took MCKK to dizzy heights in school rugby during his tenure as headmaster.

The MCKK was the rugby kingpin for many years and in the 1960s its name was synonymous with school rugby. Mention MCKK and the immediate association was 'rugby'. The MCKK rugby testimonials were then a premium in rugby circles, automatically opening the doors to university, state and national selections. Its reputation as a winning team greatly helped to make rugby an extremely popular game in the school. Almost every MCKK student aspired to don the team's black jersey.

The MCKK rugby team maintained an unbeaten streak for several seasons in the 1960s when it trounced Penang Free School by 33 to 5 and demolished the Selangor schools' champion, Victoria Institution, 39 to 3. The college won the Mori Trophy for the Malaysian Schools Sevens and the Perak inter-school championships. Not satisfied with being the undisputed rugby champion of Malaysian schools, MCKK went to win the Perak Rugby Union Sevens, beating Ipoh Club at 16 to 8. It was indeed an impressive victory as MCKK was playing against a seasoned Club side that sported some Perak state players.

These days whenever I chance upon former MCKK players, the conversation invariably turns to rugby, as though rugby is second nature to them. They would hark back to those times with great sadness and nostalgia, tears welling up in their eyes. Those were their glory years.

Coming from St. Michael's Institution, Ipoh, a lesser rugby power, I was indeed privileged to be able to play alongside former

MCKK players like Hamdan Azizi, Razalli Nordin and Adnan Maarof in the University of Malaya team. So well synchronized in their movements that Razalli Nordin, playing at outer centre, would after drawing the last defence after him, pass the ball to winger Hamdan who dashed down the flanks to score. This seemingly effortless execution of such deft moves belied the fact that Hamdan was as blind as a bat without his spectacles, an apt description as it was difficult to see how he could have performed his manoeuvres unless he had a bat-like ability to pick up secret vibrations emitted by his partner Razalli.

The Johore schools were always highly competitive in the Combined Schools rugby tournament organised by the Malaysian Schools Sports Council, with the Johore English College (JEC) leading the charge. JEC was fortunate to have Aladad Khan, a teacher, as one of its rugby coaches. He was an all-round sportsman, excelling in soccer, cricket, rugby and athletics. He represented numerous states during his brilliant sports career in all these sports. He was a national champion sprinter in the 100 and 200 yards from 1927 to 1929 and his speed helped him tremendously in his favourite game, rugby. He was reputed to be the first Asian player in the Perak HMS Malaya Cup team, playing as a three quarter. In this position he was able to display his explosive bursts of speed. He later became the coach of the Johore All Blues winning team in 1960, beating Penang 8 to 6, and in 1963, beating Selangor 16 to 9. He put his rugby experience and knowledge to good effect at JEC and many of his former players gained rugby caps when they were undergraduates at the University of Malaya and the Serdang Agriculture College.

The University team was monopolised by players who came from a handful of schools, particularly MCKK, Victoria Institution, King Edward VII, Penang Free School and Johore English College. Those who did not belong to this exclusive group found the going extremely tough as their rugby experiences did not count for anything. The few who managed to be selected had to prise open the door to this hallowed fraternity. When I attended my first

practice session, I was asked which school I had played for. On hearing that I was an ex-Michaelian player, many University players turned their backs on me as though saying "Ah,... don't waste your time, friend..."

The challenge of getting into the team if one did not come from the exclusive rugby schools was even more difficult for a freshman. In those days, freshmen had to humble themselves and be submissive to their seniors who ragged them sadistically. At a trial for a place in the team, the crowd was always extremely hostile to freshmen, shouting and making threatening gestures to upset their concentration and rhythm of play. Many succumbed and failed to make the team, even as reserves. It was a trial in every sense of the word.

At the trials, whenever I was in possession of the ball, abuse was hurled at me and some of the rowdy crowd of seniors near the line would encroach into the field of play to obstruct my run down the flanks. This was a strategy to drive me straight into the arms of the defence who were seniors. They were also attempting to win selection. I was grateful that my rigorous training at the hands of the Irish Christian Brothers at St. Michael's helped me to circumvent such impediments. However, I must confess that I took the trials seriously to spend many long hours running along Jalan University to build-up my stamina. On one occasion before the official period of orientation and ragging was over, a group of seniors riding motorbikes on that road recognised me and demanded that I stop my road training or endure heavier doses of ragging.

The Irish Christian Brothers' contributions to education are legendary. Equally significant was their role in promoting rugby in this country. It is unfortunate that this aspect of their service has not been given prominence. Many of them who came to this country during the colonial era were young athletes, infused with the tradition of Irish rugby. They popularised the game in their schools, inspiring the students with heroic tales of Irish victories and throwing in some tongue-twisting names of Irish stars of those times for good measure. Film shows of Irish rugby were also

shown; these were then followed by field sessions. As a result, many boys, including myself, became starry-eyed about rugby.

It was strange to witness these Brothers conducting some field sessions in their immaculate white cassocks with one hand hitching up the hems and the other clutching the ball to the chest. On those occasions, mischievous boys could not resist the temptation of tackling the Brothers and bringing them down, dirtying their religious habits. Howls of rebuke from the Brothers then ensued. But like all rugby men, they took the tackles sportingly. Most times they conducted their training sessions attired in baggy shorts, their fair legs contrasting sharply with their reddish, sun-burnt faces. Looking at them, their charges saw why they were referred to as the '*white man*', their lily white legs putting to shame the claim of fair complexions that local genteel ladies were purported to have.

So steeped were these Christian Brothers in the Irish rugby tradition that all players from their schools were attired in the Irish colours of green and white. The schools' emblems, however, replaced the shamrock. Some observers maintained that their schools' style of play was distinctively Irish and when they met teams from Government schools, which were usually trained by English expatriates, the contrasting styles made it appear as if it was a match between Ireland and England. Although these Christian missionary schools did not attain rugby excellence, they did produce some outstanding players for the state and the national teams. Two schools were prominent in this respect, namely St. Michael's of Ipoh and St. Xavier's of Penang.

Rugby began at St. Michael's in 1953. The school played its first two games against Anderson School in that same year. It lost both games, the first XV at 6 to 3 and the second XV 14 to 0. Anthony Loone, an ex-military officer who played in the first Michaelian team told me that it was Brother Polycarp, a Eurasian from Burma, who introduced rugby to the school. I find this information startling to say the least as Burma has never been known for its rugby but am in no position to dispute it as it came

from the horse's mouth. But I know from many ex-Michaelians that Brother Casimir and Brother Mark, who were contemporaries of Brother Polycarp, were also active in promoting and coaching the rugby squad in those years. I, however, learned my rugby from Brother Patrick in the late fifties.

I was enrolled at St. Michael's after my family moved to Ipoh from Kota Bharu. My father was transferred to the Ipoh High Courts. Leaving Kelantan was especially painful for my mother whose genealogical roots in that state could be traced back to the early nineteenth century. I too had great difficulties adapting to a new predominantly Chinese environment in Ipoh where the culture, the sights and the sounds seemed so alien to me when compared to a Malay Kota Bharu. Although I studied only for a couple of years at Sultan Ismail English School, Kota Bharu (later renamed Maktab Sultan Ismail), I have always been proud to be associated with it and have always kept tabs on the progress of its rugby team. I feel a sense of pride that it is, at present, the reigning champion of Kelantan Schools Rugby (Under-18).

I remember Brother Patrick, bless his soul wherever he is now, the tall and lean man who punted and handled the ball every evening on the field at the start of the rugby season. He would pass the ball to any boy who came by and when the routine of passing the ball started more boys joined in. It was his goal to lure the lads to rugby. He was successful and many students, like me, fell for it hook, line and sinker.

On those occasions when he was confined to the Brothers' quarters on the third floor for whatever reason, he would lean over the balcony, gesticulating and shouting instructions to the team during its training. And whenever the Brother Director, his superior, passed by, he would look up at Brother Patrick in annoyance.

At times when Brother Patrick could not attend the early training sessions because he had not completed his penance and prayers, the boys would crowd below the Brothers' quarters, calling out to him. After some time he would appear at the balcony and the rosary

in his hands was the incriminating evidence that he had sneaked out from the chapel. He would in pantomime style motion for silence. After which the balls came tumbling down. On match days, he was always at the sidelines, wildly flinging both his arms in the air and yelling at the top of his voice to motivate the boys to play harder. He would bury his anguished face in his large palms whenever the team committed a silly blunder, exclaiming, “..blessed, blessed..”

Regrettably, however, his training sessions focused mainly on ball skills, with great emphasis on the handling and passing aspects to the neglect of other areas of play. The boys would jog up and down the pitch in a line, passing the ball. Occasionally, he showed the forwards the proper method of binding in the scrummages and the formation in the line outs. Little was taught about strategic play and manoeuvres, particularly the set moves. This resulted in the boys being left to their own devices in a game. They ran helter skelter after any player who had the ball in his possession, be he an opponent or a team-mate. In the chase after the latter they screamed and shouted, “Pass the ball to me...pass the ball to me...”. Conversely, in the chase after an opponent bearing the ball, they loudly exhorted the team-mate closest to that opponent to “tackle him...tackle him.” I felt there was utter confusion in the Michaelian team in contrast to the well-planned movements and fluid coordination shown by its rivals, Anderson School and MCKK.

The boys were picked for the different positions in the team according to a simple rule of thumb, which was - the sprinters were to play as three quarters and the bigger boys as forwards. Most of the boys did not seem to relish their pre-ordained status but had to grudgingly stomach it for the sake of representing the school. Consequently, they would attempt to trade positions with each other at every opportunity. And whenever there was a vacancy in the team, a newcomer would automatically be directed by the coach to fill it. I started off in the front row but worked my way through the pack, ending up as a wing forward, nowadays known as flanker.

Apart from the haphazard way of organising the different positions in the team, the boys were never taught to understand the highly technical laws of the game. They learned them through trial and error during matches and most times, mistakes were made repeatedly or unknowingly. It was obvious that these players had never even seen a copy of the *Laws of the Game*. Rugby is without doubt a game that requires players to have analytical minds so that they can understand the many complicated aspects of the laws governing it. It is a game of strategy where a good and ably led team will always exploit the laws to gain the upper hand against a rival side.

However, one cannot be too critical of the schoolboys. State and club players who are supposedly *au fait* with the laws of rugby are also pulled up occasionally by the referee for committing the most basic of offences. Usually, these offences occur when players are not mentally alert to realise that there had occurred a sudden turn in the play situation, thereby leaving them in an off-side position during a scrummage, maul or ruck. Many experienced adult players often confess "...really, I too have never seen the handbook on the laws of the game..."

These were some of the reasons St Michael's did not emerge as a top class school in terms of rugby. It had good players but the lack of good coaching and instruction in the crucial aspects of the game became the albatross around its neck.

Some of the Christian Brothers also served as office bearers in several rugby bodies, Brother Casimir in the Perak Rugby Union, Brother Felix in Negri Sembilan Rugby Union, and Brother Patrick, after his transfer to St. Anthony's, Teluk Intan served in the Lower Perak Rugby Association, to name a few. Many school rugby players of the fifties and early sixties were indebted to the Christian Brothers for initiating them to the great game. Personally, I thank them for launching me into an exciting and colourful rugby career spanning many years. Besides that, the education I received at their hands has also given me the confidence to assume the role of a rugby

chronicler, preserving the history of the great game in this country for posterity through my writings on rugby.

Inter-school rugby matches were usually tightly scheduled with junior matches starting as early as 3pm in the harsh afternoon sun. Junior players were not permitted to wear either boots or rubber shoes; they had to play bare-footed. Players in the second XV were given the privilege of wearing boots but this footwear was compulsory for all first team players. In those times, most players in Ipoh and its vicinity wore boots locally handmade by the Chinese artisans whose dingy shops were located in Old Town. The boots were made from hard leather and it was advisable to soak a new pair in water overnight before use to rid them of 'the leather bite'. The studs were nailed in and more often than not, some came loose during a game, causing unevenness in the step and greatly affecting the players' concentration.

Immediately after the junior game, the second team would take to the field around 4pm with the senior game scheduled to start at 5pm. The referees would always ensure that there was no time wasting in each game, particularly as the rugby season for schools stretched from September to November when twilight sets in earlier than in the beginning of the year.

The young players welcomed matches where they had to travel long distances. Besides the great fun and merry making, the endless sing-along sessions in the bus during the journey, there was tea provided by the hosts. Everybody tucked in until burping point to the dismay of the coach and rugby master who kept reminding the team to "just take a sip". It was a clever strategy of fattening the calves before the slaughter.

Rugby in schools was a serious matter in the 1950s and 1960s. Supporters were emotional and passionate about their teams, sometimes threatening physical harm to the visiting team. The visitors' buses were also vandalized. The rivalry between King Edward VII, Taiping and Anderson School, Ipoh was for instance, extremely bitter and often resulted in the visiting team members

and supporters being waylaid during the journey home. Elaborately planned ambushes were sprung on the departing buses which became as battered as the players after a game. The excitement of such ambushes drew hot-blooded boys from other schools who pretended to be team supporters of either Anderson School or King Edward to join in the mayhem.

The Andersonian team was usually ambushed by stone hurling rivals near Simpang Empat. The attack which always lasted until Kuala Kangsar was so excessively vicious in one particular season in the early 1960s that the Andersonians had to be escorted by a police patrol car to Ipoh. "It was terrifying... we were under heavy bombardment, stones were flying into the bus, shattering the glasses. We had to crouch behind the seats for protection..." recalled Ibrahim Busu of that attack. "...and the bus was badly dented. Fortunately, we were using the Education Department's bus," he added with a smile, pleased with his former school's cunning in hiring the bus. The educational authorities were irked with the Edwardians upon seeing their bus smashed and vandalized beyond repair. This particular attack did not go unpunished. "If my memory serves me well, the King Edward rugby team was banned for the rest of the season," said Busu.

The Andersonians would not attack the bus transporting the King Edward team home until it had passed Chemor, then the missiles came hurtling at the bus. The intensity of the attack petered out near Kuala Kangsar. For some inexplicable reason, the royal town of Kuala Kangsar seemed to be the truce line between the antagonists. Could it be that these mischievous schoolboys were able to maintain self-restraint and observe decorum out of respect for the Royal Family residing there?

"This rivalry had already existed in my time," recalled Kassim Aziz who played for Anderson School in the forties. "But our supporters only threatened their players in the changing room and pilfered their belongings kept there when they were in the field," he added with a guilty look in his eyes. He merely smiled when

I asked him if he was one of the thieves. He was an ex-Edwardian, having studied there for many years before moving to Anderson School. In those times, King Edward lacked facilities for post-Cambridge classes and this saw an annual migration of its crop of brighter students to bigger schools in Ipoh to further their studies. Among the rugby players who migrated to other schools was Dr. Fong Wah Fatt who left for St. Michael's.

King Edward is generally accepted to be the first school to play rugby but this claim is not without dispute. A few rugby veterans accord that distinction to the Malacca High School, which unfortunately could only sustain the game for about six months. The interest waned when T. J. Thomas was transferred to King Edward and became the architect of Edwardian rugby.

In 1928, a team made up of students and ex-pupils of King Edward played the Negri Sembilan All Blues at Taiping. This was recorded as the first all Asian rugby match in the country. When the All Blues tournament was launched in 1934, many former Edwardians were greatly sought after by the participating teams. Later under the stewardship of J. D. Joseph, a Welshman, rugby at King Edward was given another adrenaline shot in the arm which saw its rugby coach, Yeoh Teng Khoo, churning out a larger crop of good players who were snapped up like hot cakes by the talent scouts.

One of them was Hui Weng Choon. He was an outstanding athlete at school, excelling at cricket, hockey, soccer, athletics and rugby, the last his first love. While still at school, he was picked to play alongside the expatriates in the North Perak and Districts XV as a scrum half. He went on to represent the University of Adelaide at rugby and was awarded the University colours after the first year. Thereafter, he was the team's automatic choice as scrum half until he qualified as a doctor. He was also picked to play for South Australia. Such a recognition was no mean feat, coming as it was from rugby playing Australia, the land of the Wallabies! Upon his graduation, he worked at the Royal Perth

Hospital where he also played rugby for its first team. On his return to Selangor in 1959, he was immediately recruited by the state HMS Malaya Cup team as well as by the state All Blues squad. He also represented the North in the North versus South Annual Classic for some seasons.

Abounding with rugby talents, King Edward had every reason to be extremely proud of its rugby heritage and would not allow other schools to even think of staking a claim to its rugby throne. But it became so pre-occupied with putting down Anderson School, that it was oblivious to the looming threat posed by other schools in Perak, thus allowing MCKK to snatch the crown from under its very nose.

This hatred turned to obsession when the Edwardians were consumed with jealousy after one of their favourite sons, Ung Khek Cheow, abandoned them for Anderson School. Upon graduating from Raffles College Singapore, Khek Cheow returned to teach at King Edward where he had learned to play rugby as a schoolboy. But due to the exigencies of service, he was later transferred to Anderson School and was instrumental in moulding it into one of the country's premier rugby schools.

Anderson School had in the 1950s an internal rugby competition where 24 teams participated; each of the six sports houses had to field four teams. In an Under-15 match against Anderson School, where all the young players played bare-footed, I suffered a hard tackle which fractured my right wrist, the only serious injury I sustained in my rugby career. That incident instilled in me a great respect for the Andersonians who were revered for their robust play and low tackles.

Ung Khek Cheow was a disciplinary teacher at Anderson School. At the start of every school year, he would visit the senior classes, cane menacingly in hand, and looked over the bigger and taller boys seated at the back. When school was over in the evening, those boys, the toughies, picked out by him would be down on

the rugby field, cuddling rugby balls obediently. Tan Eng Hock, a teacher, was one of the coaches.

His wife also shared his passion for rugby. Being early birds, both of them were already comfortably seated on the upper most tier of the field bench at the Ipoh padang before the start of a game. On rainy days, when other rugby fans ran for shelter, the couple remained steadfast in their seats, his wife providing the umbrella. Everyone knew that he was an influential figure in Perak rugby and it merely required his nod for any player to be picked for either the Perak combined schools team or the state team. Hence, those players who aspired to play in either of these teams would keep play in that portion of the field nearest to him, so that he could notice their skills. Occasionally, his petite daughter, a sprinter at the Methodist Girls School, Ipoh, accompanied Khek Cheow and his wife to watch rugby. On those occasions, most of the players lost concentration on their play, preferring to feast their roving eyes on that pretty lass.

Khek Cheow was the first Asian to hold the MRU presidency in 1959 when the Union's office bearers were still mainly expatriates. In his council of fourteen, there were only two other Asians, M. B. Pestana and Ng Wood Kan. He passed away in 1988, aged seventy-seven. I wrote him an obituary that began as follows:

A page in rugby history would be missing without a mention of the passing of Mr. Ung Khek Cheow. Fondly known as 'Uncle', he was a source of inspiration to the young and fledging rugby players who aspired to reach the pinnacle of the game...

I was greatly honoured when the Perak Rugby Union requested me to contribute an article on Khek Cheow in conjunction with the launching of the Malaysian Sevens for the Ung Khek Cheow Challenge Trophy in 1989. The article entitled *Ung Khek Cheow: A Lifetime of Rugby*, is reproduced below: -

His strong back arched and knees slightly bent in the classic stance of a skilful scrum half, Ung Khek Cheow, drenched

in perspiration was in deep concentration. Sensing that opportune moment, he swiftly threw the ball into the steadying scrummage and immediately manoeuvred himself to a vantage position behind his towering No. 8. In the next instant, he was off in a flash with the ball securely tucked to his heaving chest. The opposition was mesmerized by his sudden burst of speed and could not stop him from making a lighting touch down at the far corner.

Such strategy had always been Khek Cheow's inimitable style of play, which marked him as a formidable scrum half. His skills did not go unnoticed and despite rugby being almost the exclusive preserve of the expatriates in the pre-war years he was given the signal honour of representing Perak in the HMS Malaya Cup.

Though diminutive in stature, he was a hard and fearless tackler, highly respected by the expatriate players of his time. He donned the state colours for many years and was also an automatic choice in the Perak All Blues. He was a diehard player who never turned his back on any game.

There was an occasion when the Perak All Blues could not find proper transportation and had to rent a dilapidated lorry at the wholesale market to travel to Seremban for a fixture. During the journey the team had to endure the scorching heat of the day and the nauseating stench of fresh chicken droppings for the lorry had just transported live chickens to market. Immediately after the game the team returned in the ramshackle lorry with the stench still pervading. "Despite obvious discomfort and unpleasant odour, he never uttered a murmur of complaint," said Hairi Osman who was also a player.

Such was his commitment to the game, which did not wane in later years after he retired from active participation. In his retirement years, he travelled extensively throughout

the country and abroad to watch important games, always accompanied by his wife.

Zain Yusoff, a former Cobra president met him and his wife on a flight to Hong Kong for the International Sevens some years ago. By that time he was already a frail man and had to be wheeled out of the plane to the arrival hall at Kai Tak airport. But at the stadium, he miraculously found the energy to clamber up and down the terraces as though the excitement of rugby matches had rejuvenated him. "I was amazed to see him bouncing with energy. But it was an anti-climax to see him boarding the plane for the return flight once again in a wheel chair. Incredible, what rugby could do for a man," said Zain.

During one of his trips to the United Kingdom, he was impressed with the London Welsh after seeing their performance at Cardiff Arms Park. Upon his return he suggested that the team be invited to tour this country. Anticipating resistance in view of the enormous cost, he obtained MRU's permission to attend the meeting which discussed this matter as an observer. At a crucial stage of the discussions, he could not resist intervening, attempting to turn the tide in his favour despite his lack of *'locus standi'*.

He was convinced that such a tour would generate greater interest in rugby and inspire young boys to take up the game. Had it not been for his impassioned plea, the London Welsh tour would not have taken place in 1974. He convinced the MRU president, Sulaiman Amin to give his casting vote in favour of the tour to break the deadlock.

(Note: Before Khek Cheow made the proposal, Dr. Hui Weng Choon had already at the tail end of his MRU presidency sealed a deal with Malaysia Airlines to fly out the London Welsh for a tour of Malaysia and Thailand; the decision to accept or reject the offer was left to his

successor, Sulaiman Amin. Under the deal, MRU would be responsible to bear the team's expenses whilst in Malaysia.)

Upon his graduation from Raffles College, Singapore, he returned to teach at his alma mater, the King Edward VII, Taiping where he first learned his rugby as a schoolboy. Ironically, this school turned out in later years to be the nemesis of Anderson School Ipoh where Khek Cheow was posted to in 1933. As the coach, he moulded Anderson School into one of the great teams in the country.

This turn of events placed him in a predicament as he found his loyalty tested to the ultimate between his alma mater and Anderson School. A former Edwardian attributed the bitter rivalry between the two schools partly to Khek Cheow who was seen as a traitor and "may all his protégés in rugby be crushed!" A beneficial spillover effect of this intense rivalry was the uplifting of the game to greater heights, no doubt something that he had wished for.

Long after he relinquished his duties as coach, he made effective use of his position as vice-principal and discipline master to ensure that the school's rugby reputation was maintained. He always made it a point to accompany his team wherever it played. There was one rare occasion when he could not follow the team in the game against Victoria Institution, the Selangor schools champion. But he was early at the Tanjong Rambutan bus station, anxiously awaiting the return of the team.

"Luckily for us, we managed to win or else we might have to face the disciplinary master himself!" said Jagjit Singh a former Andersonian and ex-Perak player, mischievously. As an afterthought he smiled and added, "...he gave us a lavish treat that evening at the ice kacang stall beside the bus station."

His generosity and concern for the welfare of rugby players were well known. "There were several occasions when he

gave me ten dollars, a princely sum in those days to treat the team after a hard game," said Hairi Osman who learned the finer points of the game under Khek Cheow's tutelage and had the privilege of playing alongside him in later years. He was fond of dispensing advice to rugby players whenever and wherever he happened to be. Kassim Abdul Aziz, ex-Perak scrum half, can attest to this. He fondly remembers how Khek Cheow would cajole and coax him to improve his play in any game by hollering across the field, "You, Wretched Worm, don't hang on to the ball..."

Some critics accused him of being parochial, thinking mainly of Perak's interest at the expense of the other states. They pointed to the fact that Perak had more than its fair share of players in the national squad during those years when he was the MRU chief selector. Others dismissed such allegations as unfounded. However, this remains a controversial issue to this day.

Despite this, those who are involved in the game and knew him acknowledge the fact that he had made an indelible mark in Malaysian rugby with his immense contributions as player, coach, administrator and subsequently advisor.

With the mass departure of the Christian Brothers and the expatriate educationalists in the 1960s, school rugby started to decline which inexorably saw the rugby tradition in many schools crumbling into disrepair. In spite of the gallant efforts of some local teachers to arrest it, they lacked encouragement and support from many headmasters who placed greater emphasis on academic achievement than on sports. Writing in early 1968 to the press, the president of the Johore Rugby Union, P. B. M. Lee, among other things, stated:-

We can lay the blame on the Ministry of Education for not giving enough encouragement to sport and least of all to rugger.....the Johore English College which used to turn out some of the best young Asian players, with more than 1,400 pupils, has only one sportsmaster and now

does not even have a rugby XV nor a cricket or hockey XV that anyone has heard about. It is useless to talk about encouraging Asian rugger, presenting cups or making grants to clubs, if the schools are not turning out rugger players. For it is in the schools that rugger must be learned.

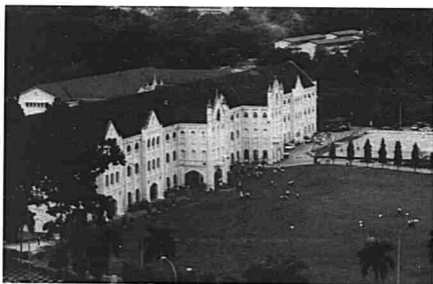
One of the many schools that saw the rise and ebb of its rugby fortunes was the Batu Gajah Government English School of Perak. According to available records, it started rugby three seasons ahead of Anderson School but by the time I played rugby for St. Michael's, its rugby was already dead as the dodo. I used to travel to Batu Gajah to play soccer against its school team but never rugby.

I was told that a headmaster of the Victoria Institution Kuala Lumpur prohibited all rugby clubs from making use of the school's rugby pitch, including his own old boys' rugby team from the Victoria Institution Old Boys Association, (VIOBA) during his tenure of office. Many VIOBA rugby players alleged that the ban was imposed because the headmaster was annoyed that a supporter had driven onto the pitch to transport an injured VIOBA player who had broken his fibula to hospital. Following this unreasonable ban, many VIOBA players switched their allegiance to the newly formed Cobra. Some of these rebels had even helped to induce the birth of Cobra by flocking to swell the ranks of the founding fathers in order to ensure that the necessary concoction for the artificial insemination process was in abundant supply and more than sufficiently potent to hasten the conception.

Deprived of these players, the VIOBA's rugby team wilted and died prematurely and this was also detrimental to the school team as it was no longer able to obtain expert coaching from this invaluable source. It was the beginning of the decline of the school's rugby heritage. Could this be a case of a headmaster's apathy towards rugby? Or was it a cultural change with different priorities? Could the fact that the headmaster was not a Caucasian have anything to do with the decision?

As more schools started to mortgage their rich rugby heritage for academic *par excellence*, Anderson School has continued to strenuously balk the trend according to reliable sources. Outwardly, it has shown that its commitment to rugby has never wavered at any time as epitomised by the presence of the uprights which have been standing in the school field since the 1950s. Painted in the school colours of blue and white, they cast imposing shadows over such activities as athletics, soccer and cricket whose paraphernalia are removed and carted away at the close of their events.

As a schoolboy, I cycled past them when taking a short cut to St. Michael's from my house in Greentown. Now in the fall of my years, I see them permanently entrenched as part of the school's fixtures as I drive along Jalan Hospital (formerly Anderson Road) during my frequent return from Kuala Lumpur to visit my parents in Ipoh Gardens. I have come to identify these uprights as the national rugby sentinels. I am convinced that the day they come crashing down, the death knell of rugby in the country will peal out.



St. Michael's Institution Ipoh was founded by Reverend Father J. B. Coppin, Parish Priest of the Church of St. Michael, Ipoh in 1912.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE MYSTERY OF THE DISAPPEARING CUPS

For more than five decades, (1922 to 1975), players undertook the arduous annual pilgrimage to pay homage to the Great National Rugby Symbol regally perched on the high altar. The icon appeared to look benignly down at the pilgrims who came from every region of the country and neighbouring Singapore to make offerings, their arms raised in supplication for favours. All of them had made elaborate preparations for this visit of veneration - they had to physically and mentally attune themselves months ahead, chalking up many miles of jogging, perfecting manoeuvres by undergoing the tedium of field work and concentrating on repetitive revision of ball skills. Only the disciplined could endure such a punishing schedule. The teams knew that only one amongst them would be divinely favoured and embraced in the hallowed bosom of the Great National Rugby Symbol and the embrace would only last for that particular year.

Despite feeling humiliated, the losers would nevertheless strive again and harder the next time around, confident in the belief that the following year would be their turn to savour the exhilaration of that warm and divine embrace. Only those who have been favoured with that embrace know its true meaning, an unforgettable experience in transcendentalism - a spell in Nirvana. I was a member of a team, one of the privileged few, that was accepted as rugby's favourite son. I was embraced because I was a member of Selangor's winning team in the HMS Malaya Cup tournament in 1970.

Selangor beat Singapore Civilians in the Cup final of that season, 12 to 6. It was a victory which left the bookmakers confounded as based on the results of the qualifying matches and on the respective team's experience and composition, the Civilians appeared to be the stronger side. It scored an impressive 14 to 6 victory over

the powerful Joint Services, the reigning champion and crushed the 28th Commonwealth Brigade, 20 nil and Johore 26 to 8. It received a walkover from Negri-Malacca.

Powered by eleven experienced Caucasian players, the Civilians also had advantage in weight and height over Selangor, which fielded nine Asians and six Caucasians. In addition, the Civilians had a speedy and dangerous back line. With such awesome attributes, winning the match appeared a mere formality for the Civilians; it was inconceivable that anything could possibly go wrong in its encounter with Selangor, the underdog. The Civilians was also in an uncompromisingly hungry mood for victory as its previous appearance in the HMS Malaya Cup final was in 1959 when it drew with Perak, 9 all.

As fate would have it, the occasion was the Civilians' thirteenth appearance in the final of the HMS Malaya Cup. And this number, considered by many people as unlucky, caused the downfall of the Civilians - rain fell during the first half saturating the ground and making it slippery for its much-vaunted backs to exploit their speed. Gordon Nicholson fumbled a crucial catch near the goal line and Bill Baillie of Selangor pounced on that chance to open the scoring. So to those who do not believe that the number thirteen bodes ill tidings, think again!

During the HMS Malaya Cup's reign as the supreme rugby symbol, only eight teams succeeded in making the challenging ascent to the high altar and earning the privilege to sit on its right. They were Selangor, Perak, Singapore Civilians, Penang, Johore, Police, Malaysian Armed Forces and the foreign military teams of various hues - United Services, Army, Combined Services and Joint Services.

The foreign military teams were rugby's most favoured sons with fourteen wins, one better than mighty Selangor. In a sense, this is a fitting result as it was the military that donated the HMS Malaya Cup to encourage and promote inter-state rugby competition. They had shown the principle of leadership through example by

being on top of the heap and they did it in style when the Joint Services pipped Selangor at the finish in the 1971 final. In the remaining four years of competition before the HMS Malaya Cup became a junior tournament in 1975-1976 season, none of the military teams' rivals managed to match their total number of wins.

Some rugby buffs might argue that it is not right to combine all the victories of the foreign military teams, thereby giving them the fourteen wins. Each military side should be taken on its merits. This line of argument would place Selangor with 13 wins at the top, its nearest rival being Singapore Civilians with 9 wins. But then, others might assert that this would not be fair to the military, taking into account the transient nature of its participation and the constant movement of different troops to and from the country and Singapore. Likewise it can be argued that the combined military team based at Singapore, which played under numerous banners over the years, should be counted as an entity. If this last argument is accepted, this military team ties with Selangor at 13 wins each, this is discounting the one victory by the Army (Malaya) in 1962-1963 season, as it was based in Malaysia. The other teams in the roll of honour are Perak (6 wins), Johore (3 wins), Penang (2), Police and Malaysian Armed Forces (1 each).

It is interesting to note that the same two teams that played in the first HMS Malaya Cup final in 1922 also appeared in the grand finale before the curtains came down and ended the Cup's era as the Great National Rugby Symbol in 1975. After that year, it became a junior tournament. Selangor beat Singapore Civilians in the inaugural final, winning 5 to 3 and in the last match of the HMS Malaya Cup as the premier competition, they ended the fight in a perfect 10 all draw. However, the more cynical would postulate that these two teams, prior to the final match, made a gentleman's agreement to end their rivalry on an amicable note.

In the first HMS Malaya Cup final, Singapore Civilians had two forwards who went by the name of Law. To distinguish them, they were known as 'Fair' Law and 'Black' Law, according to the colour

of their hair. One story has it that after the game, 'Black' Law sat with his head in his hands in the changing room and could not be consoled. He felt remorseful, as he would have saved the day for his team had his kick at conversion not hit the upright. One of the players in that Civilians squad, William Ramsay, who was later to be bestowed the honorific title of 'Sir' by the British Crown, became the president of the Rugby Football Union (England) in 1954-1955 and again in 1970-1971 when English rugby celebrated its centenary.

The HMS Malaya Cup was donated by the officers and crew of the battleship, the *HMS Malaya*, for inter-state rugby after the ship made its maiden visit to the country in early January 1921. The ship's officers and crew also donated another trophy for soccer. The presentations were made as a token of appreciation to the country that had generously paid for the ship's construction. During that visit, the crew played rugby and soccer against local teams. In rugby, they played a total of five matches. They lost to Selangor 3 to 5, and to Ipoh District 0 to 3 but beat Singapore 11 nil, Malacca 20 to 4 and Negri Sembilan 5 to 3.

The *HMS Malaya* was a British battleship of the Queen Elizabeth class. It was launched into service in 1915 and was involved in the naval battle of Jutland against the Germans in 1916 as part of the 5th Battle Squadron Grand Fleet at Scapa Flow. In that same fleet was the *HMS Revenge*. It had an ex-England rugby captain, Norman Wodehouse, on board serving as a gunnery officer. This gentleman, who later rose to the rank of Admiral, led the England team to the 1913 Grand Slam.

After the Jutland campaign, the *HMS Malaya* was refurbished on two occasions and fitted with more firepower. It also saw service during the Second World War and was torpedoed by German U-boat (U106) in the Atlantic in 1941. It was cut up for scrap in 1948. The year the vessel was sold for scrap saw the only break, apart from the War years, 1940-1946, in the HMS Malaya Cup schedule of competitions. Was this break coincidental or a deliberate move

by the rugby authorities to show respect for the ship, assuming they knew of its fate?

I posed this question to many rugby veterans but none could shed any light. When Choo Ah Chye, a former Perak and ex-Malaysian player, heard that I was writing this book, he gave me a stack of old rugby documents which he had received from Ung Khok Cheow's widow. He hoped that those documents would be of some value to my research. It turned out to be so. It was from those documents that I came across a copy of the minutes of the MRU meeting held on Sunday 5th September, 1948, where the decision to impose that break in the competition schedule was made due to the prevailing state of Emergency in the country. There was no reference made to the ship. The meeting was chaired by D. Farquharson, the president. The relevant portions read:-

The question whether or not the HMS Malaya Cup Rugby Competition will take place this year in view of the unsettled state in the country is discussed and the views of the various States are tabled.

The Committee members are unanimous in their views that as much as rugby as possible should be played, it is considered to be doubtful, however, whether the rather rigid programme of matches which the HMS Malaya Rugby Competition entails could be carried out satisfactorily, particularly so as certain States indicate that difficulty will be experienced in raising representative sides, especially in respect of away matches.

To hold the competition with Negri Sembilan and Johore and possibly Perak being unable to participate would be in the opinion of the Committee detract from the spirit of competition. It was agreed that every endeavour should be made by States to arrange matches locally and further the establishment of State Rugby Unions.

It is the considered opinion of the Malayan Rugby Union that the HMS Malaya Cup Competition should be cancelled

for this year unless the situation in the country improves very considerably.

The HMS Malaya Cup mysteriously went missing from the Selangor Club during the Japanese Occupation of the country. Immediately after the War, when the tournament resumed it was without a challenge trophy. Various quarters offered to donate a new cup. Commander Robinson of the Royal Navy sent word that the officers and crew of the *HMS Malaya* were willing to replace the lost Cup. Unfortunately, all these offers were turned down because of the Rugby Football Union's (RFU) opposition to competing for a cup in any rugby competition. The MRU had to abide by the decision, as it was then an affiliate of the RFU in England. Adhering strictly to this policy, the tournament was played for several years without a Cup until 1958. Owing to unceasing clamour that rugby should have a Cup, the MRU once again communicated with the RFU for re-consideration. The RFU replied that though it was still opposed to the 'a win the Cup spirit' in rugby, it emphasized this time around that the final decision should be at the MRU's discretion.

Given this latitude, the MRU at the general meeting held that year voted to purchase a new cup funded entirely by rugby clubs and personalities. Offers by companies to sponsor the Cup were turned down, reinforcing rugby's reputation of self-reliance. To enable greater numbers to be part of this Cup project, it was agreed that an individual could only contribute up to \$100 (Straits dollar) and state Unions should also ask for token donations from players. Any excess from this collection, after the purchase of the Cup, was to be put aside for the acquisition of ties and other awards that would be given as mementos to visiting rugby personalities. The Cup project was a huge success; the collection far exceeded the purchase price of \$690, inclusive of the engraving. The new Cup, a silver trophy, was bought from Robinson's in Singapore. The store granted the MRU a generous discount from the Cup's original price of \$1400.

After being lost for nearly two decades, the HMS Malaya Cup miraculously reappeared. It was found by an employee of the Telecommunications Department, Aruppalan, in a murky drain along Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, a few kilometres from the Selangor Club. The Cup was not damaged but the plinth and the lid were missing. In a simple ceremony at the Selangor Club, the Cup was handed over to the MRU president, J. Atikens at the start of the 1961-1962 season when it was restored to its rightful place and its replacement, the silver trophy, became the prize first for the MRU Sevens and then for the Under-23 tournament.

A new plinth was donated by the officers and crew of the *HMS Terror*, a British battleship. It remains a mystery to this day why the thieves who must have known the Cup was solid silver had not melted it down for illegal disposal. But equally mysterious is the fact the MRU did not have a new lid made to restore it to its original design. The MRU preferred to showcase an 'amputee'. The early rugby Cups were all designed complete with lids as seen in the All Blues Cup and the trophy which temporarily replaced the HMS Malaya Cup. When I was scouring for some rugby photographs at the library of the *New Straits Times*, I found an old picture of the HMS Malaya Cup. It had an exquisite lid, crested with an elegant figurine of a Queen. The picture that was taken of the Cup in all its glory shows a rugby ball placed in front of the plinth.

It is said that the eunuchs of old China constantly carried their severed manhood in a pouch concealed within the folds of their loose-flowing Mandarin robes so that at death, these 'precious missing bits' could be re-attached to make them whole again for burial. In recognition of its distinguished service to Malaysian rugby, surely it is never too late for the MRU to also grant the truncated-looking HMS Malaya Cup this eunuch's last wish.

By early 1974, the HMS Malaya Cup's status as the rugby icon hung in the balance when the MRU council toyed with the idea of introducing a new two-tiered tournament, a senior league and a junior competition, with teams promoted or demoted based on

their final standings in the respective league tables at the end of a season. A new challenge trophy, which later was named the MRU Cup, was also in the offing and most council members were in favour of it replacing the HMS Malaya Cup as the pre-eminent prize in national rugby.

There were two main reasons for introducing a two-tiered competition. The most compelling one was the MRU's alarm over the lopsided matches in the HMS Malaya Cup in recent years when certain teams were literally bludgeoned into submission. There was need to separate the strong from the weak and in the process would give the 'no-hopers' a better chance to win honours in rugby though of a junior grade. Subsequent events justified this radical move as Pahang, Negri Sembilan, Kedah and Malacca became strong contenders in the junior league. As a consequence, there was a marked groundswell of interest in the game in these states. The other reason was to cater to a number of rugby-strong affiliates to expose their vast pool of players to competitive rugby. They were permitted to enter two teams each, one in the senior division and other in the junior section.

The rise of Pahang was partly attributed to Ng Boon Keat. He was transferred from Kuala Lumpur to Kuantan in 1970 to serve as an electrical engineer at the Public Works Department. Upon settling down in his new post, Boon Keat wasted no time to getting himself anointed as the rugby high priest in his district. His rugby fanaticism proved highly contagious and many in that state became rugby converts. Soon, he became known as the 'rugby piper' in the mould of the legendary Pied Piper of Hamelin. His tunes were even able to entice fishermen and hawkers to watch rugby matches at the padang along Main Street, Kuantan, the turnout was always huge, an unbelievable phenomenon!

The new two-tiered system, however, had its detractors. One of the dissenting voices came from Dr. Freddie Lai, a former president of the Johore Rugby Union. He argued that the competition became lopsided because several state teams were no longer able

to recruit players from the Malaysian police contingents and the Malaysian army garrisons in their states. Such players once formed the cornerstone of these teams. This happened when the MRU permitted the Malaysian Armed Forces and the Malaysian Police to participate in the HMS Malaya Cup as separate entities in 1966 and 1971 respectively.

He was right. Before the admission of these two Service teams, Selangor, already well endowed with rugby talents, had even resorted to selecting police players like Chan Cheng Mun, Nashatar Singh, Nawi Hussein and Boon Onn Leong from the Police Depot and the police contingents in the state. Cheng Mun had also played for Negri Sembilan when he was serving in that state. Among the other Police players who had turned out for the states were Wong Chin Kong and Yee Peng Sung for Penang and Pow Kim Guan and Zubir Ahmad for Johore. Of the host of players from the Malaysian Armed Forces who had donned state colours were Wong Hin Jee and R. J. Gerrad for Perak and Ho Chee Pong for Johore.

It was also Dr. Lai's view that the participation of the Malaysian Armed Force and the Malaysian Police was contrary to the spirit of the competition that was originally confined to states only. The press quoted him as saying:-

The Malaya Cup Competition is essentially a competition on an inter-state level and if we exclude Police and Forces, teams like Johore, Malacca, Kedah and possibly Pahang could hold their ground in the competition.

He was right again. But the MRU had a different viewpoint. It believed that it had to adopt a pragmatic approach in order to continuously re-energise the competition by roping in more teams, state or otherwise, from time to time. The number of new in-takes depended on its resources. The HMS Malaya Cup started as an inter-state competition with Selangor, Perak, Penang, Negri Sembilan, Malacca and Singapore, the first three grouped in the North Zone and the reminder in the South Zone. A year later Kedah

and Johore were admitted but it took another three years before the combined military team from Singapore was accepted into the tournament.

The proposed two-tiered competition was tabled at the 1975 general assembly which saw the HMS Malaya Cup relegated to the junior division. Though it was obvious that many delegates were saddened by this, it was a hard decision that had to be taken due to nationalistic considerations. A Cup of the colonial era had to bow out to a locally conceived MRU Cup. Privately, many said the wiser move was to maintain the *status quo* of the HMS Malaya Cup which over time would enhance its historical image and heritage. A genuinely old cup has an tantalising ring about it, more so in recent years when most tournaments and their challenge trophies have had a short existence. I found it distressing to be the one who as MRU secretary had to table the new competition that necessitated the delegates to make a choice between the HMS Malaya Cup and the MRU Cup. The former especially held fond memories for me.

Barely seven years later, rugby's grand old man, the HMS Malaya Cup, was voted into compulsory retirement. It was to take effect after the 1982-1983 season on a resolution tabled by the newest and youngest affiliate, the Federal Territory Rugby Union (FTRU). Deemed by many as rugby's young Turks, its secretary, Rosnan Shafie, put forward a legitimate argument, quote:-

How can a trophy, which derives its name from a warship, which enabled the British to rule this country, continue to be made the symbol of a game?

Formed in 1981, the FTRU also recommended in the same resolution that another trophy, the Agong's Cup, which would truly reflect the national identity should replace the historic and long-standing Cup after it was put out to pasture. This was also accepted by the MRU. Rosnan Shafie was later to become the MRU secretary in 1984, taking over from Dr. Chan Onn Leng.

The Armed Forces which last won the HMS Malaya Cup in 1972, when it was the premier rugby trophy, found its second team had qualified for the last final of the Cup in 1983. Its qualification was much to the relief of the naval donors who understandably favoured a military side to win in the Cup's final hooray. A return to its military roots would be a fitting finale. Kedah, the other finalist, was the sensation team of that season and was fancied to win. But fate must have lent a helping hand to the Armed Forces, the match was arranged to be played at the Mindef (Ministry of Defence) Stadium in the heart of a extensive military complex. It gave the Armed Forces immense home ground advantage.

The Forces took an early surprise lead, 6 to 4, but came under heavy bombardment as the game progressed. Kedah threw everything into attack and was awarded an easily convertible penalty when the score stood at 9 to 12 in favour of the Forces. Unfortunately, Kedah squandered the opportunity of drawing level and also fluffed four other easy conversions. Those who watched the match shook their heads in utter disbelief at the easy chances wasted by Kedah. Some of those knowledgeable in the game's history smiled at the thought of the possibility that the spirits of the crew of the *HMS Malaya* had manipulated the outcome of the match.

Stranger still was the coincidence of the bugle playing the *Last Post* in the vicinity of the stadium when the Yang DiPertuan Agong presented the Cup to the victorious Forces team at the end of the game. It was as if the Cup had all along wanted to end its long and illustrious career by being buried with full military honours. It seems strange that the HMS Malaya Cup turned a full circle to eventually return to the military. Perhaps, the spirits that engineered the win were the same ones that protected the Cup from being melted down by the thieves when it was stolen during the Second World War.

The grand Cup was presented to Muzium Negara in 1983 where it has been accorded a place of display as is the case with the HMS Malaya Cup for soccer, the latter having been placed in the Muzium

much earlier. Although both Cups are now comfortably housed, I think they should be relocated to the Military Museum, befitting their status as military memorabilia. I am sure that it would be what Captain Buller, the skipper of the *HMS Malaya* and his crew would have wished for.

Looking back, I feel fate has been kind to the HMS Malaya Cup for it had been given a reprieve from oblivion on two occasions. Firstly, it was lost but subsequently found and secondly, the enforcement of the Rugby Football Union's ruling against 'a win the Cup spirit' for several seasons prevented the rise of a usurper to the vacant rugby throne, thereby ensuring its rightful and proper place upon its return. Its replacement, the silver trophy, purchased through individual subscription, was in commission for a short period of two seasons that was insufficient to endear it to the rugby fraternity. It went missing soon after it became the prize for the Under-23 competition. Some rugby fans have attributed the mysterious loss of the silver trophy and the All Blues Cup, both conceived during the colonial period, to the work of the invisible forces which wanted to ensure that the HMS Malaya Cup remains the only rugby silverware worthy of that era.

But one thing is certain, the HMS Malaya Cup's proud history as an enduring tournament of six decades will be hard to emulate, let alone break, by other MRU competitions. It was also impregnated with World-class players, the internationals of England, Wales, Scotland, Australia, Fiji, Ireland and New Zealand, some of whom were still in their prime. In the case of Jeffery Clements, a Penang-born, he was capped for England in the 1958-1959 season after he had played for Singapore Civilians in 1952. His father was H. F. Clements who was MRU president in 1955-1956 season.

The MRU Cup is made of solid pewter. It stands as a column of about a foot high with a rugby ball at its apex. The MRU Cup tournament was started in 1975 with six elite teams: Selangor, Armed Forces, Police, Singapore Civilians, Johore and Australian

Forces North. Subsequently, three other teams were admitted, the New Zealand Forces in 1977, Kedah in 1980 and the Federal Territory XV following the formation of the Federal Territory Rugby Union in 1981.

Competition was keen and hard. Johore, which created the biggest upset in the inaugural year by beating Selangor, 9 to 7, could not withstand the scorching pace and fell out after a few more seasons of participation. Kedah qualified for membership in this elite group after winning the HMS Malaya Cup in 1979. But hardly had it been able to savour its elevated status when Kedah withdrew in mid-season from its MRU Cup campaign over a technical dispute with the Selangor Rugby Union and the MRU.

It was compulsory for teams in the MRU Cup to also field their second stringers in the junior competition, the HMS Malaya Cup, unless of course they obtained special dispensation from the MRU. The rationale for this rule was to give more players the opportunities to play competitive rugby. However, this provision did not apply to the non-Malaysian teams in the MRU Cup tournament, namely Singapore Civilians, Australian Forces North and New Zealand Forces. As neither Kedah nor Selangor was given the exemption, both had to register their respective teams in the MRU Cup and the HMS Malaya Cup.

The fixtures happened to pit Kedah against Selangor in a HMS Malaya Cup encounter before either of them had played in an MRU Cup tie of that season. Cunningly, Selangor took advantage of this situation and exploited the ambiguity of the rules by registering nine highly experienced players in its HMS Malaya Cup squad when it played Kedah. Thereafter, these senior players were deregistered by Selangor from its HMS Malaya Cup team to make them eligible for its MRU side on the eve of its MRU campaign.

Kedah felt cheated. Selangor had wantonly violated the spirit of the two-tiered tournament, a senior and a junior section. Kedah lodged a protest with the MRU over Selangor's ungentlemanly behaviour through its secretary, Amirruddin Embi. Though regretting

that the rules were loosely worded, MRU threw it out on the grounds that Selangor had done no wrong. Kedah retaliated by its withdrawal from the MRU Cup and in its next HMS Malaya Cup fixture against Police B, it fielded all its former MRU Cup players, thus sending a strong signal to the MRU that it could also play the same devious game.

This unfortunate incident was not the first time that Kedah had a run-in with both MRU and the SRU. In 1975, it claimed for a walkover against Selangor in an HMS Malaya Cup fixture that was controversially postponed. After conducting an inquiry, the MRU concluded that it had no case for a walkover and ordered the disputed game to be played on another date. An angry Kedah supporter wrote to the papers under the pseudonym of '*Bola Kana*' (Olive Ball), lashing out at the MRU for its pro-Selangor stance and alleging a conspiracy between Selangor and MRU to victimise Kedah. Historically, Kedah never had an easy and smooth relationship with the MRU. Could it be that it was never forgiven for its role to subvert the no-contest rule for the MRU presidency referred to in Chapter One?

The ambiguity of the MRU Cup rules as exposed by the dispute between Kedah and Selangor had greatly destabilised the two-tiered competition system. It was open to manipulation by the participating teams. However, two other events helped to hasten the end of the trouble-ridden MRU Cup. The introduction of the MRU Open Invitational in 1979 saw the compulsory shift of three big teams, Singapore Civilians, Australian Forces North (AFN) and New Zealand Forces (NZF) from the MRU Cup to the new tournament. Singapore Civilians played under the Singapore national banner in the Open. The fourth team was Malaysia. Enfeebled by this decimation, the MRU Cup with four remaining teams, Selangor, Police, Malaysian Armed Forces and Federal Territory, was given the final push over the precipice by the Agong's Cup when it made its appearance in 1983, replacing the HMS Malaya Cup in the junior division.

The Agong's Cup is made of pewter and is intricately designed with three Royal Keris implanted in a pentagon base partly supporting a rugby ball on which the Royal Crest is engraved. It was donated by the Sultan of Pahang when His Majesty reigned as the Yang DiPertuan Agong. Given this fact, the MRU left no stone unturned to make it a really grand affair and the final was graced by the Yang DiPertuan Agong who also presented the Cup to the winners.

It was an event that attracted immense media publicity and to ensure that the occasion withstood public scrutiny, fastidious arrangements were made. These preparations sapped the energy and resources of the MRU and as a consequence, the MRU Cup, left to fend for itself, grew increasingly anorexic. Its four teams saw the writing on the wall and deserted the 'sinking ship' by not fielding their best players in the MRU Cup tournament as required by the rules. They disguised them as their second stringers to play in the more glittering Agong's Cup. Everyone saw through this fraudulent practice but the MRU chose to close an eye to it. The MRU Cup had become a farce.

Bowing to pressure from the affiliates, the MRU decided in 1984 that participation in the Agong's Cup would be without any restrictions. By this concession, the two-tiered competition automatically fell apart. It heralded the passing of the MRU Cup and to add salt to its open wound, someone seized the opportunity to spirit it away. The popularity tide catapulted the Agong's Cup from its junior status in the rugby hierarchy to become the new and unchallenged rugby icon within a season.

Swept away by the euphoria of the Agong's Cup success, few rugby officials remembered to pay their last respects to the MRU Cup and its coffin devoid of the corpse was given a pauper's burial. The MRU made no effort to search for the Cup. This was in sharp contrast to the elaborate planning undertaken for the HMS Malaya Cup many years ago, a foresight ensuring that the Cup was properly interred at Muzium Negara. However, in spite of the shabby

treatment it received, the MRU Cup had the last laugh. It avenged itself on one of the culprits responsible for its premature death, the MRU Open Invitational.

As its coffin was lowered into the ground, the swirling dust it created caused the MRU Open to suffer from severe respiratory problems. The Open started like an engine that coughed and spluttered and likely to die at any moment. If asphyxia did not kill it, then the earlier botched organ transplant surgery when it was implanted with three of the MRU Cup's vital organs, Singapore Civilians, AFN and NZF, without much thought given either to issue or organ compatibility, would have ensured its last rites eventually.

The Open was the MRU's grand design to make Malaysian rugby better known to the world by encouraging foreign teams to make up the numbers. However, during this planned recuperative period, it suffered from malnutrition so severely that any meaningful recovery was impossible. The critical intravenous transfusion of foreign nutrients the MRU had hoped for did not eventuate. Singapore and NZF based at Singapore could not be categorised as foreign entries because of their historical involvement with the MRU.

Except for Newcastle from Australia, which came in its first year, the Open was unable to lure any other foreign teams during its short life span. The poor response from foreign teams was not surprising as the Open lacked the international stature to justify the expenses overseas clubs would have had to incur to participate. Moreover, many foreign clubs that regularly travelled to this region were not keen to break the long-standing ties that they had already forged with the more established club tournaments for the Open. Even Singapore, a popular team with the local crowd, stayed away in the 1988 season. Under these circumstances, Lieutenant Colonel Abu Hassan, then MRU secretary, was not optimistic about the Open and was reported as saying:-

It is better to scrap the ailing Open and instead concentrate on efforts to bring about a rugby triangular amongst

Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. Probably, Sri Lanka could be invited in later years. Such a tournament would ensure that Malaya...have continued international exposure, even though confined within this region.

The MRU Open was consigned to history in 1989 and along with it Singapore's rugby connection with the MRU that began in 1921 was finally severed. Many years earlier, I had recommended as MRU secretary, that the annual international game between Malaysia and Singapore, which was initiated in 1966 after the Singapore Rugby Union broke away from the MRU, be discontinued. By the mid-1970s, the international had outlived its purpose as Singapore Civilians that was playing in the MRU Cup was already the Singapore national team. It would be a mockery for the Malaysian national team to play against a side that was occasionally beaten by Malaysian state teams in the MRU Cup. The annual international was terminated in 1977.

The requiem for the MRU Open also brought down the curtains on the last vestigial remains of expatriate teams in the national rugby tournament. These teams were represented by the Australian Forces North and the New Zealand Forces whose servicemen had played a significant role in Malaysian rugby since the early years. To mark this occasion, I contributed an article, *An Era Ends – The Story of the Australian Forces* to the souvenir programme of the 22nd Cobra Tens which began with the following:

As the last Mirage jet of the Australian Forces streaks across the Penang skies on 30th June 1988, it will not only signify the Australian military withdrawal from this country. The accompanying thunder from the departing jet also marks the end of the remaining vestiges of the Commonwealth Forces' influence in local rugby, which started in the colonial era. If the pilot also happens to be a rugby player, the event has more significance as he dips the wings in final salute to his kindred's contribution to Malaysian rugby...

After writing that article, I turned my attention to inquire from likely sources if they had any knowledge of the whereabouts of the missing Cups: the silver trophy, the All Blues Cup and the MRU Cup. The absence of these three Cups, especially the last two which have great historical significance, leaves a gaping hole in rugby's history and every effort has to be made to locate them. In order to cast the search net farther afield, I wrote, *Find the MRU Cup to Complete Rugby's Trilogy* that was published in a daily. Speaking on condition of anonymity, some people claimed to have seen the All Blues Cup and the MRU Cup displayed on the mantle piece in the home of a former rugby player. However, both these Cups have not been located, possibly because the culprit hurriedly removed and stored them in a secret place (where he may have also hidden the silver trophy) upon reading my article.

Indeed, if the thief is the same person who appropriated the silver trophy, he has to be a discerning collector as he did not feel that it (the silver trophy) was worthy of a place on the mantel piece alongside the two genuine trophies. These Cups are important relics of Malaysia's rugby heritage. Whoever has them must return them to the rugby authorities. Like the HMS Malaya Cup, they too deserve to be exhibited in Muzium Negara with their respective histories written for posterity.

Hopefully, by now the MRU has learned a lesson for not keeping a proper inventory of its tournament Cups. If it is not careful, the Agong's Cup, which is certainly one being coveted by unscrupulous rugby fanatics, could be another victim. It would be ironic if this Cup were to end up on the same mantle piece as the MRU Cup and the All Blues Cup, a possibility not to be lightly dismissed as the thief has proved to be a smooth operator, with two Cups allegedly already in his possession.



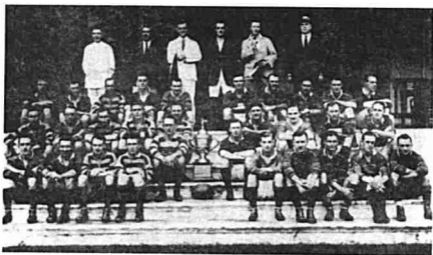
The HMS Malaya Cup, a gift from the officers and crew of the battleship, *HMS Malaya*, for inter-state rugby. It went missing during the Second World War. This picture was taken with a rugby ball placed in front of its plinth.



...the silver trophy purchased at a discount from Robinson's Singapore that replaced it for a brief period as the coveted prize in the HMS Malaya Cup tournament...



...Mr. Aruppalan found the HMS Malaya Cup in 1960, minus lid and plinth. A new plinth was donated by the officers and crew of the *HMS Terror* but a new lid was never made. The Cup was restored to its rightful place in the HMS Malaya Cup tournament in the 1961-1962 season. (All NSTP photos)



1st HMS Malaya Cup Final, 28th January, 1922. Selangor beat Singapore, 5-3. The Cup in its original state complete with plinth and an intricately designed lid. The pictures was taken at the Selangor Club.




The victorious Selangor team in the 41st HMS Malaya Cup final on January 1970 taken at the Selangor Club. Selangor beat Singapore Civilians, 12-6. Left to right, front row-Frank Gosling, Jimmy Yong, Ahmad Mahmud and Tim Sheehan; second row-Gee Boon Kee, Ritchie Wood, Ibrahim Busu, Tim Bagot, Ow Koon Chai, Aziz Ismail and Hashim Mohamed; third row Brian Pestana, G. Ellis, Hugh Forbes, Adrian de Silva, Ng Peng Kong and Bala Kandiah. (Bill Baillie not in picture). The Cup has a new plinth but without its lid.

RUGBY - A MALAYSIAN CHAPTER

Touch Judge: (Perak) P. K. Hazlett

Touch Judge: (Singapore) W. Vaughan Jones

SINGAPORE.					
(1) King (Capt.)					
(2) Ablitt	(3) Robertson	(4) Barnes	(5) Goldman		
(7) Kendall		(9) Mac Millan		(16) Scott (Stand off)	
(8) Sturgess		(10) Storr			
(11) Leonard		(12) Smith			
(14) Windle	(15) Anderson	(13) Grant			
Referee  Dr. H. W. Jack.					
(8) Walker	(9) Brown	(10) Smith			
(11) Debenham		(12) Taylor			
(13) Rendle		(14) Lewis		(15) Norman (Capt.)	
(6) Hill (Stand off)		(7) Ramage			
(5) Dodds	(4) Langworthy	(3) Carey	(2) Barr		
(1) Ponsford					
PERAK.					

The HMS Malaya Cup final between Perak and Singapore in January, 1929. An all-Caucasian cast including the touch judges. In those early years, the HMS Malaya Cup was their exclusive turf...

SELANGOR	PERAK
PULL BACK	PULL BACK
1. G. ELLIS	1. MAJEED BIN HAJI HASHIM
RIGHT WING	RIGHT WING
2. AHMAD MAHMUD	2. WAZIR BIN HAJI JHIN
CENTRES	CENTRES
3. H. FORBES	3. RAZALI NOORDIN
4. CHAN CHENG MUN	4. SYED HAZRI BIN SYED WAZIR
LEFT WING	LEFT WING
5. A. DE SILVA	5. YUSOF BIN AHMAD
STAND OFF HALF	STAND OFF HALF
6. PESTANA	6. ISMAIL BIN MOHAMMAD
SCRUM HALF	SCRUM HALF
7. AZIZ ISMAIL	7. AHMAD MUSBAH
LOCK FORWARD	LOCK FORWARD
8. B. KANDIAH	8. R. L. HOLDER
WING FORWARDS	WING FORWARDS
9. T. BAGOT	9. LEE HOON KHOON
10. NG FENG KONG	10. CHUNG CHOONG MUN
SECOND ROW	SECOND ROW
11. D. HUGHES	11. ZID KAMMARUDDIN
12. CHEONG KAI YONG	12. CHOO AN OYE
FRONT ROW	FRONT ROW
13. B. WOOD	13. ABDUL AZIZ BIN SHABIFF
14. MOHAMED HASHIM	14. CHENG MOK SENG
15. T. SHEEHAN	15. A. MCFARLANE
RESERVES	RESERVES
J. YONG	LIM AH SAU
MOHAMED TAIB	YAHAYA BIN YUSSOF
MOHAMED ZAKARIAH	
REFEREE: MR. FONG WAH FATT	KICK-OFF — 5.10 p.m.



Now taste a real beer

...by 1968 all the Malaysian state teams, except Selangor, were increasingly dominated by Asian players. The line up between Perak and Selangor in a 1968 HMS Malaya Cup fixture shows only two Caucasians representing Perak but Selangor continues to field a large number of them...

CHAPTER NINE

THE UNSAVOURY POLITICS PERVAIDING RUGBY

The Malaysian Rugby Union (MRU) was formed in 1927 mainly through the efforts of Dr. H. W. Jack, the Reverend R. D. Whitehorn and Dr. E. D. Lindow. J. C. M. Bell was the first president and Dr. H. W. Jack, a former Irish international, the secretary. Such a national body was deemed necessary to encourage rugby's systematic growth and spread in the country.

Despite its existence, the MRU did not immediately assume the responsibility for the management of the HMS Malaya Cup. From its inception in 1921, the HMS Malaya Cup was placed under the aegis of a joint state committee that consisted of participating states and representatives from the rugby-playing British military units and this duty was handed over to the MRU only in 1935. In the intervening years, the MRU devoted its energies to promoting the game only among the expatriate communities throughout the country.

The enervating tropical heat and humidity influenced the joint state committee and the MRU to fix the duration of rugby matches at 25 minutes each half but this soon gave way to 30 minutes. This was still a shorter period compared to international regulations. It was widely believed that the Europeans who perspired profusely and as some put it, "sweated like hell..." might suffer from dehydration if they played too long in the tropical heat. They were advised to quickly gulp down a large glass of salt and water immediately after every game.

Personally, I think this is a myth. I found the Europeans to be physically fit and well acclimatised and able to outpace most Asians despite the blistering conditions. None of the Europeans wilted under the heat when the MRU adopted the internationally recognised period of play.

At any rate, the MRU was haunted by the spectre of dehydration for many years as long as the teams were mainly 'whites'. A futile attempt was made in 1962 by S. H. Dowse of the Penang Rugby Union to extend the duration of play for each half from 30 minutes to 35 or 40 minutes. He argued that neighbouring countries, especially Thailand, were already making use of the longer period in their representative matches. This proposal was rejected on the grounds of medical advice. But despite this fear of dehydration, most friendly rugby matches started at 4.30pm sharp in the colonial era when the day was still hot, the grounds simmering in the heat. It was at the start of the 1965 season that 35 minutes were played for each half.

This dehydration myth has persisted to this day, becoming a vital consideration in the arrangements of fixtures where there are Caucasian teams. Most organisers of tournaments would pick the hottest part of the afternoon for their teams' encounter with the Caucasian opponents. As a player myself, I detested playing at that violently hot hour regardless of what effects the sun had on my Caucasian opponents. I was also brunt to the crisp!

As the MRU did not organise any rugby competitions for the locals in the colonial era, the task was left to the different state All Blues organisations that were staffed by Asians. They managed the All Blues Cup inter-state competition and confined it strictly to Asian players. This unfortunate dichotomy in rugby along racial lines was at the outset contrary to the professed objectives of the MRU, which was to be the main governing body of the game in all its aspects. But since this dichotomy was a convenient arrangement for expatriates and Asians alike, an issue I previously touched on, little was done to upset the applecart. The perpetuation of this dual system resulted in rugby records being maintained by two disparate bodies.

I have not seen any meeting records to do with the All Blues Cup even during my time as MRU secretary. I must, however, admit that I only made feeble attempts to obtain such records.

Several former MRU officials (especially those who served in the early 1960s) had kept many documents in mint condition, particularly Ung Khek Cheow who clearly went to great lengths to paste every minutes sheet into a thick book. His collection of MRU minutes starts with the meeting at the Selangor Club on 19th October 1946 at 11am. and ends with the 11th January, 1964 meeting at 9.10am. at the same venue.

It is a statutory requirement for all registered societies to submit certain documents to the Registrar of Societies every year. Failure to do so may result in the errant society being deregistered. There was a period when the deregistration affliction was endemic among state rugby unions. That period was a black chapter in Malaysian rugby history. It revealed the shocking deficiencies in rugby administration where even a simple legal requirement could not be complied with. This chronic disorder was mainly attributed to improper management of records and documents by a particular committee in the affected states which in turn was inherited by successive committees. Was this the result of officials adopting a lackadaisical and could not care attitude or was it due to their sheer ignorance of the statutory obligations? The MRU itself was not spared from the ignominy of deregistration during those dark days of the epidemic. The SRU was also stricken thus.

When I became the president of the Selangor Rugby Union in 1983, my first task was to seek re-registration of the Union. This involved the Union devoting much energy to reconstructing the necessary records from whatever information was available in the files and the interviews with a number of ex-office bearers. The Registrar of Societies was most helpful and understanding in this issue and allowed the SRU to function on a temporary permit.

Re-registration was achieved but at a price. The SRU had to append the year of the re-registration after its name, giving the mistaken impression that it was a newly established body. Thus, the SRU became the Selangor Rugby Union 1983. The inclusion of the year in its name was mandated to signal the approval of

re-registration. The MRU has also been renamed the MRU 1985. Legally, the re-registered unions have to display the re-registered names on all their letterheads, a stigma publicly declaring the previous managements' incompetence and inefficiency in managing the records. The question which begs to be asked is: if rugby officialdom does not take keen interest to be the repository of rugby records, then who should?

In those days when the HMS Malaya Cup was organised on the North and South format and matches were played simultaneously in various states according to the competition schedule, the MRU secretary had the responsibility to maintain another type of record. He had to keep the competition record. This was never an easy task. During my tenure as MRU secretary, I had to keep tab of every HMS Malaya Cup match by ringing up referees across the country for the reports. Referees were obliged to immediately communicate with me after a match to inform me of the score and of any disciplinary matter.

However, a few of the referees did not find the time to comply with these requirements. When I failed to contact some of these referees, I had to resort to the press in the hope that it had covered the matches. But the press was generally not of much help as on most occasions it merely reported on certain crucial matches, citing the lack of manpower to be able to cover all games. Often, it depended on me for certain results to be published in the next day's edition. The eternal triangle was: I harassed the referees and the press harassed me.

The keeping of results and scores was crucial to the preparation of the league tables, which had to be constantly updated as teams depended on their respective league positions to devise their strategies in upcoming games. The league table indicated not only the standing of the teams but also the points scored by and against each of them. Occasionally the knowledge of these points proved vital whenever the teams were tied in their standings because the team with the better goal average would progress further in the competition at the expense of its rivals.

In its early years, the MRU only admitted exclusively expatriate clubs and Service rugby units as fully-fledged members. Among the earliest members were the Penang Sports Club, Selangor Club, Singapore Cricket Club and the Army Rugby Football Club. Asian clubs were also admitted but as affiliated clubs without voting rights. These Asian clubs had to become affiliated to the MRU if they wished to arrange game fixtures with the MRU member clubs. Before the War, there were more than twice as many Asian affiliates as there were fully-fledged members. Several schools including Penang Free School, High School Bukit Mertajam and Anderson School, Ipoh were also admitted as affiliates.

Subsequently, the MRU underwent structural changes resulting in the dropping of club memberships and affiliations. MRU membership became open only to the state rugby unions and the Service unions, (the Joint Services, Commonwealth Forces North, Army (Malaya), the Armed Forces and the Police), a logical development as such unions were responsible for the control and supervision of rugby activities in their respective areas.

The office bearers of the MRU comprising a president, a vice-president for each state union/Service union, a secretary, a treasurer and an assistant secretary were elected annually. In the case of the vice-presidents, their election as explained in Chapter One, was merely a procedural formality. The constitution guaranteed that the presidents of the state and the Service unions were to be automatically elected as vice-presidents. A nominee from the Malaysian Society of Rugby Union Referees was also a member. In addition, past MRU presidents were automatically co-opted as MRU ex-officio members.

It was still a bloated organisation with a large management council. To further streamline the MRU, there was another major overhaul in 1975. Firstly, it saw the abolition of the posts of past presidents and the posts of vice-presidents as representatives of the affiliates. In their places, two elective posts of vice-presidents were created.

Secondly, it introduced three new elective council posts with specific responsibilities. The new portfolios were: director of coaching, director of development and director of international tours and games. Those elected to these posts had to keep close tabs on the international, regional and local developments in their respective areas and to prepare the necessary reports and plans either on their own initiative or as directed by council. After these reports and plans had been deliberated and approved by council, it was the responsibility of the directors concerned to ensure their smooth and successful implementation. The creation of these new posts helped to greatly reduce the work load of the honorary secretary and his assistant as prior to this, both of them had to undertake most of such assignments in addition to their normal secretarial duties. With the competent support of these directors in their respective areas, the MRU would be able to approach planning and development issues in a more coordinated and effective manner.

Thirdly, it allotted a post each to the representatives from the Malaysian Schools Sports Council and the Ministry of Sports. The purpose was to create a symbiotic relationship between the MRU on one hand and the government agencies on the other, thereby ensuring that their respective rugby planning and development would dovetail and move in tandem.

Fourthly, a new post of assistant treasurer was created. The posts of president, secretary, treasurer and an assistant secretary were retained.

And lastly, an interim Referees Board was established and along with it the post of co-ordinator. When this suggestion was raised at a council meeting, it was heatedly debated. Some were strongly against the proposal, alleging that it was a covert attempt by the MRU to subvert the neutrality and independence of the referees, making them a subservient lot. This group maintained that the theory of the separation of powers between the MRU and the Malaysian Society of Rugby Union Referees (MSRUR) must prevail. Around that time, there were already allegations of state unions

interfering in the affairs of local referees. They were demanding that their choice of referees be appointed to officiate at their HMS Malaya Cup matches. Others accused certain council members who were closely associated with the MSRUR of using this proposal as a personal vendetta to settle their feuds with the referees society. Rumours had been rife for quite a while about the bickering and the infighting in the society.

Despite the legitimacy of some of these arguments, pragmatism won the day over everything else. The MSRUR was already a deregistered body and its backlog of work was left unattended, particularly the grading of referees and the conduct of crucial courses. This unfortunate situation, further aggravated by the internal squabbles, was having adverse implications to rugby generally. The deterioration had to be stopped.

The MSRUR was established in 1954 through the initiatives of K. H. Centroll and O. H. R Beedles to oversee the referees and to conduct courses periodically to ensure that they achieved a high standard of competency. As a result of deregistration of the MSRUR, the task of grading referees had to be taken up by the MRU through its Referees Board. This Board was intended to be only a temporary body until the MSRUR had worked out its re-registration. But over the years the MRU and the MSRUR seem to have forgotten about this interim arrangement. Today the Referees Board is still an integral part of the MRU.

Before the MSRUR was deregistered, I remember its successive presidents firmly warning the MRU that the referees were an independent entity and that they would take no directive from any quarters. What has happened to its once fierce independence now that it has become part of the MRU? What purpose would it serve for the MSRUR to be vocal on its independence when it had taken no steps to put its own house in order and to demand the extirpation of the MRU Referees Board? The fact that it acknowledges the importance of the existence of the Referees Board, despite it being a part of the MRU, does not speak well of the society.

During my second year as MRU secretary, great emphasis was placed on long term planning and other policy issues, a perceptible shift from the normal focus on operational and quotidian matters. Dr. Chan Onn Leng, a council member drew up a five year development plan (1974 -1978), the first of its kind in MRU history. I contributed two policy papers: *Temporary Isolation - A Strategy for Ultimate Victory* and *The Creation of a Northern MRU Squad*. All three papers were tabled at a MRU seminar, the disputable one being the proposed isolation policy. In fact, fourteen years later, a rugby columnist writing under the byline *Scrum Down* touched upon the isolation policy in his article, *Exposed but MRU Sticking with its Policy*, (*New Straits Times*):

Both sides have their points. Former Malaysian Rugby Union (MRU) secretary, Ng Peng Kong, advocates isolation until the country has reached a reasonably good standard in the region while other rugby officials cringe at that in disagreement.

Peng Kong, a former international who played in the 1974 Asian championship in Sri Lanka suggested this idea some years back when Malaysia continued to be steamrolled by the stronger teams. To this day, he remains unwavering in his belief that the MRU should indeed try to first build up our rugby strength at home.

When Malaysia were thrashed by Taiwan, Sri Lanka and Japan at the 10th ARFU championship in Bangkok two years ago to finish, not for the last time, last in the group, Peng Kong wrote an interesting article in the *New Sunday Times*. His suggestions were almost entirely on the methods of coaching which he argued needed to be changed.

Since then, he has also been critical of the domestic tournament format. (*By this time, the MRU had already replaced the format of grouping teams in either the North or the South Zone, by a carnival system of competition over a week-end where teams were hosted by a particular State.*)

The MRU do not agree and reply that isolation would be more harmful leading to a decline in standards. Often rugby officials try to justify our participation in the Asian championship and the Hong Kong Sevens by saying that our players need the exposure and the experience.

Except for the country's fourth placing in 1974 in Sri Lanka and in the 1982 meet in Singapore, Malaysia has finished mostly last in their group. In between the biennial championships there is nothing to convince rugby followers that our standard has improved.

Since it is most unlikely that the MRU will agree with Peng Kong, the onus is on the MRU to prove the critics wrong. And the only way to do this is to think of ways to improve the game.

Before they can hope to achieve this, something must be done at the administrative level. One, there has to be better communication with the MRU affiliates in relating to tournament calendar.

Over the years, the MRU have blamed certain affiliates for not informing the parent body of their calendars early enough while the affiliates in turn claim that they had not been informed of this requirement.

Selection and coaching are the two other crucial areas. You have proper selection and subsequently good coaching and the standard will automatically improve.

The two foreign teams - Australian Forces North and New Zealand Forces - have played their last matches as regulars in the MRU Invitational tournament and the MRU will have to look for alternative sparring partners.

The national squad is currently training for the 11th Asian championship in Hong Kong next month. Half of the money to send a 25-member squad has been raised and the MRU are determined to raise more from a dinner early next month.

But recent results of two matches were far from encouraging. First the national squad lost to New Zealand Forces 34-12 and the following day losing 56-3 to the visiting Newcastle Rugby team in the MRU Invitational.

Some players who would have been in the first XV could not play then but the guys who did were still representing the country. Maybe the team will want to prove the critics wrong once they take to the field in Hong Kong.

In a nutshell, my paper does not deny the need for Malaysian rugby to be given international exposure but states that such exposure has to be undertaken in a gradual and systematic manner. International rugby involves many stages, beginning from the humble Southeast Asian standards to the World Cup level. Where then do we start? It is certainly not at the World Cup level, a place where even many rugby heavyweights fear to venture into. The Asian level is also, as yet, not within our reach. This observation is based on the disastrous beatings our team has been receiving in the Asian rugby championship over many years. Therefore, not even for a fleeting moment can we hope to emulate David's spectacular feat against Goliath in the field of Asian rugby, at least not in the foreseeable future.

Hard as it may seem, the fact remains that we are not even a respected team in our peer group: Thailand, Singapore and Sri Lanka. But what is more distressing is the reality that the standard in this group is way below that of Hong Kong and Taiwan, two countries that are not in the same league as Japan and Korea.

I have written numerous articles on the sorry plight of the Asian rugby minnows in the Asian Rugby Football championship held every two years. The tournament has been monopolised by Japan and Korea. One of the articles entitled, *Rites of Passage to the Slaughter*, is reproduced here to give some insights into my thoughts on the matter:

Once every two years, the tribes of fine-bodied young men from different parts of Asia, resplendent in their

national colours, make the crusade to a designated place to do battle.

This crusade which had been religiously adhered to for the past twenty-two years, beginning in Japan in 1966, has been decreed by the Asian Rugby Football Union as the rites of passage for young men aspiring to join the exclusive rugby fraternity of Asia. And those who are already in it have to reaffirm their standing as men of rugby.

Most times these battle grounds are huddled in the metropolises of modern Asia where the hustle and bustle of city life drown out the war cries of the combatants. But on rare occasions where the battles are fought in the backwoods of under-developed Asia, the protagonists' blood curdling cries shatter the serenity of the surroundings and the ferocity of their hand to hand combat causes the earth to shudder like the thundering hooves from Attila the Hun and his horde of fierce horsemen when they swept out from the desolate steppes of Asia.

But the outcome of these battles seems to have been pre-ordained and emphatically written in the myriad stars. The soothsayers, the shamans and the gurus could confidently chant beside their bubbling cauldrons at the obscure corner of the battlefields the revered names of the ultimate victors, "Japan...Korea...Japan ...Korea"

Ironically, Japan and Korea who have established a rugby hegemony over the rest of Asia have no rugby tradition to boast of compared to the former British territories of Sri Lanka, Singapore and Malaysia where rugby, a typically British game, was greatly promoted.

The game was extensively played in those countries in the colonial times with organised competitions at almost all levels, ranging from schools, districts to the states.

The British who were then in charge of the game introduced their brand of armour and other fighting paraphernalia, which suited them and the handful of locals who played alongside them, were carried along by the surging momentum of their physical strength and power.

Sad to say, the protégés of these former expatriates continued to stubbornly sport those ill-fitted and cumbersome chain mail, forgetting the fact that they were custom-made for the bigger and heavier built Caucasians who had long since departed.

Consequently, they suffer the humiliation of being invariably bogged down in the quagmire of the battle grounds, becoming sitting ducks to be chopped and slashed wantonly by the nippy Ninjas and smothered by the hunky and solidly built Koreans.

The razor sharp and glinting cold steel of the swords of Bushido and expertly wielded by the fleet-footed Ninjas have always proven to be a formidable and lethal combination, breaking with impunity the swords of many other Asians despite the fact that theirs had been forged and hammered out on the anvils of the traditional rugby heartlands of England, Wales and Scotland.

This predicament is inevitable as those swords proved too heavy for them to wield. However, at the previous three epic struggles at Seoul, Bangkok and Sri Lanka, the myth of the invincibility of the Bushido sword was badly blunted by the Kal, the Korean blade that brutally decimated the ranks of the Ninjas.

From their bitter experience of having had to play second fiddle to Japan for many years, the Koreans had finally prevailed, no doubt after enlisting better craftsmen to devise a stronger armoury.

Unless the other Asian tribes are prepared to be more innovative and flexible in adapting their weaponry, the

rugby battles in Asia would continue to be dominated by the Japanese and the Koreans in a scenario where the light plated armour overrides the ridiculously archaic armoury of the Arthurian age.

Otherwise, these other crusaders would continue to pay homage to the rugby warlords living in the vicinity of the Sea of Japan.

Malaysia has been exposed to international rugby for more than four decades, not taking into account the years of exposure the team had during the colonial era. In spite of such accumulated wealth of experience and exposure, we are still floundering in the abyss of mediocrity insofar as standards are concerned. Maybe this failure is due to our inability to translate the wealth of knowledge we have into practice. And yet, illogically, we constantly hear the clarion call by successive MRU regimes for more exposure at levels beyond our team's capability as though it would be a quick panacea for our poor standards.

Would it not be more prudent for the MRU to beat a temporary retreat from its indiscriminate international escapades and wade through its vast pool of international experience and exposure to dredge up a practical plan to consolidate rugby in the country? Only then, after we have undergone a complete metamorphosis and become rejuvenated, should we begin the arduous and patient climb to establish ourselves as the perennial champion in our own region in Southeast Asia. After achieving regional success, we can embark on the next phase and ultimately aim to take on Japan and Korea. Does not this strategy make sense?

It was gratifying to know that *Peminat Sukan*, a sports columnist, argued that my thoughts on rugby's temporary isolation policy were also equally applicable to many other sports. His piece, *There's Some Sense in Ng's Plan (New Straits Times)*, is reproduced below:-

What's been missing for so long now in the conservative ridden sports associations is a touch of innovation and

radicalism. Therefore, it was with pleasure that I read of Malaysian Rugby Union director of development Ng Peng Kong's plan of isolationism.

Indeed Mr. Ng's suggestions are not new - not from his point of view, of course, because for him, it is a worn and treaded path. He actually mooted this idea to the MRU six years ago when he was secretary but after it was shot down on all fronts, he resigned.

Now he's back and as he says, the MRU can take it or leave it because he has made it very clear that he will present his plan in April come what may.

Indeed his policy of isolation need not be just applied to ruggar although in ruggar's context, it makes a lot of sense.

Sports in this country is littered with mind-blowing examples of officials pulling the wool over the eyes of the public. Boxing, for instance, where they insist that they must go overseas for exposure or volleyball and tennis.

With a trip under their belts, the officials don't realise in sports like these, we are far behind other countries and their poor sportsmen and women are like lambs led to the slaughter. From what I hear, the sportsmen know better and the records abound of knockouts in the first round or losses by three sets to love.

Officialdom just put it down to international experience and knowledge gathering rather than turn their eyes inwards.

Mr. Ng put his finger right on the spot when he said; "A record of severe beatings and steady losses will do no good to improve a game's image in the minds of the public and sponsors. Without confidence from these areas, no sport will succeed.

But not only 'little' sports can benefit from this piece of advice. A couple of weeks ago I said the FAM was not acting in the game's best interests if they went and competed in the pre-World Cup tournament.

It is time that FAM get their priorities right. The money spent on making a grandiose effort like this will be better spent if it is channelled to development, an aspect they don't seem to be concentrating on too much after all these years.

It doesn't have to be a five-year plan of isolation. It could be less. But once the house is in order, the team well prepared and groomed, then and only then is it fitting to unleash them. Or even think of the World Cup.

Malaysia is an affiliate of the regional and World rugby governing bodies and membership gives it the right to participate in the tournaments arranged by these bodies. Nevertheless, in exercising this prerogative, the MRU should also take into cognisance the fact that such tournaments do not differentiate between the voracious packs of sharks and the shoals of sprats. Both these species engage in an uneven battle, quickly churning the placid waters of the lagoon to crimson red, a result of the unbridled and vicious slaughter. Even before the initial whistle, the panic-stricken and doomed fry are already trapped in the nets in their desperate attempt to escape. Yet despite the gory death scenes, they continue to be herded to the infamous lagoon come every battle season like lambs to the slaughter.

Instead of being obsessed with the right of participation, the MRU could better utilise its prized membership to work in unison with other like-minded rugby unions in the vicinity to persuade and cajole these governing bodies to assist in uplifting the standard of the game in the respective countries and in the region. Preferably, a system of graded competition could be arranged by these governing bodies where teams are able to move up to the next grade based on certain criteria. Among others, the weight classification method

which I have expounded in Chapter 11 could be given consideration. The days of the laid back affiliate that occasionally stirs from its slumber to shout aloud its right of participation parrot-fashion and to put out the alms bowl for aid from the governing bodies are certainly over.

It is heartening to know that the Asian Rugby Football Union (AFRU) has taken a praiseworthy step to separate the wheat from the chaff by introducing a two-tiered system in the Asian championship recently. I applaud AFRU for this wise decision although it was long in coming. Hopefully, this small step will pioneer the way to more innovative changes in Asian rugby.

At this point, I would like to digress to clarify two supplementary but pertinent enquiries that are regularly put to me as the promulgator of the temporary isolation policy. The first is whether the policy is applicable to the local club sides that have an ambitious international agenda. The answer is an affirmative 'yes'. But luckily, unlike the national team with its affiliated rights to participate which it has used recklessly to launch into many difficult campaigns, the clubs are solely dependent on the goodwill of the organisers who are always averse to inviting the lowly-rated teams, be they Asians or Europeans. The presence of such teams will only sully the image of their competitions. A rational approach that helps to curb or lessen the incidences of 'rugby suicides' among the minnows, unless of course, extraneous matters come into play and invitations have to be handed out on either diplomatic or political grounds. In this instance, such invitations must be turned down.

But the next question is more problematic to tackle. It deals with a scenario where the local clubs have to invite strong foreign teams for the good of their tournaments. On the one hand, the presence of top foreign teams is the stimulant the tournament needs to build-up a global reputation but on the other with their participation, the local sides will most likely be ripped apart. Personally, in this Catch 22 situation, I would, though reluctantly, not discourage such invitations because losing in the club-organised

tournaments does not involve the pride of the national team, even if national players are represented in the local sides.

A classic example is the Cobra Tens. Funded at enormous cost, the Tens, among other objectives, is also to be Cobra's contributions to meet Asians' aspirations for rugby glory on a global stage although based on Cobra's mistaken conviction that this abbreviated version could provide a more level playing field between Asians and Europeans. But the very opposite occurred. As the Tens event attains more success, the Asian hopes are in a downward spiral - the Asian rugby dilemma comes to yet another full circle. However, the spin-off is Malaysia's reputation as the home of a World-class Rugby Tens.

Going back to the discussion at hand, many MRU council members saw very little merit in the temporary isolation policy and continued to embark on costly foreign adventures, thereby not only draining the depleted coffers but also making the national team the laughing stock of the Asian rugby circuit. The reluctance of the majority to implement my proposal prompted me not to seek re-election for a fourth term as MRU secretary in mid-1976. It was a painful decision but I felt that I could not compromise my stand on the issue. I paid a heavy price for it. In espousing this policy of isolation, I ironically found myself isolated, banished to the rugby wilderness for many years. During this period, I continued to harp on the issue, criticising the MRU at every turn through my writing.

I would like to think that my perseverance eventually bore some fruit as some time in 1980 I was pleasantly surprised to receive a verbal invitation from Dr. Chan Onn Leng to take over from him as the MRU secretary. He wanted to step down and in his usual persuasive manner convinced me that I should take over from him. At that time Dr. Ling Liong Sik, deputy Minister of Information was the MRU president. On the other hand, the tempting invitation might have also been a ploy to silence me by making me join the Establishment.

The press got wind of this and on the eve of the proposed changeover carried a report, headlined *Peng Kong - MRU's Choice for Secretary* (*The Malay Mail*). I was to learn later that this report had ruffled the incumbent's feathers to such an extent that he decided not to resign. This, however, was not conveyed to me. In anticipation of the job, I turned up punctually at the Selangor Club on that particular evening for the special meeting with some MRU officials expecting the formalisation of the changeover. Unfortunately, Onn Leng did not attend; if he had I would have perhaps obtained a clearer picture from him as to his sudden change of mind.

We met at the bar and had a couple of drinks but nobody seemed ready to talk about my impending induction into the MRU. I observed that they were jittery and nervous, behaving as though something was amiss. After more drinks to conjure up courage, a MRU vice-president broke the news and told me that I had been appointed director of development, not secretary. There was deafening applause. I thought I misheard his announcement and that perhaps the drinks had got to my head.

Before I could recover from the shock, the backslapping began in earnest, with each official taking it in turn to congratulate me with a drink. They had conspired to ensure that I had no opportunity to refuse the position. At that time the post of director of development was vacant and they considered it a convenient move to just slot me into the gap. I felt I had no option other than to accept the appointment. Otherwise, it would have been seen as petulance on my part. Furthermore, I did not want to provide the MRU with the opportunity to accuse me of not having rugby's interest at heart. I was certain that they would have done so had I insisted upon being appointed MRU secretary.

I felt it improper to just walk away, causing embarrassment to the rugby officials who were also my friends but I managed in the course of the drink-filled evening to extract a solemn promise from them that the isolation policy would be implemented within two

years. This pledge was never kept, the excuse being that no intoxicated person could be held to his word as confirmed by a lawyer in the group. The press report reads:-

Former Malaysian Rugby Union secretary, Ng Peng Kong is likely to get his old job again when the MRU Council meets this evening. Mr. Ng, 37 who was last secretary in 1976, is the man most likely to take over from Dr. Chan Onn Leng who steps down today.

Today's Council meeting was convened when Dr. Chan said last week that he was stepping down because of pressure of work and insufficient time.

"I am prepared to come back and serve if I am wanted," said Mr. Ng this morning. MRU inner circles reckon that Mr. Ng is the best man for the job despite his strong views and him wanting to change the present system of competitions.

Mr. Ng's return certainly augurs well for the game especially when the country is doing poorly on the international scene. A former first class player, Mr. Ng who works with the Education Ministry will bring to office the knowledge and wealth of experience both as a player and administrator.

He capped a brilliant 18-year playing career as wing forward by captaining Malaysia to the 1975 SEA Games in Bangkok before quitting both as player and MRU secretary.

Mr. Ng was active in rugby for St. Michael's Institution, Ipoh and went on to win colours at the University of Malaya. He formed an effective combination with former skipper and flanker Gee Boon Kee in the Blues team. Their combination grew in stature while playing for the University, Cobra, the Selangor and the National teams.

In 1974 Mr. Ng was named 'Rugby Player of the Year' for the Malaysian sportsman of the Year award. He also

played for The Hague Rugby Club, the Dutch Division One side when he was reading social policy at the Institute of Social Studies on a Dutch scholarship.

Besides being the MRU Secretary for three years from 1973, Mr. Ng also doubled up as secretary of Cobra (in 1969 and 1971) and was the organising chairman for the Cobra Tens for six seasons.

During his term as MRU secretary, Mr. Ng tread on many toes when he brought about several changes the more important being the introduction of the two division (HMS Malaya Cup and the MRU Cup) national league and the plan to have more coaches. Three coaches have since done courses in Britain.

Perhaps the only thing not 'rugby' about Mr. Ng is that he is a very light beer drinker but we can expect better for the game with him in charge.

Some months after the drinking episode, Onn Leng in one of his talkative moods, laughingly declared to everyone that he used the secretarialship bait as a red herring to tempt me. I smiled, not really believing him this time. I was convinced that his pride was hurt by the news report which indirectly had cast aspersions on his performance. He was then in this third year as secretary. I neither held this against him nor the MRU but had to resign from the appointment after making several press announcements, which contradicted the policies of the MRU and grievously injuring its sacred international cow. At a 1981 press interview, I put forward arguments against the MRU's international approach, pointing out its many disastrous foreign forays.

Such experiences had damaged the image of the game, particularly amongst young boys of impressionable age who would surely not want to be associated with a game, which had become the whipping boy of national sports. Surely, it is natural that boys want to be able to boast to their peers and girl friends that they are actively involved in a winning sport. Without young boys

taking up rugby, the game would not thrive. The press interview as reported in *Ng's Plan to Clean Up Messy Image (New Straits Times)* quoted me as saying:-

What I am suggesting is going against the current grain of thought in the MRU which stresses more (international) competitions..... I say no. I would rather have an isolationist policy, at least for the next three years. Within that time, we must consolidate ourselves and by 1983 be ready to become the top team in South and South East Asia. The list of failures runs deep and certainly the public have no confidence in the sport, neither have potential sponsors all because we have fared badly in most tournaments.

After criticising the MRU in the interview, I felt it was time to make my exit, as my continued presence was sure to be a thorn in its side. I had also made contingency plans to ensure that I would not be banished to rugby's wilderness for a second time. In early 1983, I had accepted the presidency of the Selangor Rugby Union, a platform that I used to vigorously campaign for the isolation policy. In order to keep myself close to rugby developments at club and grassroots levels, I also accepted the vice-presidency of Cobra in that same year. In this dual capacity, I was able to keep in touch with the pulse of rugby at all levels that was crucial to policy formulation. My resignation from the MRU afforded me much latitude to intensify my criticism of the prevailing MRU policies, something I could not do publicly too often whilst in its fold. One of my most critical articles entitled, *A Bitter Pill To Swallow Indeed*, was published in a daily:-

Talk to almost any Malaysian Rugby Union official and the conversation would invariably lead to the moot issue of the two capital 'Es' - Exposure and Experience.

He would vehemently argue that the Malaysian XV has an urgent need for these to further hone its skills. That seems to be the vogue. In fact, the MRU Director of International Games recently appealed to the National

Sports Council for funds to organise international tournaments.

Obviously, he had in mind the necessity of further acquiring the two 'Es' in order to upgrade the standard of the Malaysian team. Being a former MRU secretary, he could not deny that the Malaysian XV has had quite an impressive record of international adventures - 17 years of it and mostly acquired in foreign countries!

Of course, a big dose of the two 'Es' would not be harmful, be it attained locally or abroad if it is gainfully harnessed and implemented. Otherwise, it could turn out to be a blind addiction to merely acquiring it whilst losing sight of the real purpose, which it seems to be happening now.

Some days after his much-publicised plea in a daily, a golden opportunity presented itself for the Malaysian XV to play against a top-notch English team, Bath RFC. The tourists, who paraded several players of international repute, are the current English champions. And what happened?

Someone in the MRU seemed to have accidentally pulled out a magic wand and uttered the wrong words. Oops! The MRU instantly disappeared from sight during the tourists' stay in the country. Instead a scratch team was hurriedly assembled at the eleventh hour, bringing together a cosmopolitan XV of a Fijian, two Kiwis, an American, a Frenchman and ten Malaysians who are comparatively unknown in the local scene.

Appropriately, this rag tag side played as the Barbarian Tigers who had to limp off the field as the Battered Tigers. Bath RFC really gave them a thorough thrashing - 80 nil to be exact! It was sheer carnage on that hot evening at the Jalan Utara ground. The tourists were like a hot knife slicing through melting butter to run up that astronomical score.

According to a red-faced MRU official who stood in an obscure corner of the ground, the national players were involved in the Malaysian Government Services championship and could not be released by their teams. However, he reluctantly admitted that the Bath fixture was arranged several months ago and as such there was no reasonable excuse for not fielding the best national material.

A strong Malaysian XV would not have caused an upset against the rampaging power play of the hefty tourists. But they would have been exposed to top class rugby and be richer for the experience and consequently fulfil to some extent at least the much sought after aspirations of the MRU.

And all these for free too! To have allowed the opportunity to slip away makes the MRU prescription of more exposure and experience for Malaysian rugby a bitter pill to swallow.

The press gave me invaluable support, often publishing my views. Intending to draw the MRU into public debate, my writings in the press and rugby magazines criticizing its policies became more strident. It refused to take the bait and never responded publicly. Whether it was a deliberate tactic on the part of the MRU or the inability to articulate its position would always remain a conjecture. Whatever the reason, I felt it pointless to pursue the matter lest I be accused of being a rebel president of an affiliated union out to create disunity in rugby officialdom. In reading my oft-published critiques, the public, being unaware of the actual situation, could conclude that I was making use of the Selangor Rugby Union presidency to seek cheap publicity at the expense of the sport. This view would certainly have forced some members of the public to sympathise with the MRU, an unintended backlash. Consequently, I did not seek re-election at the end of my third term as SRU president in 1986.

When the *Berita Harian* of 24th March 1986 broke the news that I was stepping down with the headlines, *Zaman Khan Terjekut*

(*Zaman Khan Shocked*), the MRU became defensive, announcing that it would come out with a statement on the matter. Dato' Zaman Khan was then the MRU president. It was at the 1984 MRU general assembly when Tan Sri Mansor Noor was elected president that I proposed Dato' Zaman Khan as one of the two vice-presidents. The other vice-president was Megat Najmuddin. I remember Dato' Zaman attending the meeting, sitting at the far corner of the President's Room at the Selangor Club. He had recently been posted to Selangor from Penang where he was the chief police officer.

Moreover, Benny Yeoh, the MRU secretary, intimated to the press that the MRU council would be discussing my resignation. It was strange that my decision to step down should have attracted so much attention and commotion in the MRU. I would have thought that the MRU officials would be greatly relieved by my decision to stay away from rugby politics, giving them full sway to dictate the destiny of national rugby. A nemesis removed! The *Berita Harian's* report on my decision to give up the SRU presidency reads as follows:-

Beberapa pegawai Kesatuan Ragbi Malaysia (MRU) menyatakan rasa terkejut dengan keputusan pemimpin kontroversi Kesatuan Ragbi Selangor (SRU) Ng Peng Kong menarik diri daripada kesatuan itu.

Peng Kong menyatakan mengambil tindakan itu kerana tidak puas hati dengan dasar dasar yang dijalankan oleh pucuk pimpinan MRU di-samping keengganan kesatuan itu membuka peluang kepada pemain pemain muda.

Presiden MRU, Dato' Zaman Khan ketika dihubungi berkata beliau tidak mengetahui mengenai keputusan mendadak Peng Kong menarik diri, bagaimanapun beliau enggan mengulas lebih lanjut.

Sementara itu, setiausaha MRU Benny Yeoh pula berkata beliau telah mengetahui perkara itu sejak sebulan yang lalu. Bagaimanapun, katanya, "MRU akan mengeluarkan

satu kenyataan bertulis sebaik saja mengetahui secara rasmi penarikan diri Peng Kong dari sebagai presiden SRU.”

Mengenai rasa tidak puas hati Peng Kong dengan dasar dasar MRU, Benny juga enggan mengulas dengan lebih lanjut, sebaliknya menyerahkan perkara itu kepada mesyuarat jawatankuasa MRU untuk membincangkan perkara itu.

Peng Kong yang telah memimpin SRU selama tiga tahun telah banyak menyumbangkan jasa and tenaga memajukan permainan ragbi di negara ini. Dia juga pernah menjadi setiausaha MRU. Beliau yang dianggap menjadi kumpulan pendesak kepada MRU telah beberapa kali menyuarakan rasa tidak puas hatinya dengan cara dan dasar yang dijalankan oleh MRU namum tidak mendapat perhatian.

Sementara itu, setiausaha Kesatuan Ragbi Wilayah Persekutuan, Abu Hassan Johari menyifatkan penarikan diri presiden Kesatuan Ragbi Selangor sebagai satu kehilangan besar kepada negara. Abu Hassan menjelaskan Peng Kong bekas pemain dan pemimpin kesatuan itu telah banyak menyumbangkan jasa and tenaga kepada perkembangan ragbi di Malaysia.

“Sukan ragbi akan kehilangan seorang pemimpin yang dedikasi dalam meningkatkan dan memperkembangkan permainan itu di Malaysia,” jelasnya lagi. “Peng Kong menyatakan hasratnya untuk menarik diri kepada saya ketika perlawanan akhir Piala Guinness lalu kerana ingin memberikan peluang kepada pemimpin pemimpin muda pula,” katanya. Jasa dan sumbangannya dapat dikenang kerana melalui usahanya memperkenalkan dan menggalakkan permainan ragbi disekolah sekolah semasa menjadi setiausaha MRU dulu.

Sepanjang menjadi presiden SRU, beliau juga memperkenalkan satu format baru dalam pertandingan ragbi dengan menghadkan penyertaan pemain pemain

veteran dan hanya membenarkan pemain muda menyertainya dengan tujuan memperkembangkan ragbi di kalangan golongan muda.

Katanya lagi, Peng Kong sejak berada dalam MRU lagi telah menyuarakan rasa tidak puas hatinya terhadap dasar dan cara cara yang dijalankan oleh kesatuan itu dalam memperkembangkan permainan ragbi. Beliau adalah seorang yang agak keras pendirian, tetapi dikenali sebagai pemimpin yang bercita cita tinggi untuk melihat perkembangan ragbi di Malaysia.

Dari segi perkembangan ragbi di Malaysia, katanya dia tidak nampak banyak perkembangan yang dijalankan oleh MRU dan cara lebih berkesan harus dijalankan bagi memperkembangkan permainan ragbi di Malaysia.

Jurulatih Wilayah Persekutuan, Shahid Majid berkata, "beliau adalah seorang pemimpin yang banyak berjasa kepada perkembangan ragbi, ketiadaannya mungkin boleh menjejaskan kemajuan ragbi di negara ini." Shahid memberitahu beliau juga adalah seorang pemimpin ragbi yang mengetahui banyak tentang sukan itu.

"Dasar *isolation* yang diperjuangkan oleh Peng Kong tidaklah seratus peratus benar kerana kita perlukan juga pengalaman antarabangsa sebagai pengalaman dan pendedahan," ujar Shahid. "Mungkin bagi Peng Kong perancangan yang teliti akan dapat menghasilkan kejayaan yang tinggi mutunya dan tidak perlulah tergesa gesa mengadakan perlawanan antarabangsa."

Translation of the Berita Harian's report:-

Several MRU officials expressed shock over Ng Peng Kong's decision to step down as president of the Selangor Rugby Union (SRU). He is regarded as a controversial president. It is learnt that Peng Kong took this decision because he was not happy with the MRU over its present

policies which among others did not cater for younger players to gain experience.

MRU president, Dato' Zaman Khan said he was not aware of Peng Kong's sudden move to step down. However, he did not wish to elaborate any further. Meanwhile, MRU secretary, Benny Yeoh said he knew of this matter a month ago. "MRU will issue a statement when it is officially confirmed that Peng Kong will relinquish the SRU presidency," he said. He, however, refused to make any comment on Peng Kong's dissatisfaction with the MRU and its policies, adding that such matters would better be discussed in the MRU council.

Peng Kong who led SRU for the last three years has contributed immensely to promoting rugby in the country. He is a former MRU secretary. He is regarded as a 'rugby activist', pressuring the MRU to revise its various policies that he deemed as unsatisfactory but to no avail.

The secretary of the Federal Territory Rugby Union, Abu Hassan Johari said that the stepping down of the incumbent SRU president from his post would be a great loss to the nation. Abu Hassan explained that Peng Kong, a former player, has done a lot for the promotion of rugby in Malaysia. "Rugby will lose a dedicated leader," he said. "Peng Kong intimated to me his intention to step down at the Guinness Cup final recently in order to pave the way for younger leaders," he added.

His dedication and contribution will be remembered through his efforts at promoting rugby in schools when he was the MRU secretary. As SRU president, he also introduced a system that restricted the number of veteran players in a team, thereby giving more opportunities for young players to play.

He added that Peng Kong was already unhappy with the MRU over various issues when he was serving in the

MRU council. Peng Kong would not compromise his beliefs but is known as a leader who has high aspirations for Malaysian rugby. In his opinion, he did not see much development carried out by MRU and that more effective measures should be undertaken to further develop the game.

Federal Territory's coach, Shahid Majid said, "He is a leader who has done much for rugby's development; without his presence, rugby in this country might be adversely affected."

Shahid commented that he was also a leader knowledgeable in rugby. "Peng Kong's policy of isolation is not 100% correct because we are still in need of international experience and exposure," he explained. "Perhaps, in Peng Kong's view, better planning is a prerequisite for success, not the haphazardly entry into an international fray."

Now I was at full liberty to launch a more intense broadside at the MRU through my writing, as I no longer held any office. When I was the SRU president, I felt beholden to the SRU council and though I knew that the council gave me its unreserved support, I could not take the freedom of making announcements off the cuff. At the very least, the SRU council should be told in advance of what I would say or write. Now as a rugby commentator, unrestrained by the trappings of office, I need only to pick up the pen and hopefully prove that it is indeed mightier than the sword.

Despite being recurrently clobbered at the Asian Rugby Football Union (ARFU) tournament, the MRU even had the temerity to recently venture into the World Cup qualification rounds. Delusions of grandeur must have convinced the MRU of its capability to make an impact at world-class level when in reality it has not even excelled at the regional and sub-regional level. It is indeed tragic for Malaysian rugby that the MRU finds it difficult to face reality.

Surely, the Japanese disasters at the World Cup should be enough to give the MRU a rude awakening from its daydream. Despite being the Asian rugby juggernaut, Japan performed badly at the World Cup and was consistently eliminated in the first rounds. In the augural World Cup tournament held in Australia and New Zealand, Japan even resorted to importing burly South Sea Islanders to bolster its team but yet to no avail. And in the last World Cup in 1998, despite the presence of several Caucasian players, the Japanese team captained by a foreigner, was also bundled off after the first round to the scrap heap.

Generally, the Japanese lack the physical strength and stature to stand up against the timber heavyweights from the traditional rugby nations and the Pacific. It does not take the Japanese misery at the World Cup to drive home the simple truth that sufficient numbers of tall, big and strong players are crucial to any rugby team. How many Asian teams have leviathan-sized players comparable in weight and size to the Caucasians and the South Sea Islanders?

When Malaysia first participated in the Asian rugby tournament in 1970 at Bangkok, the MRU found it necessary for practical reasons to compromise on its policy of nationals-only for international games. An all-Malaysian team was already selected but so troubled were the MRU officials by the team's lack of weight and height that at the eleventh hour, they included three hulking Caucasian forwards - Frank Gosling, Tim Sheehan and Tim Bagot. At that tournament, even Thailand, which was never a colony of the West, fielded some Caucasians, one of whom towered over his Malaysian counterpart in the lines to the extent that his elbows, with arms akimbo, rested on the head of his five foot nine opponent. Was it an act of intimidation calculated to immobilise and strike fear in his small sized opponent?

A lightweight team is certainly susceptible to more serious injuries and injuries occur more readily at the World Cup level where opponents are in no mood to be merciful. An Ivory Coast player was badly injured in one World Cup final rounds, leaving

him paralysed to this day. This calamity saw much hue and cry against the organisers. There were calls for them to ensure that there would be no possibilities of any more mismatch in the future. Hopefully, the day will not come when fatal injuries befall Asian teams in the World Cup finals.

Organisers of the World Cup should consider stipulating certain minimum standards for Asian teams to attain before they become eligible for participation in the qualifying rounds. They are the minnows in the rugby world and their participation would be nothing short of a massacre by the more experienced and heavily built teams. The Asian rugby championship would be a good yardstick to use if the Asians stubbornly and unwisely insist on an Asian quota for World Cup berths. This selection criterion would obviate the necessity for Asian teams to re-enact another round of clashes in the Asian Zone of the World Cup preliminaries. Such re-enactments come with a heavy price tag which most Asian teams can ill-afford as they have to travel extensively in the region to play their qualifying matches.

The strategy outlined in my other paper, *The Creation of a Northern Squad*, is a plan for building a larger pool of rugby talents in the country. Unfortunately, this paper was overshadowed by the polemics generated by the isolation policy. Briefly, the plan advocates the grooming of young players who do not have the opportunity to continue playing the game after leaving school. The plan is to be implemented in phases, beginning first in the three Northern states of Perak, Kedah and Penang. As most youngsters cannot afford to join the few existing rugby-playing clubs, they have to be adopted by their respective state rugby unions and grouped into teams. The number of teams will depend on the response and financial ability of each of these state unions to support them. The MRU will facilitate the nurturing of young players by providing each state union with a reasonable financial grant. These teams will then play each other and the MRU director of development and the coaches from the three states will select the better players for the Northern squad.

When a player from the Northern squad is selected to fill a berth in a state team, another promising youngster from a state union sponsored team will move into the resulting vacancy. Any player in the Northern squad who does not show sufficient improvement within a certain period of time (to make it to the state team) runs the risk of being axed.

To test the mettle of the Northern squad, it will play against the state teams and also the club sides in the Klang Valley where rugby is generally of a higher standard. This squad will be hosted on a rotational basis by each of the three affiliates. These affiliates will provide the physical facilities as well as the coaches for the different phases of centralised training. Their involvement is of paramount importance as it will give them a sense of commitment to the building up of Malaysian rugby. It will also help to forge closer co-operation with the MRU which will be solely responsible for financing the activities of the Northern squad.

I was greatly surprised that the first segment of my plan, where the state rugby unions are to sponsor youth teams, bears similarities to the young players adoption scheme that was proposed by J. E. Black in 1960 for Selangor Rugby Union's consideration. His scheme that was never adopted came to light when I stumbled upon it during my research for this book.

In addition, my Northern squad paper also calls for the implementation of a games decentralisation policy. This involves holding certain important matches in towns other than state capitals for a long enough period for those towns to be infected by the rugby fever. The aim of this is to win as many converts as possible to the game from every nook and cranny of the country. Such towns would then function as rugby growth centres, which would radiate rugby interest to other localities in the vicinity. Ultimately, such areas would coalesce, turning vast stretches of the country into rugby playing belts.

The implementation of this development plan requires enormous resources, a necessary investment for the brighter future of the

game. The MRU should accumulate whatever funds it has for this purpose and for other development projects in order to reap immense benefits in later years rather than squandering its reserves on costly and unfruitful foreign adventures.

I remember that the trip to the Fourth Asian rugby tournament in Sri Lanka in 1974 was almost cancelled because of the unavailability of funds. The last minute reprieve only occurred because of the MRU president's generous intervention. Dr. Hui Weng Choon, who was the president had no choice as Malaysia had already confirmed its participation, the arrangements had been made and the players had already completed two-weeks of centralised training.

To some degree, the airline's agent was to be blamed for renegeing on an earlier arrangement on payment terms for the Malaysian squad. The MRU was under the impression that it could make payments in several instalments over a specified period. Perhaps, the agent heard rumours that the MRU might not be able to pay and took fright, hence his insistence to be paid the full amount in cash when the MRU courier arrived to pick up the tickets a day before the flight.

An emergency meeting was immediately convened at the Selangor Club. The president proposed that every council member stand surety for a bank loan which he would undertake to acquire. His suggestion caused many jaws to drop in shock. After a moment of gloomy silence, Colonel Shahrudin Ali, a former national sprinter and ex-rugby player, said that as a government employee, he was bound by the *General Orders* that prohibited any such employee from standing guarantor for a loan. Colonel Shahrudin Ali was then the commandant of the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) base at Sungei Besi. He was later to become the Chief of the RMAF.

The president turned to me for confirmation as I was also a government employee. I nodded in affirmation. Ng Boon Keat, another government employee, wisely concurred though I suspected he was unsure of the rulings. The three government employees had

saved the day for the other council members who would otherwise have been saddled with a considerable financial burden for the sake of Malaysian rugby. Faced with this situation, the president had to live up to the demands of his office. He gave a personal loan to the MRU. I forgot how long it took for the MRU to repay him, as it was barely able to make ends meet.

Some years before this incident, the MRU faced a similar dilemma when funds for a trip to Bangkok to participate in the Second Asian rugby tournament in 1970 became available only at the eleventh hour. Dr. Fong Wah Fatt who was then MRU secretary, told me that the late Tan Sri Taib Andak, the MRU president (1968 to early 1971), saved the day by cajoling the deputy Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, into providing government assistance.

To show his appreciation, Tan Sri Taib Andak wanted to invite the deputy Prime Minister to a rugby function convened for this purpose. However, he was persuaded not to do so by several MRU council members. They knew from experience that rugby players were an uncontrollable lot after a couple of beers and would in keeping with rugby traditions, sing vulgar songs with gusto, like "sit down you bum...sit down..." (to the tune of Auld Lang Syne) and "Why was he born so beautiful, why was he born at all...he is no F*** use to...". It was customary for the guest of honour to be serenaded in this irreverent fashion before and during his speech. The MRU officials were afraid that the players in their giddy exuberance might also treat the deputy Prime Minister no differently from the other rugby guests. Hence, it was a risk not worth thinking about as the deputy Prime Minister might misconstrue such behaviour as disrespectful and revoke the promised financial assistance.

Even seasoned rugby players found addressing the 'mob' a harrowing experience. It was a daunting task to deliver their speeches before such an unruly crowd who would harass and heckle the speakers without respite. It was usual for attending presidents, team captains, referees and managers and others unfortunate to be picked by acclamation to undergo this endurance test, standing on a chair

or table to make their delivery. Many first timers were often left speechless in mid-stream, unable to muster their thoughts and quickly sinking into blithering incoherence. On such occasions, the crowd intensified their torment and hurled more insults. But such experiences proved to be invaluable training in building up confidence for effective public speaking eventually. The rugby speakers had to abide by the rule of extemporaneousness. Reading from prepared text was absolutely prohibited.

In an era when many sports bodies were putting leading politicians at their helm to gain access to much-needed funds, the MRU did not initially follow suit as it was always suspicious of politicians whom it perceived as looking upon the MRU presidency as just another feather in their cap. Moreover, it was the consensus that the presence of such a politician would necessitate the observance of a certain degree of protocol. This decorous atmosphere would most certainly curb the usual exuberance and no-holds-barred discussions during council meetings. Like other rugby functions, the MRU meetings were always frank and open. Exchanges were sometimes abrasive but often witty, like Parliament in session where argy-bargy reigned supreme. Despite all the opposing views, camaraderie prevailed at the end of every meeting with MRU officials adjourning for drinks and fellowship. This fellowship was usually held at a roadside stall along Jalan Ipoh. This stall stayed open until the wee hours of the morning.

I thoroughly enjoyed such meetings as it helped to hone my critical thinking and rhetorical skills, anticipating the need to rebut and refute with wit and sarcasm when the occasion demanded it. Deliberations in that zestful atmosphere were completely absent when Dr Ling Liong Sik, deputy Minister of Information, became the MRU president. In addition, Dr. Ling's slow and measured pace in speech with every word carefully pronounced in his soft and droning voice did little to liven things up. Often, I was not sure if he had finished talking or when I could begin, the pauses between his phrasings seemed an eternity. He also had the habit of constantly gesturing with both his hands during his speech to reiterate his

ideas and feelings. He was always a picture of serenity, cool and collected, and nothing seemed able to excite or upset him. I was told that it was Dr. Chan Onn Leng who managed to persuade Dr. Ling Liong Sik to accept the presidency in 1978.

By then, the MRU had succumbed to the necessity of having a politician as president for the simple reason that it was in dire need of funds. It hoped that with the deputy Minister as president, its financial standing would become healthier. Dr. Ling served for five consecutive years. After him, two senior police officers took office in succession, first Tan Sri Mansor Noor who served for a term and then Dato' Zaman Khan who in holding the post for over a decade would probably go down in rugby history as the longest serving president. It is most unlikely that future presidents will ever venture anywhere near to his long serving record.



President of Selangor Rugby Union Ng Peng Kong (extreme left) explains an issue after a press conference at the Selangor Club.



President of Selangor Rugby Union, Ng Peng Kong (second from left) speaks at a press conference. Jasvinder Singh, the secretary, is on the extreme right.



In his effort to spread the game to smaller towns, Peng Kong (with tie) holds a dialogue with a large group of youngsters keen on rugby at a district in Selangor...



...a section of the crowd listening attentively to him.

CHAPTER TEN

COBRA AND RUGBY TENS

The formation of the Combined Old Boys' Rugby Association, popularly known by its acronym, Cobra, in 1967 was a boon for rugby, coming in the aftermath of the large scale withdrawal from the rugby scene of the Commonwealth Forces and the expatriates who formed the backbone of the game in Malaysia since the colonial era.

Cobra filled the vacuum, giving rugby a new lease of life. Although more than thirty years have passed since its formation, the telling of the Cobra saga has not abated. Over mugs of frothy beer, Cobra veterans (and some pretenders) take every opportunity to impress their young charges with their versions of Cobra's beginnings. To lend credence to their respective accounts, some of these veterans also claim to be founder members.

With the passage of time, the Cobra story has seen much embellishment and varying degrees of exaggeration, depending on the teller's mood and state of inebriation. In such a scenario, it has become difficult to separate fact from fiction. The problem is especially acute due to the lack of documentation. I am certain my version, like others, will not escape criticism. Nevertheless, lest the legend fades away with the dwindling numbers of Cobra elders, I would like to add mine to the proliferation of accounts by recording it.

The idea of Cobra was mooted some thirty-four years ago when rugby was facing turbulent and uncertain times. It happened at the Long Bar of the Selangor Club when a group of rugby enthusiasts were reminiscing about old times. Their conversation touched on the ban imposed by the headmaster of the Victoria Institution on the Victoria Institution Old Boys' Association on the use of the school's rugby field. This led to the idea of establishing a new club for ex-school rugby players because these players often had little

opportunity to continue playing unless they could join teams associated with institutions of higher learning, the uniformed services or the exclusive social clubs.

All these remarks were overheard by the president of the Selangor Rugby Union (SRU), Mike Newman, an expatriate, who threw a challenge to the group by saying "...stop talking, do something about it!" Picking up the gauntlet, the group worked assiduously, forming a pro-tem committee and on 18th June 1967 Cobra was officially launched at the Old Card Room, Selangor Club to the loud applause of twenty-three members.

According to the minutes of the inaugural general meeting of Cobra held on Thursday, 18th June 1967 at the Selangor Club, the following were present:

Gan Kong Eng, Ibrahim Busu, Mohd Ashraff, Kon Chee Kong, Koh Guan Bok, Gan Kong Chiew, Lee Kwong Hon, Phuah see Lye, Yeoh Cheang Swi, Pang Kong Ying, T. Sriharan, Tunku Sufian, Yong Meng Gum, Chan Pak Kweng, Tan Yew Kiang, Tan Kheng Huat, Mohd Yacob, Mohd Yunus, Azmi Khalid, Kim Tai, Dr Fong Wah Fatt, Dr Hui Weng Choon and Dr Chan Onn Leng.

At the meeting the first Cobra committee was also elected as follows: -

President:	Dr. Hui Weng Choon
Vice President:	Mohd Ashraff
Secretary:	Tan Kheng Huat
Assistant Secretary:	Azmi Khalid
Treasurer:	Gan Kong Chiew
Committee members:	Yeoh Cheang Swi Kon Chee Kong Mohd Yunus
Club Captain:	Dr. Chan Onn Leng

Cobra's birth heralded a new chapter in Malaysian rugby, reinvigorating a lethargic scene with the large numbers of flamboyant and controversial personalities within its ranks. These personalities soon controlled rugby in Malaysia, holding key positions in the MRU, the SRU and the Malaysian Society of Rugby Union Referees. During their tenure in these organisations, a glut of innovations and developments took place as seen in the two-tiered rugby tournament, the MRU Cup and the radical overhauling of the national rugby constitution. It was also during this period that a concerted effort was made to work on long term planning for the promotion of the game as in the First Five Year Development Plan. The isolationist principles were also being aired.

So complete was Cobra's grip on rugby that allegations were often made of the existence of a grand conspiracy between Cobra on the one hand, and the MRU and SRU on the other, to manipulate rugby, with Cobra being the puppeteer. In hindsight, this allegation rings true. Before the beginning of each rugby season, Cobra would meet in secrecy to chart out the path of Malaysian rugby and to ensure its members held important positions in the two key rugby unions, the MRU and the SRU. Invariably, all Cobra nominees were elected to their designated posts, evidence of Cobra's unchallenged influence which reached its zenith in the mid-1970s.

At present, Cobra is a pale shadow of its former self. Apart from losing its voice in the MRU, it is also putting on lacklustre performances in the field. Perhaps, the many years of toil and conspiratorial planning have taken a tremendous toll on it, reminding one of the remains of a juiced orange.

At its peak, however, Cobra seemed indomitable. In the 1970-1971 season for instance, Cobra made a clean sweep of the SRU tournaments capturing the senior league, the Guinness Cup and the three top positions in the junior league, a feat no other club has managed to emulate up to this day. It was no wonder then that the Cobra scalp was much sought after and winning it provided the greatest satisfaction for the opponents.

Cobra elders have always remembered those times with fondness and given the opportunity are ever ready to sing in praise of the *Golden Age*. Cobra fielded four magnificent teams simultaneously under names such as Cobra XV, Blacks, Wasps and the Fangs. The intra-Cobra matches, showcase of brilliant play, attracted immense news publicity. Cobra had many exceptionally skilful players and a number of eccentric ones as well.

In the early years, Cobra was a roving vagabond, which had to slither into the Selangor Club, the University of Malaya staff club and the Pines, a restaurant in Brickfields belonging to Kim Tai, one of its founder members, to hold its meetings and social functions. In its desire to quickly build-up an *esprit de corps* among the members, Cobra organised regular fellowship sessions at the Pines where drinks and food were sold at a generous discount, courtesy of Kim Tai.

Like a naughty child, Cobra was also given to pranks at every turn and nobody was spared from them apart from the perpetrators. At one curry-eating get-together where food was being devoured with relish, Ibrahim Busu rose to go to the toilet at the back of the restaurant. He returned a few minutes later, his face ashen-white. Calmly, he sat down and looked around furtively and then leaned into the feasting crowd and whispered, "Oi, man..do you know what you are eating? Dog meat. man!" Those around him stopped chewing in mid-motion and gaped at him. He signalled that they should go to the back and some did. Within minutes, they came rushing back, shouting and cursing, "Ya, lah..bloody..we've been fed dog!four dog heads on the kitchen floor." Upon hearing this, everyone started retching except for the pranksters (needless to say, they had not eaten) who could barely contain their mirth.

Another favourite meeting place was the Cobra corner beside the water fountain at the Selangor Club padang where the players assembled to be transported to the venues of play or for training. It was only in 1984 that Cobra was able to build a clubhouse on a three quarter acre of land amid the lush greenery along Lorong

Utara, Petaling Jaya. This became its permanent breeding ground. The land is on a sixty-year lease expiring on 8th July 2035. Cobra is the only rugby club in the country to have its own building. The Cobra clubhouse stands at the end of the lonely stretch of Lorong Utara. A new block has since been built under a joint development project with a company. In the evenings the clubhouse has numerous activities and draws throngs of members and non-members, most of whom patronise the bar which purportedly sells the cheapest beer in town.

Before the erection of the new block, the clubhouse was deserted most of the time. The iron-grilled gates were locked and there was little activity in the vast compound which was always overgrown with weeds and *lalang*. Within the dank walls lurked a mysterious secret; a jinx seemed to have plagued the Cobra presidency. Cobra had six presidents from its establishment in 1967 to 1981:-

Dr. Hui Weng Choon,	four years	from 1967 to 1971;
Mohd. Ashraff,	one year	from 1971 to 1972;
Kim Tai Swee Leng,	one year	from 1972 to 1973;
Hussein Yusoff,	two years	from 1973 to 1975;
S. Sinnappa,	one year	from 1975 to 1976;
Dr. Chan Onn Leng,	five years	from 1976 to 1981.

Out of these six former presidents, four passed away after serving their respective terms and in a chronological order, reflecting the sequence of their tenure of office, namely Mohd Ashraff, Kim Tai, Sinnappa and Dr. Chan Onn Leng. Strangely, all of them were odd term presidents. However, the two who served an even number of years, (Dr. Hui Weng Choon, four years and Hussein Yusoff, two years) escaped the jinx.

Has the Club's use of its abbreviated name 'Cobra', a five-lettered-word, an odd figure, been considered a blasphemy by the mythical reptilian world that caused Wadjet, the venom-spitting Cobra of Greek mythology, to place a curse on those who dare walk under its shadow? After all, snakes are commonly associated with many rituals in witchcraft and black magic. The scriptures too

protray the snake as a harbinger of doom, a creature that was responsible for human beings being expelled from the Garden of Eden. Or are the Cobra deaths mere coincidences, all four of them? And the last one at exactly five, for five years and for five letters? Whatever the explanation, I heard that some of the later ex-presidents who served in the odd term category were worried they could fall victim to the Cobra curse. Some time ago, one of them suffered a heart ailment and was warded in the intensive care unit of a hospital. He survived. Many Cobra members took this as a sign that the curse had been broken. And perhaps they were right for the jinx has not surfaced since to the great relief of the surviving former presidents. But the message seems quite clear, avoid the pitfall of holding the presidency for odd number of years.

This Cobra curse was not the only strange occurrence to befall the club. Some time after a Cobra committee meeting at the University of Malaya staff club, Brian Pestana, who usually sat nearest the window in the room, died in the Malaysia Airlines crash at Tanjong Kupang, Johore. At the next meeting held in the same room, I and several other Cobra members felt a cold shiver run down our spine. The atmosphere was charged with a weird sensation that made our skin crawl. The fact that the arrangement of the chairs had not been disturbed since the previous meeting added to the uneasiness we felt. The chairs stood in their respective places as if frozen in time. Sinnappa, a former president, who sat on the chair nearest the window died soon after in a car crash on New Year's Day. Shortly thereafter, Cobra suffered another loss with the sudden demise of Dr. Chan Onn Leng, another ex-president, in an accident on the incomplete Kuala Lumpur-Seremban Highway.

These macabre happenings could easily have come from an Alfred Hitchcock plot. Recalling them has brought back painful memories of the passing of good friends.

Apart from being a rugby player, Onn Leng was also a renowned hurdler, having won a silver medal at the Asian Games. Although a serious medical lecturer, he was given to childish pranks at every

opportunity. He was especially fond of immersing his dentures in another's glass of beer. When I first drank with him at the Bistro, a pub owned by Kim Tai, who became the third Cobra president, I observed that Onn Leng's friends held tightly to their beer glasses, jealously protecting them as if a moment's lack of concentration would make the beers vanish. I thought this was strange until I found my beer, left unattended on the bar, was now garnished with Onn Leng's clammy dentures floating in it. The people around tried hard to look blasé though it was obvious they were stifling their laughter. They also looked furtively at me to see my reaction, probably hoping that I was in some state of inebriation not to notice the dentures and drink the contaminated beer. That was after all the grand design. To deny the onlookers their sadistic pleasure, I nonchalantly ignored the floating object that seemed to sizzle in the beer and without any comment, ordered another one. I even civilly offered one to Onn Leng and chatted casually with those around.

Taken aback, Onn Leng retrieved his dentures with his fingers and put them back into his mouth. And everyone was most disappointed that the anticipated hilarious drama never took place! This bizarre act, I later discovered, was Onn Leng's peculiar way of initiating new friends, an unpleasant and nauseating rite of passage, not that old friends were spared either.

I wrote him a tribute entitled *COL*, which was published in the *Cobra News* of July, 1984:-

Call it by any name, a pseudonym, an acronym or mere initials, but *COL* was a prominent byline for news and articles of rugby interest. It appeared in most local rugby publications and *Cobra News* was privileged to publish *COL*'s last piece of work in its issue of 17th September, 1982. It was entitled, *The Invasion of Women (in rugby) Not New*.

COL was Dr. Chan Onn Leng, a dedicated sportsman and innovative rugby administrator whose contributions had left an indelible mark. He was a prolific writer, churning

out articles effortlessly. "You want me to write an article? Alright, just let me finish my beer..." quipped Onn Leng to Dennis Pestana when the latter as editor of *Cobra News* came calling for news. True to his words, he immediately busied himself on the typewriter after he had quaffed his pint and produced a good article. Dennis was simply flabbergasted, what more, to see that Onn Leng did not pause even for a moment to mull over his thoughts. It was as if the click cluck of the typewriter was the embroication for his thoughts.

He was also a man impregnated with ideas and grandiose schemes for rugby. Such thoughts and his impeccable flair for writing made Onn Leng an obvious choice as the Think Tank for rugby. His modus operandi was to appoint a few members in his committee, ostensibly to assist him in the task. But in reality, he was the absolute commander of the tank - driver, navigator and gunner!

"I have to make a show to please some people with those appointments. Don't worry, everyone will be pleased with the final product, anyway", he told his friends when discussing the matter. And he was always proven right. His recommendations were widely accepted and some had been successfully implemented.

His skills at drafting constitution for rugby associations and competition rules were highly respected. Onn Leng not only mooted the principles and concepts underlying the MRU and Cobra's constitutions but also was in fact the author of both. "Don't worry a general provision that the general committee has the final say over interpretation will be inserted," he used to remark casually to dismiss any reservations. At the previous Cobra annual general meeting, he was assigned to study and revise Cobra's constitution. This task will have to go on without his steady hand. His wisdom and knowledge will be sorely missed.

A Malaysian saying has it that when a tiger dies, it leaves behind its stripes and when a man dies he leaves behind his name. In the case of Onn Leng, it proves to be more than this. He has left behind his contributions to rugby and sports in a permanent and ageless form - the written words. He was truly an inspirational writer.

I was first introduced to Onn Leng at the University of Malaya rugby field. He was a lecturer in the Medical faculty. After my graduation in early 1967 we lost contact as I returned to Ipoh to teach temporarily at my alma mater, St. Michael's Institution. During this period I attended a few sessions of the Perak state rugby trials where I became acquainted with Mohd. Isa, secretary of the Perak Rugby Union, who was also one of the selectors. My relationship with Isa was greatly strengthened over the years and he gave me unstinted support during my tenure as MRU secretary.

Mohd. Isa began his sports career as a hockey goalkeeper for Perak in the thirties. But he proved himself adept at rugby, being a reliable and hard kicking full back as well as a devastating winger. He represented Perak All Blues and the Kinta Asians during his playing days. During his term of office as Perak Rugby Union secretary, he helped to groom some of the better known Malaysian players in the likes of Choo Ah Chye, Foo See Keong, Zainal Yen, Lim Ah Sau and Jagjit Singh. Perak was then known as the breeding ground for top rugby talents in the country and the Perak players, resplendent in the all white attire and black striped stockings, were highly respected.

Mohd. Isa spent many hours at inter-school rugby matches scouting for promising youngsters. Sometimes on a busy day, he would shuttle between venues to ensure that no worthwhile talent escaped his notice. Consequently, his fleeting absence from the field was conspicuously felt and invited the inevitable question, "Where is Isa?" His rugged and imposingly well-built physique of over six foot, attired in his inimitable style of short pants, short-sleeved shirt and knee-high stockings, made him noticeable in any crowd.

He acknowledged Perak's rugby decline during the later part of his tenure in office. The migration of potential players to other states and the reluctance of the younger group to assume office in the rugby union posed immense problems to the state. He, however, never complained of the hard work to keep rugby afloat in Perak despite his advancing age. "I wish I were younger to have the energy to do more..." he often confided in me. The last time we met was at the 1986 National Under-23 tournament where we spent some moments exchanging views on rugby. He passed away soon thereafter.

I wrote him an obituary, which was published in a leading daily, *Isa's Passing a Great Loss*. I began the article with the following:

Another light in rugby's flickering flame has been extinguished with the passing of Mohamed Isa Abas recently. The loss came at a crucial time when rugby is facing numerous problems...

As a young boy, I harboured great hopes of representing Perak at rugby one day. During my school days at St. Michael's, I was always present at any HMS Malaya Cup fixtures involving Perak that was staged at the Ipoh padang. The padang was meticulously cared for by the Ipoh Town Council. Gangs of coolies were deployed to repair whatever damage the padang had suffered as a consequence of its sports usage on the previous evening. The damaged portions were roped-off and the coolies ministering to them, returfed and added fertilisers to rejuvenate these sections manually in the hot sun. Hence, the manicured rugby pitch was always lush green and was one of the best pitches in the country.

The padang was enclosed by concrete railings and the section nearest St. Michael's along Clayton Road (renamed Jalan S. P. Seenivasangan) was planted with huge pine trees which provided shade to the spectators from the afternoon sun. Nearby were food hawkers plying their business on tricycles parked on the kerb. That was my favourite spot to watch rugby. I would sit on the railings, normally tucking away a plate of *rojak*, a local salad of mixed fruits and vegetables.

The only two Asian players in the Perak team, Lee Kooi Meng, a full back and Adrian Rodrigues, a winger, were my favourites and when they were in possession of the ball, I clapped loudly. Adrian had left St. Michael's when I started playing in the school's first team.

I was pleasantly surprised that Adrian whom I admired as a player and I were among the former sportsmen who were honoured by St. Michael's in conjunction with its 90th Anniversary Celebrations. We were picked for rugby. At that ceremony, I met several other now elderly ex-champions in other sports. I was greatly impressed by the fact that the school had managed to trace each and every one of us after all these long years. In my case, I had left school nearly four decades ago. Datuk Lee Oi Hian, the chairman of the school board of governors, presided at that ceremony. He had kind words for the group, saying "the gathering was to honour these exemplary Malaysians and Michaelians....(who) have lived the Michaelian spirit of dedication to the field of sports.."

The Perak team would assemble at the Ipoh Club changing room and when it was near to kick-off time, the players would parade out in single file and run down the thirty-odd steps before trotting onto the field. Being on higher ground, the Ipoh Club is an ideal setting for a dramatic entrance. No one can deny that the sound of the thunderous crash of studs on the concrete steps as the players made an orderly descent was like the roll of war drums heralding the entry of the combatants and the clapping and cheering of supporters reverberating around the field helped to further heighten the drama of the entrance. How I longed to be part of it some day.

But this was denied me. At the start of the 1967 rugby season, I had to move to Kuala Lumpur to take up an appointment in the Malaysian Administrative and Diplomatic Service and was posted to the Ministry of Education located at Federal House. That building was adjacent to the Selangor Club padang where rugby was played extensively. I often walked over after work to watch

the games. On one such occasion, I was reunited with Onn Leng and he immediately signed me up with Cobra. He was on the look out for ex-University players to build up a fledgling Cobra team. So persuasive was he that even Brian Pestana, Aziz Ismail and Boon Kee, who were then Klang Club players, defected to Cobra.

Brian Pestana, a fly half, was a deceptively fast player with a safe pair of hands. He was able to receive any ball, however it was passed to him. Even diminutive Aziz Ismail, his regular scrum half partner since University days, had to shake his head in disbelief whenever his atrociously bad passes were soundly retrieved. But so confident was he of Brian's presence that he could afford to overindulge in his favourite manoeuvre of scooping up the ball at the base of the scrummage and hurling himself from a half turn backwards in the air, fully stretched, to send back a swift pass. He was never wrong for Brian was always there.

The Brian-Aziz combination of fly half and scrum half strengthened the link between Cobra's forwards and the back line. My partnership with Boon Kee, both flankers, proved to be lethal to the opposition. I was glad Boon Kee decided to join Cobra as it provided the opportunity to renew the highly effective partnership we had formed when we played in the University team. On most occasions, Boon Kee played on the blind side and I on the open in the scrummage. It was my responsibility to bring down the opponent's fly half and his to nip the scrum half.

The Boon Kee-Peng Kong combination was highly rated in those years. They were a scourge to the opposition, especially to the scrum halves and the fly halves who were at the receiving end of their hard tackles. Among those who heaped praise on this combination was Mike Stephens, a burly 225 pound prop forward who played for Singapore Civilians and later also for Selangor. He played for London Welsh and also for Buckinghamshire County in England before coming out to Malaysia. "Gee Boon Kee and Ng Peng Kong are two of the best wing forwards I have seen in this country. They have good anticipation, tackle effectively, have

the ability to follow the ball and are prominent in the loose," he said during a press interview that was reported in an article entitled, *Stephens will Miss Vital Cup Match (New Straits Times)*.

Bursting with talents, Cobra became a powerful team in its second year, beating the Selangor Club team of expatriates in the final of the 1968 Cobra Tens tournament. For several seasons thereafter, all former University players working in Kuala Lumpur turned out in Cobra colours, an indication of a symbiotic relationship developing between Cobra and the University team.

Cobra has since been publicising itself as the originator of the rugby Tens, another abbreviated version of the game. Certain Cobra records have attributed the origins of the Tens to Onn Leng but this is highly debatable. Writing in the souvenir programme for the 2nd Cobra Tens in 1968, Onn Leng categorically stated "...10-a-side rugby is not new by any chance. I am also told a school in Singapore had used 10-a-side rugby as a training technique..". He also re-emphasised this point in his article, *A New Development in Malaysian Rugby*, (published in the MRU souvenir programme for the 3rd Asian Rugby Football Union tournament, 1972) where he wrote, "Although 10-a-side rugby had already been played in this country, (with the decline in interest, many teams could field just about 10 players), this was by chance than by design." But the outcome of such a debate is irrelevant for the Tens has since become identified with Cobra. The club has been promoting it enthusiastically for the past three decades. But one thing is certain, Cobra proposed the Tens tournament during a boozing session when alcoholic-induced talk, for once, made good sense.

At this juncture, it would be pertinent to mention that rugby never began as a fifteen-a-side game. Originally, the number of players in each team was a matter of mutual agreement between the opponents. In the first International between England and Scotland, each team had twenty players - 13 forwards, 3 half backs, 1 three quarters and 3 full backs. But the English universities and certain English clubs adopted the fifteen-a-side format, which was

subsequently accepted as the norm by the Rugby Football Union and the International Rugby Board.

Many people confuse Rugby League with Rugby Union. There are numerous and distinct differences. In Rugby League, the team is thirteen players a side instead of fifteen and the scrummage consists of six forwards for each side instead of eight. It allows a tackled player in possession to regain his footing and to resume play by tapping the ball with his foot up to a point regulated by the play-the-ball rule. Only after six such tackles is a scrummage ordered. This is in contrast to Rugby Union where a tackled player has to immediately pass or release the ball and get up or move away from the ball.

What prompted Cobra to start the rugby Tens? An article by Fauzi Omar entitled, *Why Cobra started 10s Rugby (New Straits Times)* tells the story:-

The determination to outmanoeuvre the hefty European players during the late sixties prompted Cobra to introduce the 10-a-side rugby competition in Malaysia.

Cobra was one of the few clubs with local players competing in the European-dominated Selangor league then and they introduced the 10-a-side chiefly to have the satisfaction of outplaying the Europeans.

It all began during one of their 'boozing' sessions after a game. Just that evening Cobra suffered a heavy defeat against the Selangor Club who had mainly European players. While the beer was flowing the players held a post mortem of the game and wondered loud how they could ever beat the Europeans. It was Chan Onn Leng, who thought of introducing the 10-a-side game. He argued that they lost mainly because they could not defend against the burly Europeans who used their weight to advantage.

So Onn Leng, the Club captain then suggested that they stop playing defensively and instead attack. He felt it was

futile to try and defend against the Europeans. So they took out the full back, the inside centre, the two wing forwards and the anchorman leaving only 10 players in the team.

It sounded good to all the players and they decided to hold a 10-a-side tournament. They designed the trophy - in the shape of a Cobra - that very night and named it after Dr. Hui Weng Choon, the Cobra president.

When Cobra unveiled their new tournament, the Europeans protested but all the local teams supported it as Cobra members had gone around explaining about the tournament.

Since all the other clubs agreed to participate Selangor Club went along with the crowd and participated in the first Cobra 10-a-side tournament in 1967.

But the Europeans were still superior in skill and they defeated Cobra that year but only by one try. This naturally encouraged the local players. Cobra waited for the following year and this time they convincingly trounced the Europeans.

The 10-a-side has now become an annual affair and neighbouring countries also found it interesting. Bangkok and Singapore now have their own 10-a-side competitions while Penang is the only local destination to have such a tournament.

One easily takes to the 10-a-side as it is a more open game than the normal 15-a-side. It is faster and there's less forward play making the three quarters dominated game more attractive. While the 15-a-side sometimes appears too crowded and provides little room to move and the seven-a-side leaves too much ground to be covered, the 10-a-side seems just right.

So far, the 10-a-side is only actively played in Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore. New Zealand have their own 13-a-side minus the two wing forwards in the local league

competitions while Britain have a nine-a-side game for their schoolboys.

Onn Leng said since Cobra were the first to start the 10-a-side in the rugby world, it is their duty to popularise it. "What we hope to do is to go on a promotional tour to the neighbouring countries and if we have the money we even hope to introduce it to the European circuit," said Onn Leng.

According to him, the London Welsh Rugby Club who toured here in 1974 felt the game would suit their brand of fast and robust play. As a first step, Cobra has decided to turn their 10-a-side tournament to an international one from this year.

Having played in the Tens for many years, I can vouch that the game is more attractive with fast and open play. There is more room for players to show their individual skills and flair. But this could also be said for the Sevens though some rugby pundits have argued that a lucky break would determine the outcome instantly. At least in the case of the Tens, there would still be a second line of defence.

As for the primary purpose of outmanoeuvring the Caucasian players, the past records of the Tens do not seem to bear this out. On the contrary, the Cobra Tens roll of honour is inscribed with seventeen wins for Caucasian teams compared to six by the Asians from its start in 1967 to 1990. And after it became a fully-fledged international in 1992, no Asian team has ever won the trophy. The strategy of outplaying the bigger and heavier Caucasians had simply misfired!

The Cobra Tens had a humble beginning in 1967 as a regional competition which occasionally saw some foreign participation. Not satisfied with this lukewarm foreign response, Cobra decided in 1992 to risk more than a million ringgit to enhance the Tens image and lure World-class sides whose travelling and boarding expenses would be covered by the club. It was a daring move to

win international acclaim and make Malaysia the home of Rugby Tens in the World. There were two other pressing reasons for doing so. It was the grim threat posed by the proliferation of other tournaments in the region such as the Singapore Cricket Club Sevens, the Singapore Blacks Tens, the Bangkok Milk Cup and the Haadyai Sevens. Competition to attract a quality international field was becoming intense. Also, the domestic scene had become congested and stifling with the mushrooming of tournaments that caused many local teams including those from neighbouring Singapore to live nomadic lives, moving from one competition to another and often playing the same opponents. After the Cobra Tens, these teams moved in a ritualistic cycle to the Penang Tens, the Kedah Sevens, the Taiping Tens and the Jonah Jones to name a few. The crowds were bored seeing them appearing time and again. Cobra had to breakaway from such a claustrophobic atmosphere.

In taking the international plunge with its Tens, Cobra was also troubled by two nagging problems. It was uncertain that the invited foreign teams would respond as the Tens was then of an unknown quality and the mode of play was equally unfamiliar to them. The other worry, a perennial one, was whether the new international Tens would be able to draw a reasonable crowd. In recent years, rugby had not been able to attract big crowds. Even in tournaments where there were foreign teams, officials and players had always numbered more than the sparse crowd. Rugby pundits attributed this dismal situation to the lack of attractive rugby. "The participation of foreign teams in the likes of the Australian, English and the Fijians did not make any difference. These matches were one-sided and unexciting as the locals were not worthy opponents," remarked a rugby fan.

But this was not the case in the 1960s and the early 1970s when rugby had a large following and supporters paid two ringgit, a grand sum in those days, to watch the finals. "Gate collection was good, averaging RM10,000 for a HMS Malaya Cup final," said former MRU treasurer Chooi Tet Chew. He also recalled occasions when

fans attempted to gatecrash and security dogs had to be deployed to deter them. And going back to the 1920s, documents show that the Cup final was particularly a big day. Special trains were run from surrounding areas into Kuala Lumpur, the venue of the final and in 1926 it was reported that 1300 numbered seats were all taken up well before the match started and many spectators had to stand.

Thankfully, though, Cobra's fears for its International Tens proved unfounded. Randwick (Australia), Marist St. Joseph (Western Samoa), Pensoyby (New Zealand), Fiji Prisons and the Wasps (England) came to play exciting and world-class rugby. The covered stands in the stadium were packed to capacity, leaving many spectators out in the terraces under the burning sun. Despite the heat, they had no opportunity to complain as they were constantly on their feet, carried away by the excitement the matches generated.

During the two-day tournament, a large number of ex-rugby players gathered in a corner near the grandstand. They talked voluminously about old times, sang rowdy rugby songs and drank enormous amounts of beer. A few gave running commentaries of the matches, which were interspersed with ethnic jokes and witty remarks to the amusement of those around. And whenever there was a casualty on the pitch, many would mimic the ambulance: '*Ee...Or...Ee..Or...*' in their loudest voice. Some of them were greatly filled with nostalgia as they told and retold anecdotes of their rugby exploits. Indeed, the Cobra Tens provided them with opportunities to enjoy exciting rugby and to renew old bonds and engage in camaraderie special to the rugby fraternity.

Even the Wasps' exhibitionism did not mitigate the success of the Tens. To draw attention to themselves, the Wasps players dropped their pants; a sight captured on film and splashed across the sports pages of all major newspapers on the next day. They were duly charged in court for indecent exposure and fined. Cobra was greatly relieved that the Wasps' misbehaviour did not lead to the authorities banning the tournament. But all was well and the Tens successfully exploded the myth that rugby lacked crowd appeal.

Cobra's decision to go truly international with its Tens led most people to conclude that the Dr. Hui Weng Choon trophy would never again reside in Malaysia or Singapore. At least not in the foreseeable future as local and Singapore teams are no match against the World-class foreigners. The trophy is sculptured from pewter in the shape of a King Cobra with a flared hood, standing guard over a rugby ball. It is mounted on a rosewood plinth.

Before the Cobra Tens assumed a global face, the trophy had been won by Cobra on four occasions, the best ever achievement by a Malaysian side. Selangor Club won the title in the inaugural year, beating Cobra. In the following year the tables were turned. Cobra scored a momentous 13 to 3 win over a Selangor Club team comprising well-known expatriate players like Eurof Walters, Hugh Forbes, Jon Master and Mike Lamb. That triumph was made all the more memorable for me as I was a member of the victorious Cobra team along with Pang Kong Ying, Mohd. Khalid, Soon Cheng, Bala Kandiah, Boon Kee, Jimmy Yong, Koon Chai, Raoul Huet and Ahmad Mahmud.

In 1972, Cobra fielded two teams, which demolished all their opponents to make it an all-Cobra final. Three years later, Cobra chalked up another milestone when it stole the thunder from the 1st Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment (1st RNZIR), the defending champion. It was an epic struggle with neither team giving the other any breathing space, and my Cobra team-mates and I emerged bruised and battered but triumphant. In 1977, Cobra again shot into the limelight, sharing honours with Sembawang Tigers, a team comprising Commonwealth military personnel stationed at Singapore.

The 1st RNZIR, always displaying the powerhouse tactics typical of New Zealand rugby, holds a record of eleven victories in the tournament. The other teams, which succeeded in having their names engraved on the trophy are the 1st and the 6th Royal Australian Regiments, Bunnies RFC, Sembawang Tigers, Police United, the Fiji Military Forces and RMAF Blackhawks.

Besides playing in the Tens, I was also its organising chairman for six tournaments during its early years and was ably assisted in this task by Francis Chiew as tournament director. The Tens can justifiably stake a claim to being the most durable tournament in the region with more than three decades of almost uninterrupted competition, the only break happened in 1991 when it went back to the drawing board for a revision. Francis Chiew holds the record of being the longest serving tournament director anywhere in the world. As I watched him going about his duties with boundless energy at the 1997 tournament, I was convinced that only the grave could stop him from this task. A prop in the Cobra Fangs, which I captained in the Selangor Boh league, Francis was responsible for organizing the team's training. He was a tough player who on one occasion was heavily knocked down during a line out. He lay flat on his back, his torn jersey exposing his heaving chest. Despite being winded and shaken, he still had sufficient breath to hurl loud threats at the opponents.

The military teams from the Commonwealth battalions had played a significant role in the early growth of the Cobra Tens. After 1990, there was hardly any foreign military presence in both Malaysia and Singapore. Even if there were a few remaining units, an invitation was unlikely as it was Cobra's policy to invite only one team, and possibly the best, from one country to the International Tens.

These military teams came mainly from Penang and Singapore, travelling many miles in their lumbering military vehicles accompanied by their raucous supporters who lugged along their crates of beer. The tournament venue was transformed into a vast encampment reminiscent of a military campaign with fluttering banners of the different battalions and squadrons. The labyrinth of clotheslines, where sweat-soaked jerseys, boots, socks, shorts and undergarments were hung out to dry, criss-crossed the grounds around their tents. This domesticity marred the ostentatious display of military pride. Whenever these lines flapped in the wind, they emitted a peculiar sour stench. Almost every tent had a pyramid

of empty beer cans which grew in height by the hour - the result of the heavy drinking by the supporters who saw the occasion as an opportune one for swilling beer. This carnival atmosphere, much relished by the crowd, belied the seriousness with which the different Forces teams viewed the tournament. Once in the field they let loose unrestrained aggression and power, emerging victorious fourteen times.

The 1st Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment (1st RNZIR), was the crowd's favourite. The stomping of feet, the show of clenched fists and the deafening war cry of the Haka ritual before the start of the match was sufficient to intimidate the opponents. At the height of its seeming invincibility, the 1st RNZIR was toppled by Cobra in 1975, a smarting defeat which it failed to put right some months later when it lost in a fifteen-a-side match played in bad weather at the Petaling Jaya Club ground. This fifteen-a-side, a sort of re-match, was at its insistence but it was an unfruitful attempt to redeem lost pride. Its second defeat in the Tens was at the hands of the Fijian Military Forces in 1989. But it had the crowd's sympathies because it was then already a depleted side as the bulk of the Regiment had already gone home.

On its first appearance in 1973, not only did the 1st RNZIR win the trophy but its players also made off stealthily with the huge tournament banner, cutting it down from the tall poles which some of them scaled, thinking that it would serve as a memento of the Regiment's first and last appearance. But the Regiment kept coming back. The banner was only returned on the eve of its phased departure for New Zealand. That the banner was kept in mint condition for more than a decade showed its high regard for the tournament. No doubt it would have kept the booty as a regimental heirloom had it not been for its fondness for Cobra.

There was a simple ceremony for the banner's return. The Regiment's commanding officer informed Cobra that the banner would be escorted home to Cobra by three officers. The men travelled by road from Singapore, their base camp. At the handing

over ceremony at the Cobra clubhouse, these officers were extremely apologetic for the prank committed more than a decade ago and the episode ended in a drinking session. The fate of the banner now is anyone's guess.

In appreciation of the military teams' loyal participation in the Tens, Cobra should give the 1st RNZIR the privilege of returning as the military representative to compete in the International Tens tournament. This Regiment would certainly welcome such an invitation and make good the opportunity to show its mettle. Today, a 1st RNZIR rugby jersey in a glass showcase is displayed in the Cobra clubhouse, signifying the bond of friendship between the Regiment and Cobra. Even without this bond, its eleven victories should be sufficient reasons for it to be honoured with a special invitation.

Cobra has been a resounding success insofar as promoting the Cobra Tens and Malaysia as the home of the Tens internationally. But the tournament has had no monetary gains whatsoever for the club. Most times, it merely broke even in running the tournament, prompting some members to question the wisdom of continuing with such a financially risky venture. Prior to the revamp, the Tens was a profitable undertaking as the income derived was able to adequately finance the club's annual activities. The participating teams then had to bear their own expenses with no subsidy from Cobra.

Worse, many Cobra players were not allowed to don the club colours in their very own tournament. They had to content being mere spectators. Instead, the Cobra team co-opted national players in the erroneous belief that they would pose a stronger challenge. The outcome was equally disastrous, making a mockery of this strategy. And not learning from this experience, Cobra went one ludicrous step further to raise a Cobra team of foreigners in the 1996 Tens tournament but still to no avail. That year the Cobra team was dubbed, *The Mercenaries*.

By chance, my article critical of this move was published in a daily on the day the tournament began. The Cobra's 'win at all

cost' attitude was a damper to many loyal Cobra players as they were discarded offhandedly, not even consigned to the reserve bench! An ex-Cobra player (obviously a victim of this policy) who was studying law in the University of Wales, Cardiff told my younger daughter that his mother had sent him the article and that he intended to write me a thank you note. He did.

Being a former Cobra player, I understand his frustration. I had always looked forward to the day when I could play before a home crowd and in Cobra's very own tournament. The experience was exhilarating, not felt in any other tournament. The atmosphere was electrifying with the crowd shouting out names of club players to motivate them. Such cheering reflected a true bond between players and other club members. But when a Cobra team comprised non-club players, the cheering could not reflect genuine feelings, as the Cobra crowd could not identify with the team. Hard as I tried, I could not make myself cheer for the Cobra team of mercenaries. I am sure many other club members shared similar sentiments. The exposure of club players would have at least given them the opportunity to show their abilities and hopefully make them better players.

I feel that Cobra has played its part for national rugby and should now focus its attention on reviving its former greatness in the field. From now on, charity should begin at home. Leave national rugby promotion to the MRU which incidentally is its responsibility. Cobra has done enough for rugby at the national level. I have always felt that Cobra should be given some form of national recognition for its exemplary service to Malaysian sports in general and to rugby in particular. And this prompted me to write the article entitled, *Alas! When no one really cares what Cobra did* published in a daily in 1997:-

Over the years, I have observed new names being added to the roll of honour of sports, wondering when rugby would get its turn.

Such a thought is understandable as I have long been associated with the game. In the course of that involvement

I became acquainted with some great rugby personalities and also certain bodies whose contributions to the game were immense.

To many, no doubt, the realisation of this thought would appear a remote possibility, especially now that rugby is experiencing lean times, what with waning interest in schools and the train of shameful defeats of the national team recently.

The game may be in a depressed state but this should not deny certain personalities or bodies recognition for their contributions to rugby.

One body that richly deserves such recognition is the Combined Old Boys Rugby Association (Cobra). From humble beginnings where they used to meet like vagabonds at the edge of the Selangor Club padang - now Dataran Merdeka - they have grown into a multi-million ringgit enterprise with their own club building at a prestigious location in Petaling Jaya.

Their contributions to rugby are legendary, the showpiece being the successful Selangor Rugby League and the Guinness Cup competition. Both these leagues have made Selangor the hub of the country's rugby activities and the beacon in an otherwise gloomy rugby landscape.

True to their commitment to the game, they have since successfully ventured into the international arena with their revamped Cobra Tens. Started in 1967 as a regional tournament, the Tens took a quantum leap in 1992 when Cobra risked more than a million ringgit to enhance the tournament's image to lure world-class teams.

Initially few top-notch teams took the bait but in the last two tournaments, Cobra had to turn down a host of teams from the great rugby nations. The tournament has seen many World Cup players coming from South Africa,

Western Samoa, France, New Zealand, Australia, Fiji and England. Cobra's efforts in this regard have put Malaysia, a nation not known for their rugby prowess on the international rugby calendar.

The Cobra Tens is increasingly becoming a rugby holy ground for rugby pilgrims the world over, a remarkable achievement winning accolades from rugby enthusiasts including being featured in international periodicals. Being merely a club, Cobra's contributions are without parallel, which even many national sports bodies cannot emulate. They have singlehandedly raised a few million ringgit for the revamped Tens.

In the early years this was a great gamble for Cobra. Had it failed, Cobra would have been financially ruined and none but their devoted members would have to bail Cobra out. On the other hand, its success has been generously shared with all and sundry. Surely this success deserves recognition, if not outright support from the relevant authorities. In Malaysia's aspirations to become a host of world-class sports, the Cobra Tens would certainly fit the bill.

For their Herculean efforts as the lone crusader in the face of adversity, especially in rolling back the tide threatening to overwhelm rugby, a national sports award is long overdue. In describing their accomplishments, I can only think of Churchill's "Never has so much been owed by so many to so few."

Some time after the appearance of my article, Cobra was awarded the *Leadership Award* during the National Sports Award Night organised by the Ministry of Youth and Sports. I would like to think that my article had pricked the conscience of the authorities and moved them to make the decision to bestow that award on Cobra.

The success of the Cobra International Tens made many other clubs envious and concerned over the future of their own

tournaments. Some of these tournaments even resorted to misusing the international label. To lend credence to their so-called international billing, they took advantage of the participation of foreigners based locally or in Singapore to hoist the participants' national flags.

Most of these clubs could only look on helplessly as Cobra gained international acclaim but not the MRU that insisted on its dubious right for a place on the bandwagon. Throwing the rulebook at Cobra, it maintained that it would only sanction the Tens in future if the name of the tournament included the MRU tag and that too preceding Cobra's. The MRU stance spawned much speculation. Some rugby fans, who grew up watching the Cobra Tens, were simply dumbfounded and appalled at this. "Why now after all these years?" they inquired incredulously. Others were infuriated, hurling recriminations at rugby officialdom for its dog in the manger attitude. However, a group defended the MRU, maintaining that the tournament should be identified with the country rather than with a club. Apparently, the MRU had invoked article 8(v) of the Malaysian Rugby Constitution. The article reads:

All rugby tournaments organised by any member organisation must first obtain approval of the (MRU) Council and shall submit the rules for the competition.

According to certain factions, the article does not allow the MRU to impose terms and conditions but merely to decide whether approval should be given or not. Because of this ambiguity, there may be a need to review the provision and define more explicitly the scope of MRU's discretionary power. Also, the definition of a member in that clause is strictly confined to a state or service rugby union and does not include a club in a state. The club is an affiliate of a state rugby union. The MRU has no legal standing to deal directly with a club or issue it with any directives. It has to communicate with the relevant state union on any matters pertaining to the individual clubs. This legal niceties have always been overlooked by the MRU and many others as well.

Apart for legalities, many felt that what the MRU did was a violation of a club's fundamental freedom to promote its name through its own tournament, especially when such efforts could not in any way be deemed detrimental to the country. Many other clubs which promoted their own tournaments to attract regional participation were jolted out of their complacency and watched the developments with grave concern. "If Cobra, a giant could suffer this fate, it is unlikely that we would be spared," said some with trepidation.

By its actions, the MRU demanded that Cobra sever the umbilical cord from its own offspring, thereby losing its identity and unique character which had been the hallmark of the tournament. Subjecting Cobra to such a fate caused it the kind of heart wrenching anguish only a grieving mother could know about. To the disappointment of some senior members of the club, Cobra buckled under this demand, renaming the competition, *The MRU-Cobra Tens* in 1993. At every Cobra general meeting thereafter several veteran members spoke out against this concession, maintaining that Cobra should not share the name of the tournament with any other body and that mention should merely be made that the tournament was under the auspices of the MRU. At every pre-tournament press conference, the MRU representative was not able to answer the embarrassing question, "How much did the MRU give to have its name in the tournament?"

Sad to say, the MRU had not invoked that particular constitutional provision for other local tournaments billed as international where there were foreign entries. How else can one conclude except that the MRU was biased against Cobra? It was therefore no surprise to learn that several Cobra old-timers were behind the failed coup of 1996 to topple the incumbent MRU president and his council. This incident was described in Chapter One. Being involved in that plot, I attended a couple of clandestine meetings at the Subang Golf Club and the Petaling Jaya Hilton. Besides engaging in conspiratorial talk, we also indulged in good food and drinks, courtesy of the ringleaders! Occasionally, we reminded ourselves to speak in

whispers, looking over our shoulders to assure ourselves that there were no enemy informers around. Such moments made our hearts pump energetically as adrenaline rushed in our bloodstream, just as in the excitement of our playing days. Fortunately, none of the conspirators, all of them rather old, suffered a heart attack as a result of this. Otherwise, their already depleting ranks would dwindle faster, no doubt much appreciated by Father Time as he would then have to make less trips to cull their numbers which at last count totalled a handful.

Though the Cobra old-timers may have their own little foibles, they have never shied away from any issues that they perceived to be threatening to Cobra. In their self-proclaimed role as custodians of the Cobra spirit, they have always been loud and strident in their protest, ever ready to come to rescue a damsel in distress. Some say that the Cobra spirit is likely to become dimmer with every passing of an old guard and eventually the spirit will disappear altogether. This is because the essence of that spirit is not truly understood by the many latter-day members. But what is this spirit? In the first Cobra constitution, the objects were, "to maintain high standards of play and sportsmanship in Rugby, to foster and promote interest in Rugby and in sports in general and to provide facilities to school leavers to continue playing Rugby". Are these objectives the embodiment of the Cobra spirit? If so, then the spirit took a heavy knock in early 1987 when a stiff entrance fee of RM750 was imposed. This was followed by an upward revision of the nominal monthly subscription of RM10. Such stipulations have ruled out most young school leavers as they had no means of becoming fully-fledged members as did their predecessors in the early years of Cobra, thus defeating Cobra's *raison d'etre*.

Some Cobra old-timers have expressed concern that the Cobra spirit could be compromised, if not jeopardised, should Cobra develop into a sprawling sports centre. If Cobra does not curb its aspirations for physical grandeur, it might then be persuaded by monetary consideration to open up its membership to the non-rugby fraternity in order to raise finance for such an expansion and

its subsequent maintenance and upkeep. These old-timers foresaw the unfolding of such an event in apocalyptic terms – the ultimate destruction of the Cobra spirit as the deluge of newcomers might to suit their non-rugby interests, use their majority to reshape the Cobra character eventually. I had addressed the possibility of such a happening in my confidential letter of 6th December 1985 to the Cobra president. It was in response to a draft constitutional amendment that was circulated to gauge the views of members.

Already a company has built a sports complex under a joint agreement with Cobra where the company's sports club retains rights and entitlements over the building and its facilities for the remaining life of Cobra's lease of its land. The name of the company is prominently displayed on the front facade of the building. When this joint venture was raised at a Cobra general meeting, it was heatedly debated with the dissenting voices coming mainly from the old-timers. Some felt that the company would have had a very favourable deal for the right to build on Cobra's land in return for its proposed concessions which were then being negotiated. Otherwise, the company would have to expend a substantial capital outlay to acquire an alternative building site for its sports club. The negotiations should have at least be linked to a renovation clause for the Cobra clubhouse and not focussed entirely on Cobra's usage of the new facilities. It was also the feeling that if the negotiations were to break down, Cobra could easily interest other companies as its land is in a choice area in Petaling Jaya. Anyway, the idea of a joint venture development was nothing new. During the presidency of Benny Yeoh in 1984, Cobra unanimously rejected a proposed sports centre to be developed by a group of entrepreneurs. Cobra was then holding steadfast to its rugby ideals and identity.

I feel that the presence of this company is not only an invasion of Cobra's privacy but has also overshadowed its identity in its own lair. Indeed, their liaison makes them strange bedfellows. I also share the views of some old-timers that a modest clubhouse but well-equipped for rugby should be the model to adopt. This model

is the one most rugby clubs in the world have. Lest the lofty concept of the founding fathers be forgotten, it needs reminding that Cobra was founded to be a rugby club and not a rugby-playing club like the Selangor Club or the Singapore Cricket Club.

Dennis Pestana was one of the most vocal on the need to preserve the Cobra spirit. To him, Cobra must never evolve into a multi-sports club where rugby would just be any other sport. He stressed that rugby must be the game for all times and that affordable membership be made easily available to anyone who plays rugby. Standing on this platform, he won the Cobra presidency in 1988, uncontested. It was his second term. He was first elected at any emergency meeting in mid-1987 when Zain Yusoff resigned suddenly as president over a policy dispute with his committee. Until today, Dennis is still worried that such a dreaded evolution may yet happen.

There was another incident in 1982 when the old-timers came down hard on the Cobra committee. It was over the institution of Cobra Awards. I wrote a scathing criticism on the scheme in the *Cobra News* of 2nd July 1982. In it, I posed the question of whether the *Orwellian* scenario from *Animal Farm* where the concept, "all are equal but some more equal than others", had finally taken root in Cobra and in doing so, replaced the egalitarianism that was an intrinsic part of the club for the past seventeen years. Instead of pacifying the restless general membership with his explanatory reply, Gee Boon Kee, the president, found himself pushed further to the wall and bombarded with more criticisms. The outcry led to the immediate dismantling of the scheme, thus preventing the emergence of a class hierarchy in Cobra, the titled aristocrats and the hoi polloi. Boon Kee was Cobra president from 1981 to 1983.

Past events have shown how embattled the Cobra spirit has been. Often it was browbeaten to such an extent that it resulted in the dilution of its ideals. Will the Cobra spirit and its concept, like the Cobra old guards and the local rugby traditions, also suffer the ravages of time?

COBRA

RUGBY

10 - A - SIDE
TOURNAMENT

31 ST. AUGUST - 1 ST. SEPTEMBER, 1968



DR. HUI WENG CHOON CHALLENGE TRO

The Dr. Hui Weng Choon Trophy for the Cobra Tens on the cover of the 1968 Cobra Tens souvenir programme. In the foreground is the Agong's Cup.





A huge turn-out at the 1968 Cobra Tens staged at the Selangor Club padang. Dr. Fong Wah Fatt (with his son) is second from left in the grandstand and next to him is Ung Khek Cheow.



...and Cobra celebrates victory over Selangor Club. At the centre is Mrs (Dr) Hui Weng Choon (with glasses) with Dr. Hui (with tie) beside her. The players in jerseys are (from left to right) Ng Peng Kong, Ahmad Mahmud, Jimmy Yong, Mohd. Khalid, Pang Kong Ying, Ow Koon Chai and Gee Boon Kee (standing). Soon Cheng is carrying his son with Bala Kandiah behind him. Anton Robinson is not in picture.



The ageing men of rugby are always looking for the slightest excuse to have a good fellowship where they can spin endless tales of those bygone days...at the Bar, Cobra clubhouse, Petaling Jaya. Left to right, (front row), Yeoh Cheang Swi and Rory Teng; (back row), Ng Chee Heng, Tan Kim Fatt, Ibrahim Busu, Safaruddin Muhammad, Dr. Alex Liew, Ng Peng Kong, Dennis Pestana and Gee Boon Kee.



...and they always turn up in large numbers at every Cobra Tens to reminisce about their glorious past and to renew old bonds... some of them at the 1996 Cobra Tens. (front row, third from left) Cheong Kai Yong, Ng Peng Kong and Yap Kian Fui. In the second row, Pang Kong Ying is first from right.

Cobratoon by Ng Peng Kong was regularly featured in the early editions of the monthly Cobra News. Reproduced here are two such rugby cartoons...

COBRATOON



MUM SAYS I'VE TO DRINK LESS MILK NOW BECAUSE
OF THE "EXTRA BILLS" TO PATCH YOU UP.....





1st Cobra committee. Sitting from left, Dr Chan Onn Leng, Tan Kheng Huat, Dr. Hui Weng Choon, Mohd Ashraff and Gan Kong Chiew. Standing from left, Kong Chee Kong, Azmi Khalid, Mohd. Yunus and Yeoh Cheang Swi.



The Cobra and the Singapore Blacks before the start of their Annual Match for the Yeo Hock Seng Trophy at Singapore, 8th November 1970. Cobra beat Blacks to retain the Trophy by 12 to 6. Ahmad Mahmud proved deadly with his boots, scoring all the points for Cobra. Ng Peng Kong is second from left in the last row.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE RUGBY MINNOWS' GRAND DELUSION

Despite being of an older vintage, the Cobra Tens still lies in the shadow of the Hong Kong Sevens. It is strange that Hong Kong has become the venue of rugby's greatest show. The island colony is a rugby desert insofar as the locals are concerned and Asia, the continent to which it belongs, has never been known for its rugby accomplishments. Nevertheless, the small expatriate community of which rugby is very much its exclusive preserve has succeeded in assembling the world's best teams for the Hong Kong Sevens. Other teams participate but in a supporting role. Consequently, tiny Hong Kong sticks out like a diamond in the rugby world and has probably made some rugby administrators in the traditional bastions of the sport, green with envy.

The big names in the game from the Britain, New Zealand, Australia, France, Fiji and Samoa descend upon the island in droves on an annual pilgrimage to show off their prowess. In an obscure corner, the Asian teams, playing second fiddle, earn the sympathies of the crowd.

In such a tournament, where heavyweights confront the lightweights in unbridled fashion, the results are predictable. Whatever flashes of brilliant play the featherweights, usually the Asian teams, have in store are snuffed out by sheer weight and brute force. They are railroaded in the scrummages, outmanoeuvred in the rucks and mauls and dwarfed in the lines by their gigantic opponents who are also able to cleave into their defences without breaking into a sweat.

Against such insurmountable odds, the Asian teams still stubbornly go into this uneven contest, handicapped by the genetics of their physique. Their courage is abundant but it is not enough in a body contact and physically robust sport. The reality, however unpalatable, seems to be that nature, out of sheer perversity, has

seen fit to place great rugby minds into the comparatively small-bodied Asian players. Thus, these players whose play is sheer poetry in local games - goose stepping, dodging and weaving intricate patterns through a heavy traffic of players - tend to be obliterated by the power play of the Caucasians, the Samoans and the Fijians.

The format of the Hong Kong Sevens is three-tiered. The Cup championship is for the top two teams that qualify from their respective groups after the preliminary matches, the Plate championship for the third placed teams and the Bowl for the last placed teams. Most Asian teams end up competing in the Bowl but Malaysia has never even made it to the Bowl final.

The Asian ordeal in Hong Kong and rugby's increasingly universal image as it spreads from the traditional rugby nations to other regions are good reasons for the International Rugby Board, the governing body of the game, to think about the need for weight classification for international rugby. Perhaps, as in sports like boxing and rowing, weight should be the criterion for determining the categories in which teams will participate or, as in sailing, a handicap system should be devised to level the playing field. Weight classification was not necessary when the game was played within the confines of Britain, the Antipodes and some European countries because then there was no real difference between the teams in terms of weight.

For a start, players could be categorised as belonging to either an 'Open Class' or a 'Lightweight Class', the former for any player irrespective of his physique and the latter for those below a specific weight. By doing so, rugby competitions between the Caucasians and the Asians from the same weight category would be keenly fought.

Of course, one could argue that those who are smaller should stay away from the sport. But this is not the kind of view that would promote the rugby cause and enhance interest in the game. The Asian Rugby Football Union ought to pursue this issue

vigorously to open up new and more exciting horizons for Asian rugby. It is a step in the right direction to provide opportunities for Asian and other 'lightweight' teams to reach the pinnacle of their weight category. Meanwhile, the Asian teams continue to be cannon fodder at the Hong Kong Sevens.

Malaysia was invited to participate in the Hong Kong Sevens when it first started in 1976. A young Dr. Alex Liew led the national squad to this tournament which also saw eleven other teams participating; seven from Asia, the Cantabrians of New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga and the Wallaroos of Australia. Malaysia boycotted the event in 1987 as a protest against New Zealand's inclusion of a player who had earlier toured South Africa. At that time, there was a general boycott by the international community of South Africa because of its apartheid policies. As a consequence, Malaysia was not invited the following year. On its return in 1989, Malaysia had a fiery reception being drawn in the same group as Western Samoa and Tonga whose players had an average weight of 90 kgs and height of 1.9 metres.

Over the years, the Hong Kong Sevens has grown in stature and now attracts the national teams from the great rugby nations. These nations were previously represented by their provincial and county players. But Scotland and France took the lead in being represented by their full internationals in the 1991 tournament. And since then, all the great rugby nations have paraded their international and World Cup players. Though auguring well for the tournament, this development proved detrimental to Asian aspirations. None of the Asian sides had ever qualified for the Cup final in the early years despite being represented by their national teams and playing against opponents comprising provincial and county players. The Asians were eliminated in the early rounds then and would now find the competition harder as they come up against World Cup players.

In most matches, the Asians were thoroughly bashed and battered. In forty encounters against Caucasian and Polynesian opponents

between 1989 to 1991, Asian teams were buried under an avalanche of nine hundred and fifty four points. The greater humiliation was borne by the rugby minnows of Asia, comprising Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

Malaysia had been lambasted by a deficit two hundred and two points from seven matches while Thailand suffered a deficit of two hundred from eight. The former managed to score a paltry twenty-one points against its opponents while the latter a more credible fifty-two. In exchange for one hundred and twenty eight points in six matches, Sri Lanka retaliated with twenty-six to its name. Singapore gave away one hundred and ninety eight points in five matches without scoring a single point. Japan and Korea fared no better, losing to the Caucasians and the Polynesians.

These statistics were compiled more than ten years ago but the situation has not improved since. The passing of the years has seen Dr. Alex Liew making great strides in the medical profession but sadly the same cannot be said for the standards of Malaysian rugby despite its many decades of international exposure.

Although the Hong Kong Sevens has by name an Asian aura about it, the organisers are the Europeans from the Hong Kong Rugby Union who professed that "the objectives of the tournament are rooted in the Asia-Pacific region but it has been our policy to invite some teams from afar." This European-inspired competition in Asia has been faithful in the pursuit of those expressed aims by annually inviting the Asian rugby minnows though their presence does not add an iota of prestige to the tournament. Nevertheless, this group of invitees could not resist rejecting the all-expenses paid for trip, never mind if their teams which provide the essential Asian garnishing are flagellated.

When I was president of the Selangor Rugby Union, the selection of the Malaysian team for the Hong Kong Sevens became an issue. As Malaysia could not make any impact at the tournament, I contended that different sets of players be sent to Hong Kong each year for international exposure, if such exposure was the crucial

cornerstone of MRU's foreign policy, thereby creating a multiplier effect. For a start, I recommended that the MRU pick the national seven-a-side champion for the purpose rather than sending the same experienced officials and players time and again.

In the 1985 season, the Armed Forces was the seven-a-side champion and it put forward its case for consideration. It was supported by the Selangor Rugby Union and the Federal Territory Rugby Union. These three affiliates asked the MRU to convene a meeting to discuss their request.

Nik Ahmad Azmi, who had been appointed team manager for the Malaysian team, acted as the MRU spokesman and perfunctorily rejected the request. He was quoted in *MRU Says No to Forces (Sunday Star)* as saying "We'll select the country's best players to play in the Hong Kong Sevens. We'll send a national team". This contentious issue attracted the attention of the press and one sports commentator wrote an article entitled, *Showdown-But Rugby's Still the Likely Loser (The Star)*:

The rugby administrators are squaring up for a showdown with their affiliates as the deadline approaches to send a team for the Hong Kong international seven-a-side tournament.

The Malaysian Rugby Union (MRU) is facing a snowball effect from the first protests by Selangor in early January regarding its stand on the selection of the team because now, the Armed Forces who won the national sevens tournament are demanding to be sent.

In the red corner, the MRU, through its secretary, Roslan Shafie insisted that "it served no purpose if responsibilities are bestowed on those who are incapable or uninterested." He also said that although the country had not secured any success in the tournament so far, it did not mean that a younger side should be sent.

In the blue corner is the MRU's biggest critic, Selangor Rugby Union president, Ng Peng Kong.

Peng Kong proposed that the winning team of the national seven-a-side tournament be sent. This neatly solves the problem of the selectors wasting their time trying to actually perform the task they had been given.

"Either that," he said, "or send younger players and a new set of officials who could learn something from the tournament".

Peng Kong who formed a very respected wing forward combination with Gee Boon Kee in the sixties and early seventies for Malaysia, attacks issues in the same manner as he did opposing players - tackle hard, tackle low.

"What's the point of sending the same set of players year in year out to a tournament in which we get hammered by the best players in the World?" he asks.

In any event, Peng Kong was proven right insofar as his low esteem of the MRU was concerned regarding selections - no selector turned up for the national sevens tournament till only the semi-finals stage.

This effectively destroyed the MRU secretary's claim that those who were to go to Hong Kong should be capable and dedicated to the sport since the administrators, himself included, did not display an equal measure of these qualities.

Peng Kong sees himself as a radical in rugby circles. In the late seventies and early eighties, when rugby in the country was enjoying an Indian summer and prospects looked bright for growth following a fourth placing at the Asian championship, he was the only one who said, "Let's forget about international tournaments."

He said that Malaysia needed to go into isolation and do its homework in developing the game all over again right from the grassroots. "Standards have fallen," he told me "and getting beaten all the time in international tournaments do the public image of rugby little good." Witness then, the slump for Malaysian rugby, the national team finished last in its group in the 1984 Asian championship in Tokyo.

Whether or not a team goes to Hong Kong is irrelevant at this moment. The Hong Kong tournament has been nothing but a holiday trip for most of the Malaysian players because they get knocked out after three or four matches in the preliminary group matches (a grand total of forty to sixty minutes of actual play).

What is important is that the administrators of rugby have not handled themselves well at all and therefore are responsible for the game's doldrums.

What credible challenge could Malaysia pose when Japan and Korea, the champions of Asia, suffered severe haemorrhaging in Hong Kong? Since the launch of the Asian Rugby Football Union championship (ARFU) in 1968, the top honours have been firmly in the clutches of the 'Gang of Three' - Japan, Korea and Hong Kong (an expatriate team) - to the extent that the tournament's outcome has always been a foregone conclusion. The other Asian teams have not been able to come anywhere close to breaking the Gang's stranglehold on the competition. More often than not, their clashes with the Gang of Three turned out to be disasters, causing more embarrassment to the victors than the vanquished because of the runaway scores. For the minnows, a fourth-placing finish has always been a coveted prize and anything better a miracle indeed.

In 1974, however, just such a miracle happened. That year saw Sri Lanka playing Japan in the final. Under the ARFU tournament rules, the top team in each group would qualify for the final. In that year, a freak draw placed the Gang of Three and Thailand in

Group A, leaving the minnows comprising Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore and Laos in Group B. All the teams in Group B were pleasantly surprised at this unexpected good fortune and looked upon it as the undreamed opportunity of playing in an Asian championship final. The minnows were determined to make good this chance, come hell or high water.

Mohd. Ashraff, a MRU council member, was the first to receive news of the draw. He immediately rushed to the Selangor padang where the Sri Lanka bound team was in training. From a distance, he was seen excitedly waving a paper as though he had won a lottery. Within earshot, he was heard shouting, "*Ada chance, ada chance!*" ("there's a chance, there's a chance!"). On hearing the news, the whole team cheered wildly, its morale boosted. It knew that Sri Lanka was the only obstacle to the final.

In Sri Lanka, all participating teams were housed at a hotel at Mount Lavinia, overlooking the azure Indian Ocean. The drive from the airport to Mount Lavinia, some kilometres from Colombo, took us through calm, scenic countryside, belying the political turmoil Sri Lanka was going through then. The participating teams only became aware of impending political troubles when the organisers announced at the welcoming dinner that the opening ceremony for the next day might be called off because of a possible curfew. Later that evening, curfew was indeed imposed, causing the matches to be rescheduled and the opening ceremony cancelled.

Sri Lanka is famous for its precious stones. There were two jewellery shops located in the lobby of the hotel and the Malaysian players often visited them merely to inspect the stones. The proprietors had a harrowing time keeping a keen eye on them as they passed the stones to one another for scrutiny as though they were experts. Hopefully, there was no Fagin, a character well known for his sleight of hand in *Oliver Twist* who taught young boys to pick pockets, in the prowling group.

Not allowed to wander beyond Mount Lavinia because of the uncertain political climate, officials and players whiled away most of their free time around the shops. There was a nightclub within the premises. Ashraff, the team manager, made sure the club was off limits to the players. All players had to be in bed early and he enforced this ruling by making periodic checks of every room, even in the wee hours of the morning. One evening, some MRU officials decided to turn up at the nightclub sarong-clad. They were stopped by the bouncers but after explaining that they were in national costume, they were allowed in. They had a gala time. I heard that they sat a table away from a well-known Sri Lankan politician and kept his bodyguards on their toes, what with wild rugby officials scurrying around, up to their usual antics.

The tournament was played at Longden Place, a stadium with the same seating capacity as the Mindef Stadium, Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia and Singapore fought an extremely bruising game, the latter throwing everything into attack to overcome an earlier deficit. Play was held up on several occasions as players exchanged punches and there was a Malaysian casualty before the end. Kneed in the ribs during a line out, I fell, clutching my sides, totally winded and had to leave the field. Malaysia beat Singapore by a hair's breadth, 9 to 7. After the ill-tempered game, the Malaysians and the Singaporeans travelled back to the hotel in the same bus. Just imagine the ensuing taunts and bad mouthing between the rival teams. And of course the patriotic song, *Malaysia Berjaya*, rang out incessantly to the annoyance of the Singaporeans.

In the next game, Malaysia whipped Laos, 31 to 10 while Sri Lanka had a difficult struggle against Singapore, winning 10 to 4. Singapore's loss in that game put it out of contention. Laos had earlier been beaten by Sri Lanka. After these games, the stage was set for the Sri Lanka-Malaysia showdown for the place in the final. This took place on a hot afternoon before a packed stadium with part of the crowd spilling onto the field. The game was fought at a punishing pace, often interrupted by the belligerent partisan crowd, some of whom pelted stones and shouted abuse at the Malaysians.

When a Sri Lankan player was sent off the field for rough tactics in the later part of the second half, the crowd became more intimidating and play was held up for some time to allow the officials to restore order. The Stadium was like a smouldering powder keg about to explode. At a crucial stage, when Sri Lanka was three points ahead, the Malaysian captain was caught off-side during a scrummage in front of the Malaysian goal and the resulting penalty sealed the fate of his team. I shuddered to think of what would have happened if Malaysia had won that game.

The *Ceylon Observer* filed a comprehensive report of the game and part of it read: -

Beat the Tom-toms, sound the cymbals and shout it from the hills, "We've done it". Sri Lanka until the next Asiad rugby comes along in 1976, are number two in the whole wide Asia.

When this Asiad is recalled in the future, that we emerged as one of the finalists won't be the only thing that will be spoken of. Our confrontation with Malaysia will be a memory itself. It has all the stuff to preserve it lastingly in the vaults of our minds. The game was a bitter, unrelenting battle as two teams aware of the chance that might never present itself again of being in an Asian final, pushed almost beyond the point of endurance to make a dream come true.

This victory was celebrated on a grand scale as if Sri Lanka had already won the Asian crown. The euphoria continued for two days, reality setting in only when it was trounced by Japan in the final. An equally tired Malaysian team lost badly to Korea in the third place playoff.

Such a freak draw will never recur as the organisers of the ARFU tournament have since revamped the competition, after taking cognisance of the marked disparity in standards between the teams. Under the revised system, the stronger teams are grouped in Division

One while the minnows are put in Division Two. The rumour has it that China and the Asian republics of the former USSR are likely to become members of the Asian rugby fraternity. Their anticipated participation, particularly China's whose achievements in many sporting endeavours have been internationally acclaimed, is likely to pose a serious challenge to the dominance of the Gang of Three. This development would inject a new lease of life into the tournament resulting in more exciting matches and less predictable results.



At a Regional Rugby Conference in 1974. From left Ng Peng Kong, Mohd. Ashraff (looks over the papers), a Thai delegate and the Singapore delegates...



The Malaysian team to the 1970 Asian Rugby Championship in Bangkok, 1970 at Subang International Airport with two former Michaelians, Ng Peng Kong (back row, twelfth from left) and Cheng Mok Seng (front row sixth from left).



Ronnie Yeo makes a break from the base of the scrummage with Ng Peng Kong and Osman Malek moving in to provide support for the attack at the 1974 Asian Rugby Championship. The Malaysians are in light-coloured jerseys.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE STOICAL MEN OF RUGBY

Rugby is definitely not for the faint-hearted, being appropriately described as a ruffian's game played by gentlemen. A true rugby player has to be physically and mentally enduring, highly disciplined and stoical as well. Kicks to the ribs, a knee in the groin, an elbow in the face and blows to other parts of the anatomy must be absorbed unflinchingly as part and parcel of the game. Especially when such acts appear premeditated. The aggrieved player must be able to control himself and not resort blindly to overt retaliation. Often, most of the victims restrain themselves admirably but at an opportune moment deliver the counterblow covertly. I had no qualms about such covert strikes if I felt the offending acts were intentional. I felt justified in inflicting a warning retaliatory action on the offender to remind him to be more careful with his fists and boots.

During a preliminary match in the Southeast Asian Games in 1975, a hard tackle brought me down. The opponents stomped viciously on me. In the heat of the game I felt little pain. After the match, when I removed my jersey in the changing room, my whole back was a swollen blue-black mass punctuated by darker blotches, the unmistakable marks of studs from boots.

Those who are uninitiated in the game find it difficult to understand that despite the carnage seen in the field in which fallen bodies are booted and flailing limbs are pulled and twisted forcefully as though to wrench them from the joints, the final whistle is able, as if by sleight of hand, to dissipate the antagonism and to immediately replace it by an effusion of embraces, backslapping and handshakes between the opponents. Often, the uninitiated pass snide remarks, "...bunch of clowns killing themselves over a ball that's not even shaped like a ball. Ridiculous!"

To others, rugby players are idiots and sado-masochists, taking pleasure in inflicting pain on each other and willingly accepting

the same. Sado-masochists they may be but they are not idiots in the literal sense, in other words mental retards. Many rugby players are well-qualified and intelligent people. I can confirm this as the Malaysian national team in the 1960s and the 1970s consisted of doctors, engineers, lawyers, accountants, teachers and the Malayan Civil Service (MCS) officers.

I have singled out the MCS because it was and still is, despite its change of name to the Malaysian Administrative and Diplomatic Service, the elite branch of the Public Sector. A number of outstanding players in the Malaysian XV were MCS officers. In recent years, graduates and other professionals have become an endangered species in all levels of rugby, from club to the state and the Malaysian XV; a consequence of rugby's decline in the institutions of higher learning and in the elite schools.

I have even heard that some detractors of the game characterise rugby players as men who harbour homosexual tendencies because of the close physical contact peculiar to the game. As evidence, they point to the scrummage in particular where the opposing players are shoulder-locked, cheek-to-cheek. They claim that no player can get more intimate than in a scrummage. The mind boggles at the reactions of these rugby cynics if they knew that rugby players shower together in the nude after a match. They would then damn rugby players as out and out perverts.

This communal bathing after a match is a common practice if there were suitable changing room facilities. Normally, after a match at the Selangor Club padang in my playing days, the players would adjourn to a particular section of the Long Bar at the Selangor Club to engage in a session of drinking. Then they would walk lazily to the changing room to take their showers. The exhausted players would strip themselves without a care in the world. A few would lie on the benches while others would slouch in the rattan chairs, stark naked. Slumped in their respective positions, it was obvious that all their limbs were limp and so were their appendages. In those moments, the great myth that the size of the male organ

is proportionate to a man's physique is quickly dispelled. My observation over the years in many changing rooms leads me to a contrary conclusion. Often I could hardly make out the appendage in question in some of the big brawny players (who I am sure are grateful I write no names) whereas in some smaller built men it was the burden of manhood.

Another amusing activity to behold in the changing rooms was the sight of expatriate players brushing their teeth in the nude before showering. This routine was usually undertaken by a number of them, standing naked in a line before an array of mirrors, brushing their teeth energetically and sending down reverberations causing their appendages like pendulums of varying lengths to swing in rhythm. What a sight! Occasionally some Asians joined them but theirs were always out of sync with the rhythm of the swaying lengths of the expatriate manhood.

At Twickenham, the shrine of English rugby, the changing room has a number of huge bathtubs, each able to comfortably accommodate two players. When the lady guide mentioned this to our touring party during the visit to the room, I could discern a naughty smile and a twinkle in her eye. She was a very interesting narrator of every significant facility at Twickenham and a good rugby historian.

At the VIP section of the stadium, she invited her touring party to select and sit on the seat that they perceived as providing the best viewing of a match. Through sheer good luck, my father unknowingly sat on the seat that was reserved for the British Queen who is the patron of the Rugby Football Union. He was complimented for his choice. My elder daughter, who was adamant that I visit Twickenham, arranged the tour. She came along to watch her father wander around Twickenham in awe. I would recommend those visiting London to find time for such a tour - it would add icing to anyone's rugby cake.

Back to the changing room at the Selangor Club, the thing that struck me the most was the row of huge ceramic urinals, standing

at over four feet and mounted securely to the wall. The bowl was at ground level in contrast to the conventional ones that were suspended at two feet above ground. Because of the bowl's positioning, it took some skill to relieve oneself. The force of torrential downpour into the bowl inevitably caused a portion of urine to ricochet, wetting the shoes and lower portions of the trousers. "The trick is to urinate at a certain angle at the lower wall of the urinal, thus allowing gravity to cause a natural flow downwards to the bowl. It calls for precision, the act to aim at a proper angle. This is a stringent test even for the most sober of men," said Dr. Chan Onn Leng.

It was common to hear profanities and curses uttered by tipsy players who had leaned too close to the urinals. Many of them rested their heads on one of their arms, crooked firmly against the wall above the urinals, to steady themselves when discharging in powerful jets their beer-filled bladders, resulting in a prodigious spray. They returned to the rugby fellowship, looking embarrassed as a good part of their attire was urine-soaked. "...ah, this wet patch...beer spill..." was often their retort to queries as they put on a brave front. With alcohol-clouded brains, it was difficult for many of them to rationalise that urine gushing forth from a turgid appendage could be likened to a pressurised jet stream which when it hit the urinal, more so at a right angle, could only obey one of Newton's law of motion: to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Ignorance of this law results in unwelcome sprays.

On a more serious note, it cannot be denied that rugby players are highly exposed to injuries in the course of the game. Such risks are magnified if they are not physically fit and do not concentrate fully during play. Serious spinal injuries are more common compared to other sports despite rule changes aimed at making the game safer. In New Zealand, where rugby is the national game, there were eighteen spinal cord injuries reported in a particular year, with a third of those injured winding up in wheelchairs and one fatality, the fate of two players were unknown and the rest although able to walk, had serious residual disabilities. In fact, international records

point to an incidence of death from spinal cord injuries in rugby ranging from 5% to 10%. A recent South African survey showed 19 deaths in 117 cases of injury.

Malaysians players, including schoolboys, also suffered spinal injuries but unfortunately no statistics are available. I lost a good friend, Ng Tat Tay, in a game when he succumbed to injuries received during the final between Cobra and Blackhawks in the Guinness Cup many years ago. He collapsed after a hard knock during a ruck and was rushed to hospital where he passed away. And in the midst of writing this, I read that the Welsh captain, a medical student, suffered a serious neck injury after being trapped in a pile up during a local league game.

Despite the possibility of fatalities and serious injuries, rugby players are still prepared to embrace the risks for the sheer excitement of the game. For many of them, the game is a life long obsession and they are prepared to make great sacrifices for it. Few sportsmen can surpass the grit and determination shown by rugby players. They pursue the game with such zealousness that even the prospect of suffering crippling injuries does not deter them. Perhaps, their mantra is the adage 'better to have loved and lost than not to have loved at all.'

Take the case of Gee Boon Kee, the former national captain who, to prolong his playing career, resorted to surgery to repair his injury prone shoulders. Both his shoulders were often dislocated during matches. His formerly broad and imposing shoulders became truncated and stooped after an operation. It was a heavy price to pay but as his consolation, he went on to become one of the country's finest players.

On the subject of shoulders, the story of Ow Koon Chai, the former Selangor centre, has to be told. Well respected for his feints and swerving runs, the chink in his shining armour was his bad shoulder, which dislocated easily. Whenever this occurred he would clench his teeth, use his good arm to expertly stretch the affected arm until there was a resounding crack. Immediately normalcy

returned and he would trot in again from the sideline. He was so adept at treating his own shoulder that others who suffered similar injuries often sought his help rather than that of the doctor in attendance at the field.

Cuts and gashes are also common mishaps in rugby. Most players desiring to show off their macho image always insisted that their injuries should be treated after the game. In keenly fought matches, doctors were usually kept busy, kneeling beside the injured at the sidelines, merrily suturing away without anaesthetic. These doctors were mainly former players like Dr. Chan Onn Leng, Dr. Ernest Yeoh and Dr. Ronnie Yeo. When Onn Leng had to do any suturing on the foreheads of the injured, he would say, irrespective of the size of the gaping wound, "Ai-ya...a little cut only... can be mended with a couple of stitches...bandage it and go back and play."

In a Cobra versus Serdang Agriculture College match at the University grounds, I was wounded on the forehead. It happened during a tussle for the ball in a line out when I hit my forehead against the wide-open mouth of a Serdang player. His teeth cut a jagged tear on my forehead. It bled so profusely that I had to bandage it with a borrowed handkerchief to continue in the game. There was no doctor in attendance. Dr. Hui Weng Choon, who was a spectator, did not have his first aid kit with him and the treatment was done at his clinic after the game. Fortunately, the jagged scar has faded and is hardly noticeable, thanks to Dr. Hui's deft handiwork. Even my children were unaware of this injury until they read this manuscript.

A former MRU official, Pang Kong Ying, was one of the many casualties who was treated at the sidelines without anaesthetic. He had 43 stitches in all to remind him of his playing days. He maintains that rugby players are made of steel and able to withstand these minor surgeries unflinchingly. Even more serious injuries such as a broken jaw, dented cheek and smashed nose have not discouraged the players. On the contrary they seem determined to play harder after their recovery.

Some years ago, Zain Yusoff was deliberately punched during a ruck. His opponent, an expatriate, having caught his neck in an elbow lock, threw a devastating punch to his jaw, cracking it. Mouth agape and bleeding, he ran off the field making frantic gestures to indicate that he had a broken jaw. I happened to be a spectator at the game and immediately rushed him to hospital. Throughout the journey he was obviously in great pain, supporting his loosened jaw in the palm of his hand. He spent several months recuperating, his jaw heavily wired up. On recovery, he could not resist the allure of the game and was soon back on the field as if his nasty experience had taught him nothing.

Likewise, Cobra's wily scrum half, Mohd Ali took a hefty kick on the chin resulting in a deep gash. Barely a week later, he was back on the field rallying his team with gusto into counter attacks in the final of the Anchor league.

Even in retirement, many former players cling firmly to the spirit of the game. Whenever they meet, there are the inevitable sessions of story telling and reminiscences of past glories. Another telltale sign of their devotion is the wearing of the casual T-shirts of striking colours and designs with the word 'Rugby' emblazoned across the chest. Such exhibitionist traits have helped in boosting their flagging manly ego, making them feel proud to belong to a rugged fraternity despite the receding hairline, balding pate and paunch. Ladies with rugby boyfriends more often than not are unaware that the winsome smiles are only possible because of 'natural looking' dentures, for most, if not all, of the gleaming teeth have been sacrificed at rugby's altar.

Many former players take pride in showing off the telltale scars of injuries suffered during their playing days and flaunt them as their badges of honour. Erstwhile player turned coach, Ibrahim Busu (affectionately known as Busu) had a number of such badges. Besides showing his crooked index finger and the scar near his eyebrow, he never hesitated to loosen his collar to expose the unsightly growth on the back of his neck. This always drew gasps

of horror from his audience. "Is that a deformity?", they would ask. "No...no..." he replied, swearing that it was a legacy of a true blue prop inherited from the punishing toil of the scrummage.

Allow me to enlighten those not familiar with the demands expected of a good prop. A prop is one of the sixteen players involved in an orthodox scrummage. Each team has to supply eight players, binding one another together in a three-row formation, the first row consists of three men, (the middle man is the hooker and men on either side of him are the props). the second row has four, (the two inner men are the locks and the two outer men are the wing forwards or flankers) and the man in the last row is known as the Number 8. In this formation, this set of players in a crouching stance engage in a pushing manoeuvre against the opposing set of eight players who are similarly bent and bound, the players in the two front rows interlocking shoulders to make the scrummage whole.

A scrummage is called for by the referee following infringements of the laws of the game as in a knock-on or a forward pass and is formed at the spot where the offences happened. A player, usually the scrum half, of the team not responsible for the stoppage of play puts the ball in the tunnel between the two front rows and the players attempt to heel it back for their team to initiate an attack with. Normally, the scrum half will retrieve the ball when it comes out from the back of his set of players and relays it to the back line composed of a stand off or fly half, an inner centre, the outer centre, two wingers and the full back.

Being in the front row, a prop is required not only to ensure the stability of the scrummage but also to provide the thrust to propel his pack to gain territorial advantage. Interlocking shoulders with the opposing prop, he has to bear the brunt of pressure both from the opposing pack and his team-mates pushing him from behind. Unless he is strong, he will probably collapse under such stress, possibly folding up like an accordion.

Busu was a tough prop in his prime who was able to vanquish many brawny expatriates. Tipping the scales at over 220 pounds and standing at over six foot, he was able to withstand his ground against great odds. Occasionally, he could even propel some of the opposing props up into the air with the combined strength of his broad shoulders and ample nape. Such tactics caused great friction to that part of his anatomy. Small wonder then that after prolonged exposure for over three decades in that physically demanding position, beginning in the school team and then in the state and national sides, Busu developed his unique 'Prop's Hump', the size of a golf ball. Had he not retired from the game, it would probably have grown to the proportions of a camel hump.

It was Busu's view that any prop who did not develop this hump was considered an amateur. In this regard, he had great respect for a former Armed Forces prop, Tan Tai Fatt, who has a similar growth, though smaller. In Busu's books, the size of the growth reflects the calibre of the prop. If Busu's claim were true, I wonder what the telltale sign of an experienced hooker, the player who is always enmeshed in the centre of the scrummage, would be.

It was on the morning of the day when I was to leave for England to visit my two daughters that I received the sad news of Busu's demise. I was one of the first few to arrive at his house. His widow Mary rushed up to me in tears. She was understandably inconsolable as she and the late Busu had been inseparable; always together at matches and in the Cobra clubhouse. I felt extremely sorry for being unable to attend the funeral as I had to finalise my travel arrangements to leave by the night flight.

But I felt Busu deserved an obituary and it had to be written by a friend who had known him well as a former player. Immediately I sat down to write one. I was happy to learn on my return from London that all the leading dailies carried it. It was a fitting tribute to Busu. *The Sun* provided the most apt title, *Rugby's Man for all Seasons Passes Away*. The obituary reads:-

Another priceless page from rugby's ever thinning book has been torn away with the passing of Ibrahim Busu yesterday. He was fifty-five.

In his heyday, Busu was an awesome player. Powerfully built and towering over six foot, he was an expert at delivering the killer blow in the lines with the swipe of his bulky arm. On one occasion a foreign player paid a heavy price for the audacity of challenging him in an aerial duel for the ball. Busu felled him like cut timber.

I knew Busu when we played together for Cobra, then a fledgling team. Subsequently we represented Selangor and Malaysia for many seasons, he the indomitable prop and I the flanker.

His bulky presence was of great comfort to his team as it cast an intimidating shadow on the opponents. At one HMS Malaya Cup fixture played at Ipoh, I was felled by a vicious tackle and stomped upon mercilessly at the instigation of the partisan crowd.

Busu rushed to my aid, standing astride my battered body, looking defiant. Had it not for his timely rescue, I might have suffered grave injuries. Understandably, neither of us was liked by the Perak crowd who looked upon us as traitors. We were originally from Perak.

Once off the field, his ferocity immediately disappeared. He was a kind and helpful person who was ready to lend a sympathetic ear and the comfort of his broad shoulders to friend and foe alike, in fact to anyone who was in need.

After he retired as player, Busu continued to be involved in the administration of the game in many roles at different times - coach, manager and advisor. But his greatest love, no doubt had always been for his club, Cobra, he being one of its founding fathers. And Cobra like a spoilt child

had always made exacting demands for his time and attention whenever it was in crisis.

He never failed to respond, tending to Cobra's needs at the expense of his leisure and family. Indeed theirs was a special bond, symbiotic and paternalistic in nature to the envy of many.

Personally, I will miss him greatly, especially for his rugby tales and anecdotes to assist me in my writings. He was truly rugby's encyclopaedia with his clarion recollections of past events.

Now my great regret is that he is no longer around to scrutinise my book on Malaysian rugby when it comes out. I realise it will be but a scant consolation to his loving wife, Mary to know that I have already immortalised his memory in that book.

Farewell, my friend. You may not be around physically, but we and Cobra know that you will always live on in our hearts and your presence behind the Cobra Bar will always be felt.

When I was in London, I told my two daughters about the passing of Uncle Busu. They had known him ever since they were toddlers. Busu used to tease them when they were adolescents by saying that they were my darling dates, as they would both cling lovingly to me, one on each arm, whenever we had a stroll in Bangsar.

It has dawned upon me that I have become the unofficial rugby obituarist, having memorialised many departed rugby friends. I am happy to do this last favour for my rugby friends but sometimes I wonder if anyone would do this for me. To this, my daughters responded, "We will write you a nice piece, Papa." In spite of this assurance, I think I should write one for myself and keep it handy. This exercise, though bizarre, is certainly worth thinking about. At

least, I would be certain that the obituary has my personal touch and approval.

To return to more serious discussions, in recent years, players have resorted to wearing shorts with thicker seams to minimise injuries. The mouth-guard, which safeguards the teeth from being knocked out, has been an integral part of the gear worn by players from many rugby-playing countries. But this accessory is rarely worn locally. Even the expatriates of yesteryear did not wear them, complaining that it was uncomfortable. None, however, can dispute its usefulness, as not only does it protect the teeth but also prevents serious injuries to the mouth and tongue, especially from a vicious kick or an upper cut. The MRU should make the wearing of mouth-guards compulsory.

The headgear is better designed as compared to the old fashioned scrum-cap. It is becoming a vogue nowadays judging from the increasing numbers of players wearing them. Made of hardened but flexible foam and available in assorted colours, the headgear is normally worn by the forwards, particularly those in the second row and the Number 8. It is to protect the head from injuries, especially the ears. In the scrummage, these players have to bind in with their shoulders locked on the buttocks of their team-mates, their heads wedged in around the hip joints of the two players in front. When the scrummage is unstable, the pack would sway erratically causing the locked-in heads to suffer immense rubbing motion from the hip-bones, particularly around the ears. Over time this rubbing routine would cause the ears to be deformed so that they look cauliflower.

The old fashioned scrum-cap which resembled the pilot's headgear of the last war was a favourite accessory of Phuah See Lye. Occasionally, he played for the Selangor Club as a hooker. He was a flamboyant and an eccentric character with a good heart. Whenever the Cobra team was held up in chaotic traffic on its way to play its fixtures, See Lye would not hesitate to alight from his car to play traffic cop at critical junctions, making sure Cobra had

a smooth and uninterrupted ride. I was privileged to have known him for many years. When he passed away, I wrote him a tribute which was published in a daily, *See Lye - Colourful and Lovable* and is reproduced below:-

Mention Phuah See Lye in local rugby circles and it immediately brings to mind the lovable comic character, *Sporting Sam*. Both characters shared strikingly similar traits.

To many See Lye was a controversial man, unbending in his views. But it was his eccentricities that endeared him to the rugby fraternity, one of which was his penchant for outlandish attire.

As a hooker for the Royal Selangor Club when the team was staffed mainly by expatriates, See Lye played with a headgear tightly strapped on to protect his skull and ears and wore old fashioned boots which wrapped his ankles.

In this garb, he looked as though he had leapt out from the pages of the early 20th century rugby. Being diminutive in stature he looked completely weighed down by his greatly oversized jersey and baggy blue shorts, giving the impression that he was already exhausted before the start of the game.

The fans would holler and clap encouraging him whenever he made laborious attempts to sneak pass the defence. Alas, in most pile-ups, he was inevitably flattened at the bottom. But yet he survived the rigours of the game and retired physically intact.

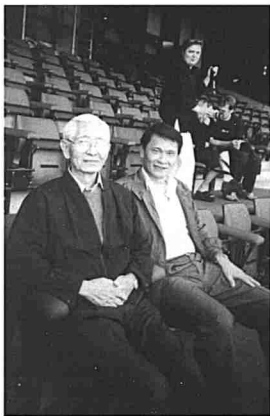
As a spectator he was always dressed in immaculate white - shorts, short-sleeved shirt and knee length stockings, reminiscent of the English planters of colonial days. On those occasions, he was entertaining with his antics, mimicking many rugby personalities as he busied himself, patrolling the lines.

He was an extremely generous man, treating his friends to drinks. At a recent party, he brought along a sheepskin bag filled with beer, which he squirted at his friends who enjoyed it and obligingly opened their mouths to receive the beer.

When not carousing with the rugby lads, he assumed a more serious responsibility, involving himself in charitable works and other social movements. He died on Boxing Day. His passing has robbed rugby of one of its most colourful and lovable character.



At the Klang Club, 1968. From left, front row - Ng Boon Keat, Ibrahim Busu and Ng Peng Kong; from left, back row - Jimmy Yong, Ow Koon Chai, Don Hunn and Ahmad Mahmud.



Ng Peng Kong poses at the entrance to Twickenham Stadium and his father, Ng Yeow Hean, sits regally on the seat reserved for British Queen who is the Rugby Football Union's patron.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE GOOD FELLOWSHIP AND VANISHING GROUNDS

Mention rugby and alcoholic beverages immediately come to mind. This inextricable link probably originated from the game's close identification with the Europeans during the colonial era. Then all Europeans, without exception, were stereotyped by Malaysians as heavy drinkers and alcoholics. This notion was compounded by the brewers who, recognising the advertising mileage to be gained by associating with an undeniably manly sport, readily consented to sponsor rugby. The existence of the rugby-brewer connection in the past cannot be denied as the fellowship after the game always saw beer flowing freely and non-drinkers were required to join in to avoid ostracism. Beer drinking was then an integral part of a player's rite of passage.

Indeed, the suggestion of contemporary accounts that the amount of liquor and alcohol consumed at the lavish hospitality receptions to fete the officers and crew of the *HMS Malaya* during its visit to this country in 1921 was sufficient to keep the good ship itself afloat on it. This metaphor truly reflected the prodigious thirst rugby players had for alcoholic drinks!

The alcohol factor had also played a role in building up Cobra's cash reserves in its early years. Cobra organised a number of pub-crawls for cash but the grandest one was on 29th October 1972 with its highly publicised pub-crawl competition, 'Pub-Pub-Thon-Thon'. At that time, a new brand of beer had just been introduced and the brewer, anxious to quickly establish it in the competitive market, sponsored that pub-crawl. Dr. Chan Onn Leng drew up the rules governing this competition, which among others penalised "unruly behaviour unbecoming of a drinking gentleman". Every participant was required to drink one bottle of beer at each and every pub visited within three hours, starting from the Cellar owned

by Kim Tai. The list of these pubs, all in the Petaling Jaya region, was printed on the back of a competition card issued to each participant who had to have a second to drive him around. Everyone had a fun-filled day and stories were told of Cobra officials going around the circuit to locate those stragglers and their errant seconds who could not find their way home.

I was introduced to beer because of rugby. I must confess to being a poor drinker even to this day. I tend to turn lobster-red immediately after consuming one glass of beer. I remember an occasion when I drank before an intra-club social game and kept on asking my team-mates why the field was green. There were stories of drunken players running around the field like headless cockerels and one even scored against his own side because the referee was also drunk! In rugby, there is no such thing as scoring an own try but the drunken referee vehemently defended his wrong decision and got away with it. It was then the usual practice to quench the thirst a wee bit before the start of any social game at Cobra, though some could not resist the temptation to down more. They were excused anyway as the occasion was mainly for fellowship.

But it was an astonishing experience to behold the vast quantity of beer rugby players consumed and the speed with which they did it after a match and at social functions. There was the inevitable boat-race where two teams of drinkers attempted to out-do the other in speed drinking. Many drinkers merely poured the beer down their gullets, and placed the emptied glasses upside down on their heads, within a split second. A truly remarkable feat when considering the fact that not a drop was spilt!

But one particular person stood out amongst them for being a drinker *extraordinaire*. An aggressive prop in the Cobra Fangs, Ng Chee Heng was not only lightning quick in gulping down his beer but he also chewed the glass like he was munching some crispy snacks. After this performance, he would casually wiped his mouth and burped loudly. Often before the start of a boat-race, Cobra would call upon Chee Heng to demonstrate his stunt which had

the audience astounded. And the opponents were visibly shaken when it was announced that he was merely a reserve! Cobra nicknamed him 'the glass eating Heng'.

This tradition of beer drinking is no longer widely practised as the new generation of players has been brought up in a different environment. Today, most rugby players are teetotallers and not sociable ones as well. Immediately after a tournament, many participating teams would leave for home, hardly bothering to take part in any after-game fellowship in contrast to yesteryear. In those bygone days, an after-match rugby dinner was an elaborate occasion. The teams would attend smartly attired, some in suit and tie. There were the lengthy sessions of speeches, toasts, ribald jokes, hard drinking and loud singing. At the end of the evening, everyone would stagger out of the dining room, open-collared and dishevelled.

Selangor Club was a popular place for such functions, the menu originally being the famous steak and kidney pie. This later made way for chicken curry rice to suit the taste of increasing numbers of Malaysian players. Recently, I heard that the *kangkong* fried in *belachan* (fish paste) has made its appearance. A connoisseur would be able to discern the changes rugby has undergone in the racial make-up of teams over the years by looking at the old and the new menus and the dishes served at such functions. My sympathies go to the present handful of foreigners who have to endure eating the spicy dishes and sweating at the brows!

Nowadays, there is little merriment at such functions and the lack of free flowing beer has certainly not helped to loosen things up. Dennis Pestana, an ex-Cobra president, lamented the passing of such a cherished rugby tradition in an article in 1985 entitled, *Where is that Rugby Spirit*. (19th Cobra Tens souvenir programme) An excerpt of it is reproduced below:-

Where have all the friendships, songs, jokes and other traditions gone? Even drinks after the game have disappeared. Only the Royal Selangor Club tries very hard to carry on with this age-old tradition. Now that

Cobra has a clubhouse, I am sure we will carry on with this tradition of inviting our opponents for a drink - even if it's a soft drink if that's what players drink today. At least the friendship and spirit of the game will be carried on. There will be fewer enemies and more friends.

Maybe we should re-introduce those good old sit down dinners of steak and kidney pie and all dressed up in long sleeve and tie. Today victory whether at state or club level is not celebrated. Recognition for the victor or finalist has disappeared - you simply eat, have a few soft drinks and go home. Why have such a function? It's a waste of time. I say let's stop all this and bring back the good old 'Mat Salleh' days - steak and kidney pie, speeches, toasts, dirty jokes, with beer and songs all night long.

The next day you wake up with a splitting headache, you know you have played and enjoyed your rugby.

Guinness has been involved in rugby in a big way. I was fortunate to have had financial assistance from Guinness for Selangor rugby throughout my tenure as president of the Selangor Rugby Union (SRU). Flush with cash, mainly due to this generous assistance, the SRU was not only able to purchase corporate membership in Cobra, enabling the committee members and the state team to utilise Cobra's facilities but it also had a healthy reserve of funds at the end of my presidency.

The Guinness rugby tournament is the oldest rugby league in the country. In its thirty-year history, the Guinness Cup has only been won by six teams, with Cobra having won it for an unsurpassed record of nine times. It was in 1968 that Mohd Ashraff, then SRU president, suggested the idea of a tournament for the champion teams, a proposal taken up by Guinness. The Guinness Cup tournament witnessed some of the greatest rugby finals in the local annals of the game. In 1971, Cobra was trailing Selangor Club, a mainly expatriate outfit, 3 to 8 in injury time. Cobra looked doomed at that time as all its moves were effectively contained. Then lanky

Rahman Yahya breached the gap with a dropped goal, making the score 6 to 8. In the dying seconds, Cobra won a crucial line out. The ball was swiftly relayed by the forwards and the three quarters to winger Raoul Huet. He then ran the run of his life and scored a try at the corner. It was a dramatic finish and Cobra pipped its opponents to win, 9 to 8.

Many spectators, however, thought that the referee had allowed too much 'injury time' as he kept looking at his watch constantly and the evening was already shrouded in darkness. Visibility was poor. In the gathering dusk, part of the crowd was heard yelling, "Full time, ref! Full time!" I played for Cobra in that match and honestly felt that Selangor Club was cheated of that game - the referee had given too much extra time to compensate for permitted delays during that game.

After the game, every Cobra player sighed with relief that he did not falter in that critical passing manoeuvre. Otherwise, he would be the villain of the piece if he had made a silly mistake with the ball like a knock-on or a forward pass to make the referee blow for the end of the game. Unlike most sports, a rugby referee does not whistle to end the game when the ball is not yet 'dead' even if playing time has expired. He will do so only when play breaks down because of infringements and the ball becomes 'dead'.

The Guinness Cup final saw another exciting finish in a match between Cobra and RMAF Blackhawks where the capacity crowd was baying for Cobra's blood. It was in this game that Cobra's hooker, Ng Tat Tay collapsed after a hard ruck and was rushed to hospital where he passed away. A riot erupted in the stadium when Cobra was awarded a penalty in injury time with the score tied at 6 all. Incensed supporters invaded the field and assaulted the referee, Tan Hock Leong, a senior police officer. The match was abandoned and Cobra was declared the winner by default. In the aftermath of that tragic and unruly match, the MRU imposed a life ban on a number of Blackhawks players. This, however, was later lifted on appeal.

In yet another episode, a Blackhawks player sprinted down the flank, determined to make the crucial try as his team was trailing Anchorman, 9 to 10. He was, however, stopped in his tracks by Ahmad Mahmud's bone crunching tackle. He fell, breaking his leg, a sacrifice made in vain.

The Guinness Cup provided some amusing moments as well. In the late 1960s, Ibrahim Busu rubbed his face with Sloan's so as to sting the opponents' eyes in the scrummages. Some years later, a Selangor Club player smeared smelly and pungent *belachan* (fish paste) on his head, irritating the nostrils and fouling the air in the scrummages. So unbearable was the stench, that Tan Tai Fatt, the prop, protested loudly to referee, Ishak Abidin, who after sniffing the smelly head in typical canine style, overruled the objection. Reliable sources told me that those who had excessively inhaled the pungent smell swore off eating *belachan* forever.

In a Police versus Selangor Club final, the Club's hooker, in a desperate attempt to upset the momentum of the Police attack, resorted to ungentlemanly tactics. He felled his opposite number with a head butt in a scrum. This failed to win the game for the Club but did cause the offending hooker to have recurring headaches ever since. The Guinness Cup has seen it all, excitement, hilarity and regrettably, tragedy.

Another corporation, which deserves mention for its commitment to rugby for many years, is the Boh Tea Plantations. Many present day rugby fans may be surprised that there was a tournament named the Boh League. The corporation was extremely generous. For prizes, it gave hampers of tea products that could last a family a whole year. For obvious reasons, such prizes were not immediately unwrapped compared to Guinness' which were consumed with gusto even before the prize presentation ceremony was concluded.

The Selangor Club padang was not only the favourite venue for the Guinness Cup and the Boh League finals but also for many other important rugby tournaments. The Cobra Tens, for instance, was first staged there. According to J. B. Potter, the MRU president

in 1963, the padang was, "that home of rugby in Malaysia...of which many of us older hands have such nostalgic memories." Many HMS Malaya Cup finals were played there. Rugby lost this venue when it was developed into the Dataran Merdeka in the late 1980s. Victoria Institution was another popular venue, chosen primarily because the MRU could collect gate as it was in an enclosed compound. The only drawback with this ground was that the balls occasionally became entangled in the big trees fringing the pitch.

Although the grounds at the Language Institute Pantai fell short of the minimum dimensions required of a rugby pitch, it was also extensively used for minor league games. Plateau-like, play there was frequently interrupted because the ball would often roll down the '*belukar*' covered slopes, making it difficult to retrieve. Occasionally, players also rolled down the slopes during tussles in the lines and scrummages close to the edge.

When the Mindef Stadium at Jalan Padang Tembak was used, players occasionally fell into the monsoon drain in front of the grandstand after a tackle near the line. On one occasion an entire pack found itself in the drain, the players drenched to the skin, after being pushed into it by the opponents during a scrummage. Once Gee Boon Kee tackled an opponent near the line and both rolled into the drain. The added complication to this venue was the fact that it was also used for other sporting activities. Another stipulation for use was the military had priority rights. It was therefore never an easy task to get a confirmed booking for rugby.

The Jalan Utara pitch in Petaling Jaya, although overused and pockmarked with exposed sandy patches, is now in great demand because of the dearth of suitable venues. This pitch, which is near the Cobra clubhouse was cared for by Cobra in the early years when it was a forbidding pebble-strewn terrain infested by weeds and thorny vegetation. Cobra members spent many hours in the hot afternoon sun to make the ground playable, pulling out the weeds and the thorns with pliers and *changkul* (a hoe). Some even

used their bare hands to do this menial task because of the shortage of gardening implements. This dedicated gang of workers (with a number of women wearing large straw hats to protect themselves from the sun) slogged away for weeks in this backbreaking work while members of the public frolicked or played soccer on areas that had been worked over without even a murmur of thanks, probably thinking that these Cobra men and women were local municipal workers.

Besides, Cobra badgered the local authority responsible for maintaining this field, pleading with it to upgrade the area and enlisting influential rugby personalities to push its case in those years. Cobra can look back with pride at its sense of civic-consciousness and activism in this matter even though it was driven mainly by its selfish rugby interest. However, it is a win-win situation as the larger community benefited as well.

The Kelana Jaya Stadium is increasingly becoming a popular venue for rugby competitions despite the perils posed by the existence of the running tracks encircling the field. As the Stadium was built for soccer and athletics, the ground layout severely restricts the playing enclosure for rugby. Rugby's field of play is hemmed in by an elliptical shaped running circuit with the touch lines and the tracks in close proximity. The in-goal areas, much reduced in dimensions, are practically marked on the tracks. To diminish dangers to players, the offending sections are normally covered with canvas and rubber mats. These compromises show how desperate rugby has become in its search for venues. Hopefully, no serious injury will result from rugby's use of this stadium.

In the late 1980s, the MRU started a campaign to secure a permanent ground for rugby. It wanted a venue it could maintain in accordance with acceptable international standards. A rugby pitch is rectangular in shape. The field-of-play is 100 metres long and 70 metres wide and at each end, two goal posts are erected. The two posts, 5.6 metres apart, are joined by a crossbar 3 metres from the ground. These posts, also commonly known as the uprights,

are extended upwards to a total height of usually 7.62 metres (they have to exceed the minimum height of 3.4 metres). Behind each set of goal posts is a rectangular in-goal area measuring 22 metres long (but not less than 10 metres) by 70 metres in which tries are scored.

A try is scored when a player carries the ball into his opponents' in-goal area and grounds it or grounds a loose ball found therein. After a try, the scoring team has a right to take a kick at goal, known as a conversion, either a place kick or a drop kick, and a score is effected if the kick goes over the crossbar and between the goal posts. The kick at conversion has to be taken at a spot in the field-of-play anywhere on a line through the place where the try was scored. The kicker chooses the spot that he is comfortable with after taking into account the distance and angle of kick vis-à-vis the goal. Presently, a try is worth five points and a conversion two.

A place kick is when the ball is placed on the ground for the kick at goal whereas a drop kick is executed by the kicker letting the ball fall from his hands to the ground and kicking it at its first rebound. Scoring points by drop kicks are also common strategies adopted by attacking players whenever they are in a vantage position close to the posts. A dropped goal effected in this fashion is worth three points. There was an incredible goal scored in this manner by Cobra's Jack Lee from mid-field in a Cobra versus Singapore Blacks game. Players and spectators were stunned by his feat, including himself! It had to be a fluke, a flash in the pan as for the rest of his rugby career, he was unable to conjure a replay of such freakish performance.

This campaign which had identified Padang Merbok along Jalan Parlimen as a suitable site lost its steam mid-way. It is difficult to understand why the authorities cannot provide rugby with a permanent venue when hockey and tennis which are not as popular as rugby have several modern venues built for them. Maybe the comparative popularity of these sports is a moot point but crowd

turnouts at hockey and tennis matches have been disappointing on most occasions. On the other hand, rugby seems to have the edge with a discernibly larger crowd.

At the height of this campaign, I wrote an article entitled, *Give MRU a Permanent Home*. It is reproduced below:-

Rugby, adhering to the age old practice of the wild catters and gold prospectors has already staked its claim on the recently restored Padang Merbok in the Federal capital by the conspicuous presence of a solitary rugby post at a strategic spot. Enquiries as to who was responsible for the post's erection drew a blank. If it were the work of the local authorities, could it be assumed that they were thinking of allocating the field to rugby?

Furthermore, the staging of the 1989 Carlsberg Jonah Jones rugby tournament at the Padang Merbok has helped to raise optimism that the claim could yet succeed, considering that it was the first major sporting event to be held on the newly re-turfed padang.

To the soothsayers, such happenings are encouraging omens for rugby and the players who have been leading a nomadic existence moving from one venue to another to play important matches each year, depending solely on the goodwill of the owners.

Former MRU treasurer, Chooi Tat Chew remembers those times when he and the secretary had to do the perennial rounds, pleading with the owners for the use of their fields. "It was just like putting out the alms bowl each time..." he said.

At some venues, the MRU had to expand enormous energies and resources in restoring the dilapidated fields, including replacing sub-standards goal posts, filling in the potholes, levelling certain sections of undulating ground,

returfing the tracts of sandy patches and lopping off branches of trees that overhang into the area of play.

Of the many venues, the Selangor Club padang was undoubtedly one of the favourites, despite its proneness to floods after a heavy downpour. There were occasions when the Fire Brigade had to be summoned to pump out excess water before play could commence. To enable gate collections the field had to be fenced up with many yards of thick canvas. But this venue was lost to rugby when the Dataran Merdeka was built on it.

At the Victoria Institution, play was frequently interrupted when the high kicks for touch saw the ball caught in the twisted branches of the big trees fringing the pitch. In order to retrieve it, the lesser MRU officials would clamber up the trees to shake the branches. More often than not, many such balls could not be reached as they were entangled in the upper-most branches. Such losses proved costly and there were suggestions, jokingly made, that the MRU officials should return after every rainstorm to collect the balls that would have dropped from the trees like ripen durians.

The University of Malaya and the Mindef Stadium were once popular venues but their physical layouts which encouraged fans to sneak in without paying, made them unsuitable for staging Cup finals. The barriers at the Mindef Stadium do not really deter gatecrashes as they are not of great height in many places while the entry to the University campus is generally open to the general public.

Even though early approvals for the use of these venues had been confirmed, they were, however, subject to revocation at the eleventh hour. The MRU was placed in a quandary on those occasions when this happened as it entailed a frantic search for an alternative site. One such occasion happened in 1974 when the authority cancelled

its earlier approval for MRU's use of the Mindef Stadium because it was subsequently designated as a pitch for World Cup hockey and was closed for renovation.

The MRU had made many efforts in the past to secure a permanent ground but all came to naught. The authorities were somehow not sympathetic to its cause. Securing a place of its own would save time and energy on the search for venues that could better be utilised on other more important matters. Also, the MRU would be made responsible for maintaining it in keeping with acceptable international standards, thereby enabling good rugby to be played.

Many rugby enthusiasts who were at the Jonah Jones tournament considered the Padang Merbok as perfect for rugby because of its excellent drainage and ideal location, being easily accessible to the public and having a large car park in the vicinity.

In his welcoming speech at the reception for the teams of the 1989 Jonah Jones, Tan Sri Hamzah Abu Samah, president of the Selangor Club, alluded to the golden era of rugby and lamented at its subsequent decline. Being also the president of the Olympic Council of Malaysia, he has the necessary clout to influence the authorities.

In fact, both he and Datuk Bandar, who is well-known for his strong support for sports, should assist the MRU to acquire the Padang Merbok. After all, the latter has also recently shown a keen interest in rugby with the formation of the Dewan Bandaraya Dragons, which has within a short period proven itself to be a strong team.

Hopefully, the solitary upright found at Padang Merbok, stretching high up in the air like arms raised in supplication for blessing from Providence could yet make the MRU's dream come true.



The champion beer drinking team from Cobra. The beer goes down the gullet with incredible speed. (From left to right), Brian Webb (judge), Yap Hoon Kuan, Dr. Chan Onn Leng, Kim Tai Swee Len, Yeoh Cheang Swi, Werner Krebs and Anton Robinson.



PUB — PUB — THON — THON 1972

(The Cobra Pub Crawl Competition)

Dear Sir,

This Pub Crawl competition is organised by the Combined Old Boys Rugby Association to raise funds for our Club House Project.

The undermentioned person is a bonafide competitor, and in order that he be eligible to compete, he requires sponsors, either to donate a lump sum or to donate a fixed sum for each pub visited.

We hope that you are familiar with this Club's aims to promote Rugby chiefly and National Unity in the process, and will do justice to our objects by your generosity in your donations.

NAME OF COMPETITOR:

Kim Tai
President
COBRA

The competition card for the greatest pub-crawl in local history... the back is printed with the participating pubs in the Petaling Jaya area. All participants must complete the pub-circuit within three hours. "Penalty points will be deducted for vomiting... and for unruly behaviour unbecoming of a drinking gentleman."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE PROTAGONISTS AND EXHIBITIONISTS

In recent years, two local Service teams namely Police United and the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) Blackhawks have been in the limelight of Selangor rugby, sweeping everything before them. In most finals, these two teams had fought it out for the honours while the others vied for minor placings.

Their achievements were nothing to shout about as they were expected to prevail over the other club sides. The Police United and the RMAF Blackhawks were then the *alter egos* of their respective sides (the Royal Malaysian Police and the Malaysian Armed Forces) in the Agong's Cup, the premier rugby tournament in the country. When both these sides demolished the various state teams in this premier competition, little was left to the imagination as to the fortunes of the club teams which met them in the Selangor leagues.

Both the Royal Malaysian Police and the Malaysian Armed Forces were latecomers to the national rugby circuits. It was only at the start of the 1971 season that the Police began to play under its own banner by which time the Armed Forces was already a battle-scarred veteran campaigner of five seasons past. Before these two teams competed in the HMS Malaya Cup, their players were much in demand by the respective state teams where they were serving.

In its preparations for every HMS Malaya Cup game, the Malaysian Police would assemble all its players who were scattered throughout the country, serving in the various Police contingents, at Police Depot Kuala Lumpur for centralised training. This was also the case when it was preparing to play its scheduled yearly rugby matches against the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) and the Royal Thai Police. The clash against the MAF was for the Fenner

trophy donated by Dato Sir Claude Fenner, an expatriate who was the first Inspector General of Police. The annual match between the Malaysian Police and its Thai counterpart was initiated in 1961. This periodic call-up, a rugby mobilisation, required much logistical planning which ultimately persuaded the Police authorities to transfer all the key rugby players from the states to serve in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Most of them were posted to the Police Depot, Kuala Lumpur and this sudden infusion of talents also benefited the Depot team which was already participating in the Selangor league. From a lame duck, the Depot team quickly emerged as one of the strongest challengers for local honours.

The Police had several outstanding players who also played for Malaysia. Among them were Zubir Ahmad, Boon Onn Leong and Aziz Shariff. Zubir Ahmad is remembered for his 35 yard conversation from an acute angle in the final seconds of the 1967 international between Malaysia and Singapore which resulted in the former winning at 13 to 12. Since its entry into the HMS Malaya Cup competition, the Police team had always been an all-Malaysian side.

It was a different story for the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) in its early quest for HMS Malaya Cup glory. Upon its admission to the HMS Malaya Cup in 1966, it depended on a rugby bedrock of eight British military personnel who were serving its different corps on secondment; one was Nick Raffle, an ex-Cambridge Blue and the other W. P. C. Thurgood, formerly of Hampshire county. The team was dominated by Army officers, mostly holding the rank of captain. Former Perak fly half, Wong Hin Jee, was appointed the team's skipper. He executed this responsibility ably. In recognising his leadership and playing qualities, the MRU appointed him as national captain in 1967 for the second time and also the fly half in the North squad for the North versus South Annual Classic of that year. He scored a penalty and a conversion to give North a narrow win, 8 to 5. A news report heaped glowing praise on his masterly role in that game, "The architect for North's victory was undoubtedly pint-sized Wong Hin Jee of the Malaysian Armed Forces who played brilliantly."

In later years, the Army lost its preponderance of numbers in the MAF team to a tough and mean Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) squadron based at Kuala Lumpur. This RMAF team, which was later to add the title 'Blackhawks' to its name, was literally bursting at the seams with quality players, thanks to the encouragement and support shown by its top commanders. One of them was Lieutenant-Colonel (Air) Zakaria Yusoff and the other the Chief of the Air Force himself, General Shaharuddin Ali. Concomitant with this development, many RMAF players, the likes of Lee Nyuk Fah, Sunsubaha Baharuddin, Lee Wen Bin and Tan Tai Fatt experienced a meteoric rise to national rugby fame.

In the 1960s and the early 1970s, civilian teams like Selangor Club, University Blues, Serdang, Petaling Jaya Club, Anchorman, Cobra and the Negri Sembilan Chinese Recreation Club XV, proved too strong for the local Service sides in the Selangor rugby leagues.

This period also saw the marked presence of civilian players whose idiosyncrasies added an amusing touch to the rugby scene. Giant of a man and Maori All Blacks trialist, Dan Ellison played barefooted, Tim Sheehan in his slit boots and Dr. Wong Sau How in his silky shorts. Ng Boon Keat, (nicknamed the Chinese Bhai because of his bushy beard), a prop, deliberately cropped his bushy beard to grow a bristly stubble to rub against his opponent's face in the scrummages. Ahmad Mahmud always played in highly polished boots and Kamarulzaman Maarof, the well-groomed gentleman, had a miniature comb stuck in his stockings. And of course there was Ibrahim Busu's trick of rubbing copious amounts of Sloan's liniment on his face to irritate the opponents in the scrummages. Many years later, when he returned as a tourist, Tim Sheehan complained that his eyesight was failing due to excessive contact with Ibrahim Busu and his Sloan's in the scrummages. Both were props in their respective teams.

Zainal Yen and Ow Koon Chai were two other colourful players, respected for their feinting skills. The hypnotic effect achieved by their ability to duck and swerve created a now you see it, now you

don't illusion. It was no wonder that many defenders became disorientated when either Zainal or Ow cast his spell.

Zainal was a strong sprinter who required open spaces to execute his deceptive swerves. Shouts of "...get him, on the left...on the left," was commonly heard reverberating across the pitch but the phalanx of defenders who were already alarmed by his incisive runs had never been able to keep their cool. They always moved in total disarray. His opponents claimed that he had a tendency to feint to the left, not that such knowledge helped them to bring him down. Others refused to be confused by his manoeuvring, preferring to wait for him to come within tackling distance. "Concentrate ...concentrate...look at him in the eyes," they mumbled, but yet in the next second...whoosh! Zainal had already flashed past them and was heading towards the uprights. More often than not, they misjudged his speed as he cleverly alternated between acceleration and deceleration. He would normally gain much territory, splitting the defence wide open before he was caught.

Ow Koon Chai on the other hand was noted for his swerving acts on the spot, a ruse to draw the opponents to him. "Why, the guy is merely running on the spot...surround him..." was the common catch cry heard across the field. As the encirclement began to take shape, Koon Chai coolly and confidently continued to swerve to the right and then to the left, oblivious to whatever was happening around him. When the noose began to tighten and everyone was breathing down his neck, Koon Chai with the finesse of a ballerina would deftly pirouette to one side and hey presto...the next sequence would show him running down the flanks like a streak of lightning to score.

The crowds loved to watch Zainal and Koon Chai in action. If rugby had an award for showmanship there was no doubt that they would be the undisputed joint winners. Zainal, a Perak player, staged his talents mainly at the Ipoh padang where he grew to be a player of national standing. Koon Chai who hailed from Johore was more of a prodigal son as he exhibited his rugby dance at the

University of Malaya grounds and at the Selangor Club padang. Both these talented players captivated hundreds of rugby fans over the years. Rugby has not been the same since they went into retirement in the mid-1970s. No worthy successors have emerged to take over from them and to bring back those times when elusive and nimble players went around to put a jinx on the defenders.

The early 1970s was also the season to hunt down the two most wanted scalps in Selangor rugby, the expatriates' as represented by the Selangor Club and Cobra's. Civilian and Service teams shared this aspiration and they pursued this goal zealously because victory over these two teams provided them with greater satisfaction than even winning the rugby league titles. Few, however, managed to achieve this.

The experienced expatriates in the Selangor Club team were able to blend their varied styles of play, ranging from English and Australian to Kiwi into a cohesive and effective unit. Cobra had the benefit of many outstanding civilian national players. Both these teams and Petaling Jaya Club, which later became the Anchorman, asserted their supremacy for many years and together with the other civilian teams kept the challenges of the local Service teams at bay.

Cobra and Anchorman were important pools of talent from which state and national players were chosen. They also provided the more articulate administrators of the game including the rugby theorists. For many years, the Selangor Rugby Union and the Federal Territory Rugby Union were controlled by Cobra and Anchorman respectively. Anchorman's inherent boldness for assertive leadership role in rugby was a streak inherited from its Cobra ancestry. It was a chip of the old block as its early roots came from Cobra's genealogical tree, being the result of a breakaway by a splinter group who formed the Petaling Jaya Club XV in the early 1970s. After a short stay under the patronage of the Petaling Jaya Club, the rugby players resigned *en masse* and thereafter assumed another identity, calling themselves Club X. They were

later adopted by a brewery and became the famous Anchorman, a highly respected side.

The passage of time, however, did not heal the wounds of separation as borne out by the deadly rivalry between Anchorman and Cobra. "Every encounter between them has always been rough and bruising... and fought at a fast and punishing pace..." remarked a rugby fan. During one game in the Selangor Rugby Union league, played at the Universiti Kebangsaan, Pantai, a free-for-all broke out among the players and quickly spread to the supporters. This brawl occurred during a heavy downpour and umbrellas became handy as weapons, with the occasional shoe being thrown in! Realising that their supporters were also fighting, the players rushed to quell the fracas, forgetting that they had started it all. After a while the match resumed. Everybody shook hands and became friends once more as though the ugly incident did not take place at all.

Unfortunately, the Anchorman collapsed abruptly when its sponsors backed out. During its brief appearance in the league, it provided many anxious moments for its opponents, including Cobra. The team is sadly missed. At one stage there were rumours that the ex-Anchorman players were contemplating on setting up a new team and the name "Klang Nomads" was bandied about. Everyone was excited and waited with bated breath to bear witness to the return of these re-grouped seasoned fighters, their new banner quavering in the ferocious winds of competition. The wait was in vain.

During this era, the two institutions of higher learning, the University of Malaya and the Serdang Agriculture College, were literally rugby colonies, overflowing with rugby players and supporters. The University had two teams, the Blues and the United. The former played in the senior league and the latter in the junior section.

Every match at the University attracted large crowds of students who massed noisily around the rugby pitch before the start of the

game like angry mobs. Many of them made guttural sounds to rehearse their self-anointed roles as cheerleaders. When the match started, the shouts and cheers rose in a crescendo, drowning out the referee's whistle most of the time and sending tremors to the periphery of the campus, the Pantai Roar! The crowd on the touch line near the Students' Union was usually two to three thick. Some supporters would perch precariously on the slopes in front of the Agriculture Faculty for a better view. The pitch, located in a trough between that Faculty and the Second Residential College, is considered one of the best maintained in the country. Drainage is excellent and the field is never flooded even after a heavy tropical storm.

Publicity for rugby was well organised and posters announcing upcoming games together with the list of players were plastered everywhere, with many of them being put in the Third Residential College, the ladies' hall of residence. Players felt extremely proud to have their names all over the campus and many made unnecessary trips to the ladies' college to loiter around in the hope of being recognised. Such posters reminded me of cinema billboards in smaller towns to publicise a show that was being screened.

In those times, the University players managed the administration of the game themselves, drawing up the training schedules and arranging for matches. Two lecturers who were actively involved in University rugby were Dr. Chan Onn Leng and Anthony Short. A history lecturer, Short accompanied the players in training and in running the cross-country course in order to build their stamina. Predictably, the route was organised to pass the women's residential college and the players, as expected of any hot-blooded male, whistled loudly to attract attention. Short was to later write a book on the Malayan Emergency entitled *In Pursuit of Mountain Rats*.

The power of both the University teams enthralled their supporters, sending them into wild excitement which was unnerving to the opponents. These moments of delirium reached boiling point when the University played against its arch-enemies, the Selangor

Club and Serdang. Cobra was then not yet formed. Their loyalty to the teams was unquestionable. There was an occasion when a sports reporter was threatened and chased off the campus for filing a critical report about their team and their unruly behaviour.

Serdang Agriculture College, which was upgraded to a university eventually, also enjoyed a great rugby reputation. Dennis Pestana remembers Serdang as an extremely agile and fleet-footed team with the uncanny ability of turning defence into swift attacks. Dan Ellison, the former Maori All Blacks trailist and lecturer at Serdang, taught his wards well, instilling in them the best of the All Blacks tradition of devastating power in the pack and the scintillating runs of the backs. He played beside them as a flanker. His bulky and muscular body stood out ominously in the scrummages, the strong legs stretching well beyond the Number 8, the last man. And what is more macabre, he played barefooted as no boots were available for his huge feet.

The power of Serdang saw droves of rugby selectors descending upon the campus at the start of every rugby season. Revered for his unerring eye for star material, Ashraff would never finalise the Selangor state team be it for the HMS Malaya Cup or the Under-23 until he had made the pilgrimage to Serdang. However, in spite of its teeming talents, Serdang found its march to the summit of University rugby obstructed by a more powerful force living in the undulating and mist covered terrain of Pantai - the University of Malaya.

The University stalwartly denied Serdang the honour of even winning a single rugby flag in their many epic encounters in those years. As arch-rivals, every game between them drew vociferous camps of supporters. A battle royal broke out on one occasion in the Pantai campus when Serdang fans rushed out of departing buses to raid the residential hall nearest the exit. They ran up the slope, hurling stones at the residents who came out to confront them and a running battle ensued.

On the return leg, the University team had to be escorted by a battalion of supporters through a throng of foot stomping Serdang

fans chanting, 'Serdang, Serdang.' At an obscure corner beside the changing room and away from prying eyes, some University players and their male supporters were perpetrating an act of derring-do by standing in line and urinating in unison at the nearby nursery plots. If they had been caught, the campus would be a field of carnage!

Except for the hard tackles and rough tactics in the game and the sabre-rattling by both groups of supporters, including females who shrieked the loudest and adopted a more aggressive stance, nothing untoward happened. Nevertheless, the whole atmosphere was nerve-wracking to say the least and any timid person would have wetted his pants had he not already fainted in fear.

Immediately after the game, the University team and supporters rushed to board their buses to make a quick departure. When the last bus was at the exit gate, some University fans daringly leapt out to uproot some prized saplings, cutting a swathe through the nearby nurseries. Of course they had to retreat under a barrage of missiles.

Such was the frenzied interest in rugby at these two institutions. Their keen rivalry in fact became a breeding ground for many of the rugby stars of those years and for many seasons the Malaysian XV was dominated by the graduates and undergraduates of these institutions.

The vociferousness and intense loyalty of Serdang fans became the bane of other visiting teams as well. Colonel Wong Hin Jee, an ex-Malaysian player, told me the time when even his team, Kuala Lumpur Garrison XV, had to call in reinforcements whenever it played against Serdang at the campus. "It was more of a military manoeuvre to keep the chanting crowds at bay. In the field, the match was highly explosive..." he said.

Cobra too was not spared the harrowing experience of being besieged after a match at the campus, the tense situation tended to be worse if Serdang lost. Fortunately, the presence of Mohd.

Ashraff who always accompanied Cobra whenever it played at the Serdang campus helped to prevent the outbreak of any violence. Serdang players - and Cobra players as well - could not afford to offend him if they hoped to don the Selangor jersey. Ashraff was the chief state selector.

Battle weary over the years, Serdang as well as its arch-rival, the University, slipped into oblivion at almost the same time. Recently, Serdang has returned to play in the Selangor league, aptly renaming the team *Serdang Angels* to symbolize its resurrection after some time in purgatory. This revival was the result of the hard work put in by certain lecturers and the determination shown by the students. However, the same cannot be said of the University of Malaya, which despite having a full time sports co-ordinator for several years now, has not shown any signs of a rugby revival. It has yet to return to the Selangor league.



The meeting of former comrades-in-arms... (from left), Ibrahim Busu, Ng Peng Kong, Dr. Fong Wah Fatt and Oen Seng Fo.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE LAWS AND THE ENFORCERS

All sports have rules to govern play. In rugby, the rules are called 'laws', creating I think, an intended psychological effect suggesting the game is anything but frivolous and any breach would invite serious consequences. This has to be so to prevent debilitating and harmful injuries as the sport involves constant heavy body contact. A breach of the law makes the offender a criminal whereas a broken rule is dismissed as a mere misdemeanour. However, the desired effect of this distinction has not deterred players from violating the sanctity of rugby laws in the heat of the game. Deliberate fouls, often potentially hazardous, continue to be committed wilfully, for instance throwing punches, attempting to gouge out the eyes with the fingers, biting and strangling. Some players are noted for biting their opponents' ears at every opportunity. There was an incident in a Cobra Tens match when the victim had his ear chewed.

More than in any other sport, rugby referees cannot compromise their role as enforcers of the laws because of the potential dangers involved in rugby manoeuvres. This is easier said than done, as enforcement requires expert knowledge of the laws and their application in varied and complicated field situations. With this in mind, the twenty-eight laws governing the game in the International Rugby Football Board Handbook are mostly accompanied by a detailed explanation of their application. The Forward of the Handbook explains that:-

The Laws of the Game ... are complete and contain all that is necessary to enable the game to be played correctly and fairly. Nevertheless, in a complex game where so many diverse situations can arise, the Board finds it necessary to instruct all concerned as to the meaning and effect of some of the Laws and to add emphasis to duties,

which the Laws place on the referee. This is all the more necessary because lack of uniformity in referees' decisions is bad for the game.

Any player who is guilty of misconduct or dangerous play as stipulated in the laws shall either be ordered off the field or else cautioned that he will be sent off if he repeats the offence. In such circumstances, the referee must award a penalty kick. The laws spell out what is tantamount to misconduct and dangerous play and specify both the Flying Wedge and the Cavalry Charge as illegal. The relevant notes describe these plays thus:

The Flying Wedge: This move usually occurs close to the opponents goal line when a penalty kick or a free kick is awarded to the attacking team and is initiated by a player either tapping the ball to himself or receiving a short pass and then driving towards the goal line with his colleagues binding onto either side of him in a V or wedge formation. The dangers inherent in this formation are not for those initiating the move but for those trying to stop it.

The Cavalry Charge: A cavalry charge usually occurs when a penalty kick or free kick is awarded to the attacking team close to the opponents' goal line. Players of the attacking team line up behind the kicker, spacing themselves across the field in gaps of a meter or two. On a signal from the kicker they begin to charge forward. Only when they are close to the kicker does he tap kick the ball and pass it to one of them. The defending team has to remain behind a line 10 meters from the mark of their own goal line (if nearer) until the ball has been kicked. This move is potentially dangerous.

Both these manoeuvres were extremely popular in my playing days (when such moves were not yet prohibited), especially with teams that had bulky forwards. Cobra utilised Ibrahim Busu as the ball carrier as he was one of the bigger forwards. The Selangor

team had Tim Sheehan for this role. In the fierce tussle between the two teams where the attackers were determined to make a score and the defenders equally determined to deny it, the ball carrier was caught in a cross fire between the two. Often, the ball carrier would make a shoulder charge into the thick of the big-sized defenders who were always assembled to face such an onslaught. Painful head-on collisions often occurred with terrifying cracking sounds like young coconuts being hacked open. In the aftermath of this gargantuan battle, many big players would be laying on the field, a few grabbing their heads.

Rugby is one sport where the referee has to consult the opposing team for its options to resume play after the opponents have committed certain infringements. The rugby referee has to be in tip-top physical condition in order to keep up with the fast pace of the game and be at the very spot where an infringement has been committed. Otherwise, he would not be able to detect the offence in a crowd of thirty players jostling, tugging and falling about. More importantly, he must have the uncanny ability to position himself without being ensnared in the ensuing melee. There were instances when referees were floored by onrushing players. During the match between Malaysia and London Welsh, Dr. Fong Wah Fatt, the referee, was caught in the midst of a ruck and had to be stretchered out.

At least Wah Fatt was flattened by stampeding players but Kassim Aziz, a referee from Perak, suffered the indignity of falling flat after merely stamping his foot to mark the spot where a scrummage was to be formed, dislocating his knee in the process. There were also other hilarious cases of short-sighted referees who lost their spectacles after being knocked over by players, leaving them groping around for their 'eyes', sometimes on all fours. When that happened, the players reigned supreme. The game also tended to become chaotic when it rained as these bespectacled referees were rendered partially blind, their glasses turned misty and were required to be wiped constantly.

Because of the rigours of the role, only a handful earned the right to be categorised as accomplished referees. Yeoh Cheang Swi was one of them. So fit was he that he often outran the players and was at the spot the moment a touchdown occurred. I remember an occasion when dashing across the field, I became conscious of a presence, which I naturally thought was an opponent. Although I accelerated, I just could not shake him off. Yet, he did not follow through with a tackle. Imagine my surprise and relief when, upon looking behind me, I found it was Yeoh Cheang Swi, flashing a cheeky smile.

Evidently proud of being a referee, Cheang Swi was always smartly attired and festooned with his prized rugby emblems, his shining whistle shrill in its loudness. He was a flamboyant referee and was also often caught in controversies that were not of his own making. There was one occasion when the MRU had to engage in serious deliberations over his proposed appointment as the referee for the Malaysia against Thailand game in the Vajiralongkorn trophy. Some council members were against appointing him, maintaining that he was part Thai. I was part of that discussion, where tempers flared but the president, Dr. Hui Weng Choon tipped the scales in Cheang Swi's favour when it was put to the vote. I played in that match which Malaysia lost narrowly by 3 points.

The Vajiralongkorn trophy was donated by the His Majesty King Bhumipol of Thailand and named after his son in 1955. It began as an annual international series but two years later, due to financial reasons, it became a biennial match. A peculiarity in the arrangement was that the host country was given the privilege to appoint its own referee. This was adopted as an economic measure to avoid unnecessary cost of having to fly out a neutral referee from a third country. Such an arrangement was also seen in the annual international between Malaysia and Singapore.

During my interview with Kassim Aziz who was the president of the Malaysian Society of Rugby Union Referees (MSRUR) in 1972-1973, I casually mentioned Cheang Swi and his Thai

connection. Immediately, Kassim Aziz sat up and said, "Yes ah? I don't really know but I have heard of this rumour ... no wonder that my proposal to have him as referee at the final of the Asian Rugby Football tournament at Hong Kong in 1972 was flatly rejected. The Japanese representative commented that Cheang Swi refereed badly at the Thailand versus Hong Kong match at the previous tournament and this was supported by the Hong Kong representative". In the midst of this remark, Kassim Aziz got up and lumbered to his study to retrieve his managerial report on the tournament. He handed it over to me, pointing out this incident as well as an extract of a report from the *South China Morning Post* that reads:-

The sequence was spoilt in 1970 when a rash of penalties imposed against Hong Kong in the match against Thailand were converted by Apirak, the Thai full back. Thailand thus qualified for the final and got soundly thrashed by Japan but the consensus opinion was that the better team had lost the semi-final, a fact, which the Japanese themselves endorsed later on.

Despite such innuendoes, Cheang Swi was awarded a Grade A classification by the Asian Referees Society. At the home front, he was also an unfairly maligned referee by his own society. Lodging a complaint to his president, the secretary of the MSRUR in 1972, Dr Chan Onn Leng wrote that:-

Dr Hui Weng Choon has appointed Cheang Swi again (second time for the HMS Malaya Cup final) ... this has of course been a somewhat unpopular choice. I made my point that if Cheang Swi gets to referee every big game, you will not get any referees in the near future. And in my case, I shall certainly not take up the secretaryship again. Let Cheang Swi do it. It has now come about that the MSRUR has practically no say in the appointment of referees at MRU level.

It was widely speculated then that Dr. Hui Weng Choon had a soft spot for Cheang Swi, given his eagerness to take his side in difficult circumstances. I have known Yeoh Cheang Swi since I first joined Cobra in 1967 and had the privilege of working with him in the MRU council as well as in the Cobra committee. Someday, I think I will have to ask him if he is indeed of Thai descent. It may be a fabrication by his enemies as he looks like a Thai and speaks the language. But he is certainly a live wire at any rugby function with his repertoire of songs and his ability to cleverly improvise to suit the needs of a particular occasion.

Aside from the personal rivalries within, the MSRUR then was also facing threats to its independence from without. The MRU posed a challenge to the autonomy of the MSRUR through its president, Dr. Hui Weng Choon. He always expressed preference for a particular referee, so too did the Selangor Rugby Union whose president, Neil Ryan (who had previously served in the Perak Rugby Union and is recognised as the man who built up rugby at Malay College during his tenure as headmaster) insisted that he should be able to choose his referee from the MSRUR list for Selangor's fixtures in the HMS Malaya Cup. This was resented as it had always been the practice for the society to recommend the referee. It was subsequently reported in a triumphant manner by Dr Chan Onn Leng, the MSRUR secretary, in his letter of 8th January 1973 to his president that "I won the vote at the MRU committee meeting." Everybody was advised to adhere to existing procedure.

Of late, many referees have come under adverse publicity for their alleged incompetence and farcical interpretation of the rugby laws. But many of these complaints have been dismissed as being of no consequence as they came from the anonymous crowds. Many rugby spectators have little knowledge of the complicated laws. Thus, it was usual to find articles by experienced referees in every souvenir programme, up till the mid-1970s, explaining either the changes in the laws or how certain laws were to be implemented. In this respect, A. J. Vail, a first class referee, was

one who contributed copiously to this attempt at public education. In one of his articles, he began with the preamble:

Have you ever sat next to one of those irritating noisy fellows...who knows just what each player should do next and what the referee should have done last? If you happen to be sitting next to one now, lend him your programme, (he's probably lost his) and invite him to read these few notes...

Unless a spectator is well versed with the laws and able to detect the actual cause for the stoppage of play, he may not understand why the penalty was awarded. This is more so in action packed rugby where thickset players are constantly falling on top of each other. It takes an experienced and keen eye to pick the proverbial needle in the haystack of infringements. In a 1st Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment against Gakusi of Japan match in a Cobra Tens, the former's drop-out did not reach the twenty-two metre line. When the referee signalled for a scrummage there were loud howls of protest from some spectators who maintained that the referee had erred in not consulting the Japanese team according to Law 15(3) which states, "The ball must cross the 22 metre line; otherwise the opposing team may have it dropped out again or have a scrummage formed at the centre of the 22 metre line".

Advantage play is a significant aspect of rugby. If a team has managed to capitalise on its opponents' infringement of the laws, play is allowed to continue; but if the advantage proved to be short-lived, the referee may penalise the team which has committed the earlier infringement. In a Cobra against Police United match, also in a Cobra Tens, the former punted the ball which soared high above the latter's in-goal area. The plummeting ball was, however, secured by a defender who managed to slam it down to stop play amidst a rampaging Cobra pack; but the player who punted the ball had earlier been brought down by a late tackle in midfield.

From behind the heap of twisting bodies, the referee moved out in measured strides to award a penalty five metres from the goal

line. His decision was greeted by loud outburst from sections of the crowd who felt that the penalty though rightly awarded for the late tackle should have been given on the goal line. Others, however, shouted at the referee, pointing out that the penalty should be at the spot where the late tackle took place. A group of instigators who had no inkling of what had happened began to jeer and abuse the referee.

But when some former rugby officials began to voice their frustration against poor refereeing standards, there is cause for concern. Dennis Pestana, who is respected for his vast knowledge of the game, fired the first volley when he spoke out against the referees in his article *Refereeing Standards Static* (21st Cobra Tens souvenir programme) in 1987. He cited instances of a referee allowing a scrummage to be formed with less than the mandatory numbers in a fifteen-a-side match, the failure to penalise players who blatantly committed fouls in the referee's presence and the inconsistency in the implementation of the laws. He said these decisions were symptomatic of the decline in refereeing standards.

There were also unbelievable cases where kicks sailing past the upright were awarded as conversions to the disgust of players and officials alike. Such an incident happened in a Selangor junior league final when I was the SRU president. I was placed in a dilemma as the aggrieved team and its supporters were protesting over such a ridiculous mistake by the referee. I had to sort out this delicate situation, taking into account that the referee's decision was final. The SRU had to placate the aggrieved team with a prize as well and this understandably earned the wrath of the local referees' society. The local chairman, Michael Lai, wrote me a strongly worded letter, threatening to boycott all matches in Selangor. Fortunately, the matter was amicably settled after a flurry of meetings and a solemn pledge from SRU to respect all decisions of the referees. It came as no surprise that in the rugby event of the Commonwealth Games hosted by Malaysia in 1998, not a single Malaysian referee was picked to officiate at the many matches.

Seemingly, the MSRUR has not yet sufficiently recovered from the numbing effects of being deregistered for many years. In attempting to find its feet, it is making use of the MRU as its crutch by functioning through the Referees Board. It obtains MRU's assistance via the Board. In the past, the MSRUR was a vibrant body that was able to raise its own funds for its activities, one of which was to conduct regular exercises to upgrade the proficiency standards of referees. Its grading committee was active and consistently monitored the progress of the referees, particularly the inexperienced ones who had to complete their compulsory stint at friendly matches. When they had attained sufficient competency, they were given more important assignments. And they had to pass an examination after attending an eighteen-hour course of lectures and discussions, touching on topics ranging from the laws of the game to the administrative structure and sports physiology. Consequently, the gestation period for a referee to reach the pinnacle of his trade is a long and hard one.

The MSRUR has an elaborate administrative network. It has two vice presidents, one taking charge of the northern states and the other the southern states. In each state there is the local chairman who is responsible for appointing the referees for matches in his jurisdiction. He is also required to hold periodic discussions with his charges to update them on the changes and interpretations of the laws to ensure uniformity in their implementation. In his capacity as the vice president (North), Major T. K. G. S. Barrett went to the extent of writing notes to the referees under his jurisdiction to explain specific issues. In one of his circulars in 1968, he stressed the need for referees to "really feel the game... a hasty punch or even a kick can often be a reflex action and should be regarded and penalised as such. Not all are deliberate dirty play". He gave this advice after observing several send-offs, which had resulted from some referees adhering strictly to the letter of the law.

This view was also held by the MSRUR. This body consistently reminded referees of the necessity to read into the intention of any

action taken by a player before arriving at the appropriate decision. The oft-used case was the late tackle and the referees were asked to consider whether the tackler had begun to legitimately execute his tackle and could not reverse this action. Indeed, reading the player's intention poses a referee's greatest challenge. A referee has to develop extra sensory perception to accurately do this on every occasion, a quality only a select few have.

The referee has always been a misunderstood person. He often gets abuse from all sections of the rugby fraternity - the crowds, the players, the officials and even worse from his own kind - for his handling of the game. In 1972, after a referees' caucus at Ipoh Club, the MSRUR put out a guideline, which emphasised that "it should be a rule never to indulge in public criticism of another referee, even if a genuine mistake has been made". As though being criticised and abused were not enough, referees have been physically manhandled, sometimes punched by players and spectators. Given such hazards, few ex-players have taken up the vocation and referee shortage was a problem even in those days when rugby was enjoying its Indian summer.

But players who aspire to become referees after hanging up their boots should take this advice seriously, play clean always and never assault referees. Events have shown that players who had been guilty of referee abuse were invariably on the receiving end when they took up the whistle. A former player who was suspended for allegedly hitting the referee in the tragic Cobra versus Blackhawks match in the Guinness Cup final when Ng Tat Tay died, was himself assaulted when refereeing a game in the Agong's Cup in 1992. It was a case of just desserts.

Periodically, the International Rugby Board makes changes to the laws of the game to promote a more attacking play. The kick for touch saw a radical change. Up till the late 1960s, players, particularly the full backs, were obsessed with kicking for touch when under pressure. A hefty kick, which found touch in the opponents' territory immediately turned the tide of battle, for by

that one kick the attackers found themselves deep in defence. Play would resume from a line out formed at the spot where the ball went out. The law was amended to discourage such a situation.

Accordingly, any ball which went straight out into touch from a kick taken outside the twenty-two metre line would result in a line out being formed at the spot where the kick was taken. But if the ball bounced out, the line out would be formed at the spot where it went out. On the other hand, a kick taken from within the kicker's twenty-two metres which went straight into touch or bounced out, would result in play resuming at a line out formed where the ball pitched into touch.

Consequently, teams in defence have a tendency to retreat into the twenty-two metres to make a kick. Moreover, many kickers put in endless hours of kicking practice to ensure that if a kick outside the twenty-two is necessary, the ball would bounce out of play.

For numerous infringements during play, referees award kicks according to the laws. And gauging from the large number of matches won by penalties, a review of the laws pertaining to the awards of such kicks may be necessary to maintain rugby's reputation as a physical game of hard running and bone crunching tackles. In a Guinness Cup final, a kicker from Blackhawks converted four penalties to subdue a highly efficient and entertaining Police United. His team won by 12 to 3 despite being in constant retreat.

Losing by kicks in rugby is certainly a frustrating experience. But the vanquished Police United could take consolation in the fact that many other teams had met with a similar miserable fate. Fifteen strong and fit French players were kicked into submission when Grant Fox of New Zealand proved too lethal with his boots at the inaugural Rugby World Cup final at Eden Park, Auckland on 20th June 1987. New Zealand beat France 29 to 9. Australia's reputation as a rugby superpower was singlehandedly trampled under the right boot of Hugh Porta who kicked over five penalty goals, giving Argentina a 27 to 19 win in a Test some years ago.

Out there somewhere in mid-field prowls a kicker who awaits the opportunity to send the ball soaring between the posts. Exploiting such an opportunity as allowed for in the game is likened to taking candy from a child when compared to the physical duels, courage and tricky manoeuvres normally associated with a touch down. Scoring a touch down in true rugby's style provides that exhilarating and totally satisfying feeling to the scorer, which also adds a dash of drama to the excitement. The object of rugby has been defined as 'two teams of fifteen players each ... should by carrying, passing and kicking the ball score as many points as possible...' Rugby's image has never been built on kicks but if the carrying and passing aspects of rugby are taken away, it automatically loses its unique character.

Yet kicks have been given much emphasis out of proportion to the rigorous spirit of the game. Kicks are awarded for many infringements including non-dangerous play like an offside at scrummages, rucks and lineouts. And when a penalty kick is given, teams with strong kickers would make an attempt at goal from almost anywhere in the field, to the extent that some matches have degenerated into kicking duels.

Some rugby administrators say that an off-side does not deserve a kick unless committed by the defending team within its twenty-two. An attacking team who has moved within that area of play is presumed to be in a vantage position to make a touch down. Thus, it would be fair to award a penalty kick against a defending team who had resorted to being off-side in a desperate attempt to frustrate the attack. Personally, I feel that except for dangerous play, the awarding of kicks should be confined to offences committed within the defenders' twenty-two. This would help to curb the opportunities to win by sheer mastery of the boots. Otherwise the great game of rugby might deteriorate into another game for kickers.



The meeting of old foes... (from left to right). Jagit Singh, Ng Peng Kong and Tim Sheehan. Tim played for Selangor Club and Selangor in the late sixties and was one of the three expatriate players picked to represent Malaysia at the 1970 Asian Rugby Championship at Bangkok.



The women enjoying a game of rugby. The formation of this ladies' rugby team in Selangor became a controversial issue between Selangor Rugby Union and the Malaysian Rugby Union.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ETHNICITY AND FEMININITY

At one time, different racial groups in Malaysian society were associated with certain occupations. Interestingly, this characteristic was also evident in sports. Certain sports were the exclusive preserve of particular racial groups but efforts by the government to promote these sports among all the races have been quite successful; ethnic identification has since been blurred.

Rugby once took pride in being the sport with a multiracial participation after the great expatriate exodus of the 1960s. All state teams and the national team had players who represented every racial community in the country. In my debut in national colours against Singapore, the team reflected the multiracial character of the country. The members were as follows: Abdullah Ali, Ahmad Mahmud, Aziz Ismail, Hashim Mohamed, Aziz Shariff, Ow Koon Chye, Chan Cheng Mun, Tan Kim Fatt, Ng Peng Kong, Gee Boon Kee, Lim Ah Sau, Choo Ah Chye, Adrian de Silva, S. Muthiah and Puran Singh. Gee Boon Kee was the captain. The same cannot be said of Singapore whose team had twelve expatriates within its numbers. At one stage during this hard fought game, Boon Kee bled profusely from the right ear. He left the field for treatment and returned five minutes later. Earlier, Koh Yeow Thong of Singapore suffered a neck injury and was replaced by Barney Swann.

Although Malaysia lost narrowly to the taller and heavier European-dominated Singapore side, 14 to 10, the match was extremely special as two first national cappers scored tries for their country. In the early minutes of the game, I opened with the first try, sneaking around the scrummage to snatch the ball from the fumbling scrum half. Tan Kim Fatt, another first timer and teammate, picked up a missed kick to run through the defence for a touch down in the dying minutes.

The game's multiracial character was due to the fact that it was widely played in the then English-medium schools, which had a multiracial environment. Sadly, rugby's multiracial character has been badly eroded in recent years. Nowadays, very few non-Malays are representing the state and the national teams, both of which are increasingly dominated by a particular racial group, the Malays. The current national team is almost exclusively Malay in composition, putting back the clock to the days when rugby was the exclusive preserve of the expatriates. Surely, this is an unhealthy development, especially at this time when most other sports are shedding their ethnic identification, rugby once standing proud as a multiracial sport is moving in the opposite direction.

One reason for this could be that game has taken deeper roots in institutions which are Malay-dominated as in the Police Force, the Armed Forces and the residential schools that it continues to thrive based on the large numbers of its exponents within these places. Perhaps it could also be that many non-Malays do not have the opportunity to be exposed to rugby, mainly due to the fact that few day schools are promoting the game.

I had several informal discussions on plans to revive rugby in schools with many sports-minded Education officers whose friendship I had cultivated during my 14 years at the Education Ministry. Often, I suggested that rugby should be introduced as part of the sports curriculum in the teachers training colleges and that the Ministry's Schools Sports Council be also actively involved in its promotion by holding rugby clinics and seminars. Some of these officers are now holding top positions and have the clout to make policies for rugby's healthier growth in schools.

Understandably, the question is posed; "Why didn't I influence the making of such policies whilst at the Ministry?" An answer to this requires a good grasp of the working of the fairly complicated government system. Briefly, the Education Ministry is staffed by two different cadres of officers, the professional educationalists who are in charge of education *per se* and the Administrative and

Diplomatic Officers who look after the administrative, financial, human resource and infra-structure development aspects. I belonged to the latter group. And sports in schools is strictly a professional matter.

Rugby has attributes that can contribute effectively towards racial co-operation and unity, the nature of the game requiring every player to assist each other in all situations of play. It is a game where the team is only as strong as its weakest member for without the protection from team-mates, a player runs the risk of being injured. In the lines, the jumper is vulnerable to hits by the opponents unless his team-mates serve as barriers around him to neutralise such attacks. Similarly, in the rucks and mauls, a fallen player could be physical mangled if his team-mates do not come to his aid quickly.

Team spirit and mutual support among players are without doubt the most crucial aspects of rugby. In other sports, the lack of such interdependence does not have dire consequences, as they do not involve heavy body contact. As a player, I was often caught in potentially dangerous situations where I could have suffered grievous hurt but for the support of my team-mates. The bond between players forged in the field nurtures a deep sense of gratitude and respect for each other long after the playing days and well into their twilight years.

Recently, Gee Boon Kee's team-mates of yesteryear attended his wife's funeral service in church in full force. His former Muslim team-mates, all prominent personalities today, were seated in the front pews and were also the pall bearers. I was deeply moved by this sight. It was more than just coming to pay their last respects; they were also there to express their gratitude to Boon Kee for having had stood by them in difficult play situations in the past.

Generally, the Malays with their agility and suppleness proved themselves to be gifted rugby players. They played in all positions. The Maarof brothers have carved with pride their family name in

the rugby annals, all three brothers played for the University of Malaya, Selangor and Malaysia. They joined Cobra at different times following their graduation from the University of Malaya. Adnan was the first to play for Cobra and he battled his two younger siblings when they were in the University team. Then it became two Maarofs in Cobra ganging up to bully the youngest, the University player. But all ended on a happy note when the youngest brother too became a Cobra on completion of his tertiary studies. The three resembled the legendary swashbuckling Musketeers, "all for one and one for all" for a brief season in Cobra until the youngest was posted to work abroad.

Adnan, who played as Number 8, was a deadly accurate kicker, converting almost every kick from any angle. He used to boast of his 'Honda pickup,' snatching up the ball from the base of the scrummage and launching into attack, always heading for the corner flag. He was my colleague in the Malaysian Administrative and Diplomatic Service and both of us served at the Education Ministry in our early years of service. At first, the Ministry's staff appeared anxious when seeing both of us regularly in arm slings or sporting bruised faces or sprained ankles but gradually they became immune to the sight of such injuries, referring to both of us as the rugby officers.

Another famous Malay family is Hairi Osman and his two sons, Malek and Ibrahim, the patriarch was one of the four Asian players who represented Perak in the HMS Malaya Cup in 1950 but both his sons went a notch higher to play for Malaysia. Aziz Ismail and Shahid Majid, both diminutive scrum halves, were extremely agile and elusive and were highly respected for their guile and cunning during their playing days. Up till this day, there has been no other scrum half who is able to emulate their scintillating style of play. Yassin Said was a shrewd centre and highly regarded for his feinting runs.

The tall and suave Megat Najmuddin, a second row, was a hard player to stop in his tracks. He made great use of his height in

the lines, often outwitting his opponents in the timing of his leaps for the ball. Once he executed a stylish 'kung-fu flying kick' to intimidate Roy Holder which even the famous martial arts actor, Jacky Chan, would not have been able to emulate. An alert sports cameraman caught it on film for publication in the sports page. With the kick, he was nicknamed, 'kung-fu fighting player.' He was certainly a gritty fighter in the scrummages and the line outs.

Ahmad Mahmud was a sports all-rounder. He excelled at athletics in two fields of endeavour, the triple jump and the decathlon. He takes much pride being the first Malay decathlete. And he was also a versatile rugby player, being able to play as a full back as well as a winger. He found athletics boring and decided to concentrate fully on rugby, the game that according to him, "...pumps the adrenaline in your blood stream." He started out with the Kedah team in the HMS Malaya Cup but later moved to Selangor to be its automatic choice for many seasons. He also played for Cobra and Malaysia.

The Chinese also proved themselves adaptable in all positions. Choo Ah Chye of Perak was renowned for his robust tackling and his kicking specialty, the torpedo kick. The ball would soar high into the air in a spiralling fashion and whoever caught it at the end of its plummeting fall was always knocked senseless by Ah Chye who ran through to be at that very spot. On one occasion, Ah Chye was badly handled in the line by a Cobra expatriate. To extract his revenge, Ah Chye waited for an opportune moment when he had possession of the ball to strike back. Some minutes later that moment arrived and Ah Chye executed his torpedo kick, ensuring that the plummeting ball would be collected by his nemesis. Ah Chye rammed so hard at his midriff that he had to be carried out.

Lim Ah Sau, a second row, was a courageous player who always steered his run in a collision course with the defence. Lanky Cheong Kai Yong, an aggressive Number 8 and jumper, would always initiate a devastating attack from the back of the line whenever he was in possession of the ball.

I was glad that one of my former team-mates at St. Michael's, Cheng Mok Seng, played for Perak as hooker. We were in the same class for many years and I was captivated by his fascinating and endless stories about his fighting Siamese fish and spiders. In our encounters in the field, neither of us asked for any quarter, we fought each other hard and fair. It was only at the after-match fellowship sessions that both of us gladly discarded our physically tough exterior and allowed the nostalgia of the school days to freely gush forth. He was also selected to represent Malaysia in the Second Asian Rugby Football tournament in that position. I was the flanker in that team. In the later part of my rugby career, I hardly saw him again, probably he had already retired from competitive rugby. We were the only two Michaelians of our era to qualify for state and national rugby sides.

At the tail end of my playing days, I was greatly impressed with a number of young Chinese talents, namely Boon Hong Chee, Lim Say Tee, Tan Tai Fatt and Lee Nyuk Fah. Hong Chee was a powerful forward and Say Tee an elusive centre. Both of them went on to become Cobra's stalwarts and were also capped for Selangor and Malaysia in the late 1970s. Say Tee won the MRU award, 'Player of the Year' in 1983. Lee Nyuk Fah and Tan Tai Fatt, both from the RMAF, were dashing forwards, strong in the scrummages and resolute in defence. Both of them represented Malaysia for many seasons.

Two ethnic minorities, the Sikhs and the Eurasians, have also been in the forefront of the game. Literally speaking, the Sikhs were once the pillar of strength for rugby teams. Their physical stature, tall and broad shouldered, made them suitable for the physically rigorous game. Generally towering over six foot, they stood shoulder to shoulder with the expatriates. With such attributes, the Sikhs were natural players in the scrummage, providing greater stability and power. In the lines, they were invariably designated as jumpers, a position they excelled in due to their height and longer reach. In this regard three Sikhs - Puran, Nashatar and Gucharan - were outstanding with their clean catches. Their

opponents on most occasions would rather not challenge them for the ball in the lines, preferring to pounce on them the moment they jumped for the ball.

A common tactic was to hack at their legs when they were in the air, making them fall like timber. I was told that Nashatar suffered a nasty neck injury from one such fall. All of them hailed from the northern states, they were almost of the same build and rose into prominence at the same period. After them, the Sikhs' reign of terror ended, as their successors were smaller built, comparable in stature to other Malaysians.

Two other Sikhs, Kulwant and Jagit, who came around the time when the fearsome trio was on the threshold of retirement, deserve to be mentioned for their intelligent play. They had excellent rugby sense. Though physically smaller compared to their predecessors, they were always exploiting any opportunities that came their way to cause havoc to their opponents. And both were good kickers. Both gained national caps and Jagit rose to become a national captain.

Some other Sikhs were even smaller, causing jesting cries of "Bhai Kecil!" (small Sikhs) to reverberate in the rugby field. This radical change in physical attributes inevitably led the rugby fraternity to wonder whether the emergence of the smaller version was due to their diet changing from chapatti to rice. However, they compensated for their lack of height and weight with increased tenacity, furiously but often vainly attempting to shake off the tackles - something their predecessors could do with relative ease.

The finely tuned Eurasians excelled as three quarters because of their speed and agility. Pestana became a household name in rugby, with Maurice as the patriarch of the clan that included sons, Brian and Dennis. Maurice, a scrum half, was awarded an MBE for his contributions to rugby by the British Queen in 1957. And he richly deserved the recognition for his twenty-five years as a player. He was captain of Penang in the 1951 HMS Malaya Cup final against Singapore Civilians at the age of thirty-seven where

most rugby men would have retired from active participation. He was appointed captain of the Civilians in the 1961 match against the Services (a formidable side of expatriate servicemen) at the age forty-seven when most rugby men, his contemporaries, would have already been grandfathers according to the mores of society in those times! The Civilians versus Services annual match organised by the MRU started in 1947. It folded up in 1963.

I was privileged to have played alongside Brian and Dennis for many years. Both these brothers were deadly tacklers and all opponents who crossed their path were knocked down like ten pins. Dennis served as the vice-president of the SRU for a term when I was the president.

The Pestana clan played in the north, either for Penang or Selangor while cousin Kenny, partnering Francis Dilenberg caused havoc to opponents in the south. I remember Francis as a hard and robust player who went for low tackles. The Ritchies of Penang had also produced good players. In the All Blues Cup final between Singapore and Perak 1950, two Ritchies were the captains in the opposing teams. Hector Ritchie captained Perak. His brother John Ritchie, led the Singapore team. Adrian de Silva, a centre and Raoul Huet, a winger, were also great players with their swerving runs, often catching the opponents on the wrong foot.

The numbers of Sikh and Eurasian players in the national team were well out of proportion to their numbers in the Malaysian population. On most occasions, their combined numbers took up more than one third of the berths in the national team. Almost overnight, the Sikhs, big and small, and the Eurasians disappeared inexplicably from the rugby scene. This phenomenon has baffled the rugby fraternity to this day. They ask, "Will there ever be a revival of the Sikhs' reign of terror and the scintillating play of the Eurasians in Malaysian rugby?"

It would be an act of betrayal to my former Indian team-mates if I were to conclude this discussion without ever saying a word about their equally immense contributions. How can I forget them

when names like P. Ganeson, K. Jayaratnam and M. Dattaya keep cropping up in my mind whenever I think of rugby? As a matter of fact, I have always thought of Ganeson as the local version of Jonah Lomu, the All Blacks with his unstoppable runs.

Many do not realise that there was a women's rugby team for about two years from 1983 to 1984 comprising mainly girlfriends of rugby players. The women players were trained by Dennis Pestana and Zainal Yen. Hardly six months after its formation, the team was invited by the Thai Rugby Union to play an exhibition game against its Thai counterparts in the Haadyai Sevens. The results were not very encouraging to the Malaysian ladies but this only strengthened their resolve to do better the next time around.

Accordingly, they put in many hours of practice, anticipating another Thai invitation in the following season. However, when it came, the MRU refused permission for their participation. Instead, the MRU directed that they be disbanded if they failed to register themselves as an affiliate. The SRU was also taken to task for providing assistance to women's rugby, adding more strain to an already shaky relationship between the two unions. As the SRU president, I was again caught up in more rugby bickerings as though my other intractable problems with the MRU were not enough. I had always maintained that the SRU should provide all forms of assistance to any group interested in the game.

The SRU secretary, Jasvinder Singh, was given the mandate to thrash it out with the MRU over the matter. It was to expose him to first hand rugby politics, a deliberate move to put him in the lion's den to do battle singlehandedly so that he could quickly learn the ropes and emerge an experienced rugby campaigner. He undertook his responsibility seriously with his hard-hitting press statements. In *MRU taken to task over women's rugby (The Star)*, Jasvinder was quoted as follows: "What's wrong with the SRU meeting the request (for coaching assistance)? Moreover the development and coaching is in the state of Selangor, very much under the jurisdiction of the SRU". He went on to add, "I shall

be glad to have a copy of the rules which say that the SRU should not provide assistance to anyone interested in rugby". A war of words ensued in the press.

Whilst the men were acrimoniously debating it in public, one party championing women's rights against male chauvinism and the other insisting that rugby is a sacrosanct male domain, the women probably yawned at the whole affair, promptly losing interest in a game where the men seemed to continually bicker over even the most trivial things and where politics rather than the good of rugby was considered more important.

Looking back, I think the ladies took the macho rugby men for a good ride, for at the end of the day the victory claimed by both warring factions proved pyrrhic. Imagine, while two parties of rugby men were engrossed in a duel to the death to settle a point of honour, the ladies conveniently packed up and made a quiet exit.

Perhaps, critics such as I should do likewise but the flame of rugby still burns fiercely in my soul and it is my fervent hope that one day in the not so distant future the game will rise out of the ashes like the phoenix and soar once again to great heights in this country. A day when young men will see visions of what can be achieved and old men dream dreams of the glories of rugby. Such a day can happen if all factions collaborate to make it happen.

That is my dream.