

COLOURS OF PASSION

Ng Liang Chiang. C. Kunalan. Chee Swee Lee. K. Jayamani. These are some of the names which readily come to mind whenever one talks about track and field in Singapore. This is hardly surprising as they, in their hey days, were among the best athletes in the region. Whether it was Liang Chiang reigning supreme in the 110m hurdles at the 1951 Asian Games in New Delhi or Chee Swee Lee making her mark as a champion in the 400m at the 1974 Asian Games in Tehran, these athletes kept the Singapore flag flying high.

Often they did this while also endearing themselves to fans. For example, Kunalan, who won three gold medals (100m, 200m and 4x400m relay) at the 1969 SEAP Games in Rangoon, was known as much for his likeable nature as his exploits on the track. On her part, Jayamani, who emerged as a star with gold medals in the 1977 SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur as well as the 1979 SEA Games in Jakarta, was unfailingly modest about her achievements.

Behind the success of these athletes were dedicated coaches whose careers were so intimately linked to those of their athletes that their names were uttered in the same breath. For instance, mention C. Kunalan and Chee Swee Lee and one thinks almost immediately of coaches Tan Eng Yoon and Patrick Zehnder. Similarly, the feats of athletes like Jayamani and P. C. Suppiah were often associated with the hard work and dedication of their coach, Maurice Nicholas. Other coaches with impact over the years included Goh Teck Phuan and Chin Lye Heng.

Then there were officials and their work behind the scenes, including Goh Teck Phuan promoting marathon and bringing the Singapore Marathon to the international level it is enjoying today. Indeed, as the following pages reveal, the history of Singapore's track & field is filled with distinctive personalities, whether athletes, coaches or officials. Whatever their roles and across the decades, what they had in common was an undying passion for track & field and the values it imparted.



Tay's success can be attributed in part to his single-minded focus which enabled him to keep going whatever the circumstances.

STAYING FOCUSED

Tay Boo Jiang

Compared to some top athletes, Tay Boo Jiang may not be a well-known name in Singapore's track & field circle. But his role in promoting the sport should not go unnoticed. Plus he, with his success as a businessman, has contributed financially to its cause and set an example of how the positive values from sports can enhance one's career.

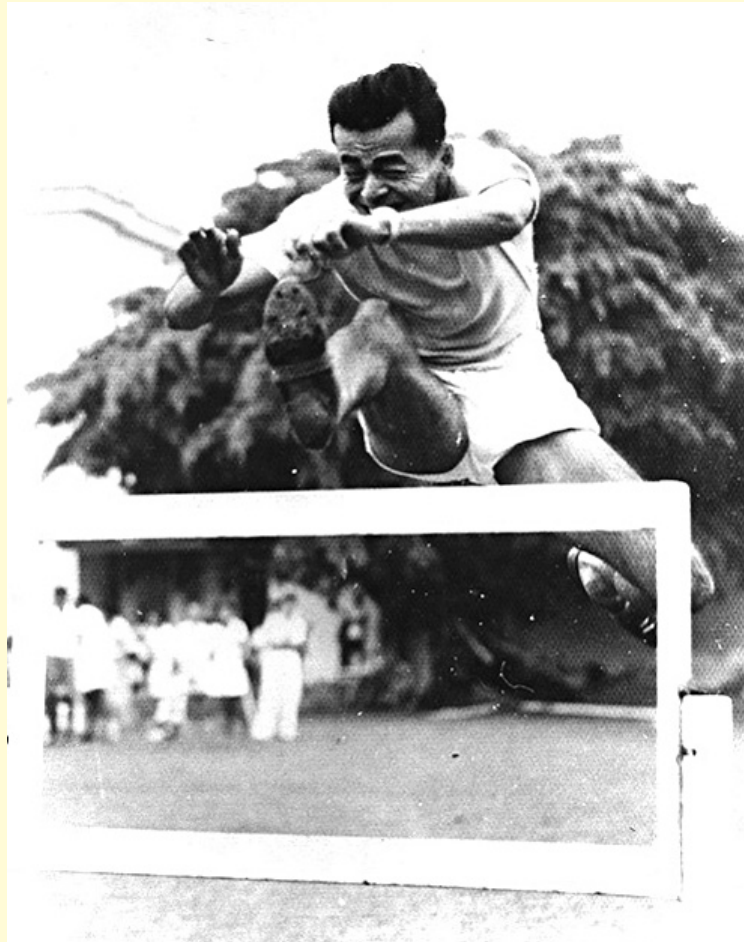
A founder member of the Swift Athletics Club, he formed the Swift Athletes Association in June 1947 alongside other pioneers such as Yeo Choon Bee, E. A. Sears, Goh Teck Phuan and Chin Lye Heng. Significantly, this marked the beginning of a new era in athletics in Malaya and Singapore.

Beyond sports, Tay made his mark as founder of Sincere Watch & Fountain Pen Dealer. More than 50 years ago, he set up his business behind a modest six-foot counter at 22 North Bridge Road to serve mainly Boat Quay seamen. Since that modest start in 1954, the company has become a listed retailer operating not only in Singapore but overseas as well.

Tay's success can be attributed in part to his single-minded focus which enabled him to keep going whatever the circumstances. And this ability to stay focused, he is quick to stress, has its roots in his days as an athlete. "I may not have achieved that much in terms of times, medals and records. But the values I've learnt from athletics are enduring. This is perhaps why I still have the fondest memories of my track & field days as well as the athletes I grew up with," he says.

His gentlemanly style also contributed to the growth of his business as customers came to him knowing he was honest and would offer them fair prices and genuine products. Though his thriving business eventually earned him customers from high society, he was always a simple man. This, he says, can be explained in part by the fact that he, through athletics, grew up humbly, mixing comfortably with athletes from all walks of life. "In the track, on the field, what matters is how you perform and how you carry yourself - not your background," he explains.

Apart from being an avid athlete, Tay later developed interest in tennis and golf even as he took his business from strength to strength. Whatever he has done - in sports or in business - he remains to those who know him a remarkably humble gentleman.



His proudest achievement was winning Singapore's first Asian Games gold medal. He did this at the inaugural Games in New Delhi in 1951, breasting the tape at 15.2 secs in the 110m hurdles.

QUIET ACHIEVER

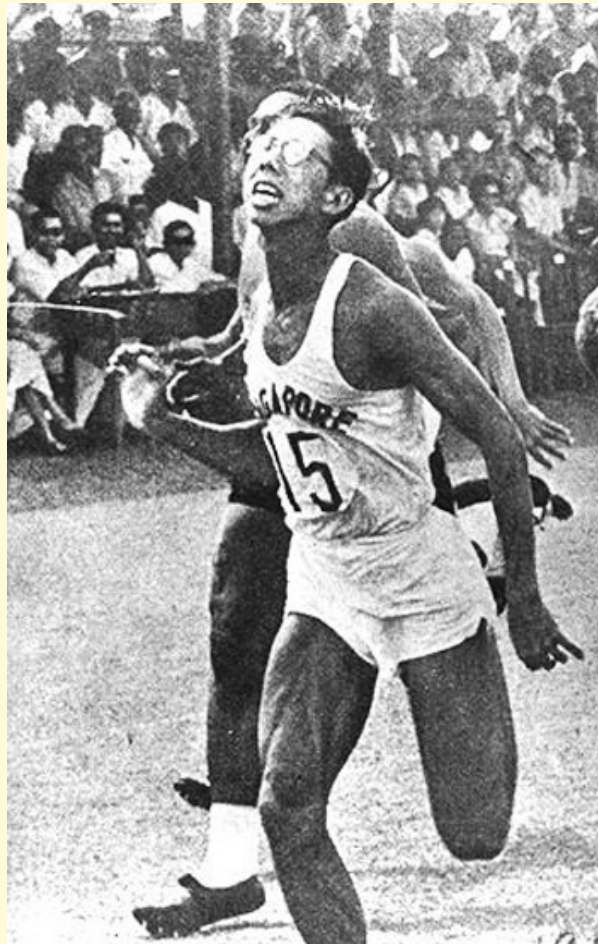
Ng Liang Chiang

Ng Liang Chiang is the quiet achiever of Singapore athletics. He would smile and say very little throughout his years as an athlete and coach - even though the champion hurdler had plenty to boast about. His proudest achievement was winning Singapore's first Asian Games gold medal. He did this at the inaugural Games in New Delhi in 1951, breasting the tape at 15.2 secs in the 110m hurdles. In the same meet, he also clinched a bronze medal in the 440-yard hurdles.

Looking back, the feats are all the more incredible when one considers that they came from a self-taught man. Ng had no coach and learnt hurdling techniques through reading books. As a student, he represented Serangoon English School in numerous sports, including athletics, table tennis, basketball, hockey and football. Then at 17, he started training with the Singapore Chinese Amateur Athletic Federation.

He announced his arrival in the international scene by winning gold medals for the 110m and 400m hurdles at the 7th Annual Chinese National Athletic Meet in Shanghai in 1948, breaking the All-China records. By doing that, the self-taught hurdler had fulfilled a promise he made to his dying mother at the age of 13. The eldest of 12 children in a poor Teochew family, he had told her that he would one day become a sports champion and bring glory to the family.

Ng retired from competitive hurdling at the age of 32 but started coaching - his most famous protege being hurdler Heather Merican, who won two gold medals at the 1973 SEAP Games in Singapore. The father of four continued coaching until he succumbed to lung cancer in 1992, at the age of 71.



It was 1959 when Singapore got its first track gold in the South-east Asian Peninsular Games in Bangkok. And for that, we have to thank Tan Eng Yoon, who blitzed the 400m hurdles en route to that win.

FIRST GOLD

Tan Eng Yoon

It was 1959 when Singapore won its first track gold in the South-east Asian Peninsular Games in Bangkok. And for that, we have to thank Tan Eng Yoon, who blitzed the 400m hurdles en route to that win. In the same Games, he won gold in his other pet event - the triple jump. That effort could not eclipse his personal best, which he set at the Jalan Besar Stadium in 1955. His effort of 49 feet and 7.5 inches (14.51 metres) stood for an amazing 32 years.

Yet it wasn't just on the field that he excelled. Tan was an honorary national athletics coach from 1958 to 1970 and showed a keen eye for talent. Among his proteges were Glory Barnabas, Osman Merican and - most notably - C. Kunalan, whom he picked out in 1962 after watching the latter play football at the Teachers' Training College.

A former St Joseph's Institution boy, he had also won a scholarship in 1955 to study physical education at Loughborough College in England. He became the first international student to top his graduating class at Loughborough University in 1958 and the first non-local to captain the Loughborough College Athletics Club. But his education didn't stop there. In 1986, he received his Masters degree in sports management from the United States Sports Academy. Loughborough also presented him with an honorary doctorate in 2005.

Tan, 79, had previously served as director of the National Stadium Corporation, which oversaw the building of the Singapore National Stadium in 1973, and was deputy executive director of the Singapore Sports Council until his retirement in 1988. He later served as the general secretary of the Football Association of Singapore from 1993 to 1999.



The highlight of her career came when she was chosen to represent Singapore at the Olympic Games in Helsinki in 1952.

BREAKING THROUGH

Tang Pui Wah

A former Fairfield Girls' and Nanyang Girls' High student, Tang Pui Wah started doing the hurdles when her coach Tay Kai Teck spotted that she could take three steps instead of five in between the hurdles. She was older than the other kids because the war had delayed her studies. But soon, she didn't need size or age advantage to beat others as her natural ability came through.

In the 1951 Malayan Amateur Athletic Association (MAAA) sports meet in Kuala Lumpur, she was the "triple crown" winner, getting gold in the 100-yard and 220-yard races as well as the 80m hurdles. In the 1953 MAAA Championships, she shone with two new records.

On the bigger stage, she also showed her promise. For example, at the 1951 Asian Games in New Delhi, she was placed fourth in the 80m hurdles. She then topped this performance at the next Asian Games in Manila in 1954. On the opening day of the Games, she broke the Games' 80m hurdles record with a time of 12.1 secs in her heats. In the finals, she kept up with the frontrunners throughout and finished a creditable third behind two Japanese hurdlers.

The highlight of her career came when she was chosen to represent Singapore at the Olympic Games in Helsinki in 1952. Though her times in both the 100m and 80m hurdles didn't take her far in the competition, the experience was valuable. Also she had taken a big step forward for women athletes in Singapore with her breakthrough. Now 74, she keeps a low profile but still speaks with fondness about the good old days of local athletics.

VERSATILE ATHLETE

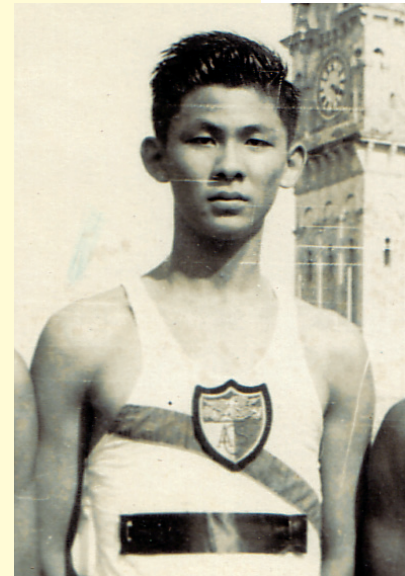
Chan Onn Leng

Much has been written about the exploits of the athletes from our “Golden Years” in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, the likes of C. Kunalan and Chee Swee Lee fired our imagination with their sporting achievements. Yet, many of us draw a blank when we are asked about how athletics was like before the 1960s.

The name Chan Onn Leng might not ring a bell. Yet he was the sprint sensation of the 1950s and easily one of the more talented and versatile athletes to have graced our track scene. During his days in Anglo-Chinese School (ACS), he already showed much promise, dominating the schools’ championships of the 1950s. But athletics was not his only passion as he was involved in rugby as well.

Despite being more of a 100m and 200m sprinter, Chan’s crowning achievement in athletics came when he won the silver in the 400m hurdles for Singapore in a time of 54.8 secs at the 1954 Manila Asian Games.

Besides athletics, he also excelled in his academic pursuits and was often held up as a prime example of a scholar-athlete in those days. It did not surprise many therefore when, after his retirement, he joined the medical profession. However, that did not signal the end of his involvement with athletics. An active member of the Swift Athletes Association, he served as its Honorary Secretary from 1962 to 1963 and also displayed his creative streak by helping Swift design its logo. His light-hearted nature won him many friends and he was also known for being a practical joker before he passed away in a car accident. And he will go down in local athletics folklore as one of the earliest medallists in athletics at the prestigious Asian Games.



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His greatest success was becoming Coach Of The Year in 1972 - the same year that two of his athletes P. C. Suppiah and K. Jayamani were named Sportsman and Sportswoman of the Year respectively.

TOP COACH, TOP OFFICIAL

Maurice Nicholas

In school, Maurice Nicholas did well enough to represent his school in both athletics and hockey. When the time came to make a choice between the two sports, he picked athletics - but didn't reach the level he wanted. He did, however, go on to become arguably Singapore athletics' most famous coach and official.

Nicholas started coaching in 1959, when he was appointed national coach for middle distance and long distance events by sprint legend Tan Eng Yoon. His greatest success was becoming Coach Of The Year in 1972 - the same year that two of his athletes P. C. Suppiah and K. Jayamani were named Sportsman and Sportswoman of the Year respectively.

The following year, he became the vice-president of the Singapore Amateur Athletic Association and secretary of the Asian Amateur Athletics Association. Nicholas has scored a few firsts for Singapore, including being elected as a member of the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) in 1981 and serving as technical delegate to the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and the Commonwealth Games in Auckland, New Zealand, and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 1990 and 1998 respectively.

In 1982, he was awarded the Veterans Pin by the IAAF - the highest award given by the federation to individuals for their contribution to track and field. In the same year, he received a public service medal from then President Devan Nair. In 2004, he was awarded the IAAF's silver order of merit for his service and contributions to the development and promotion of athletics in Asia.

GREAT COACH

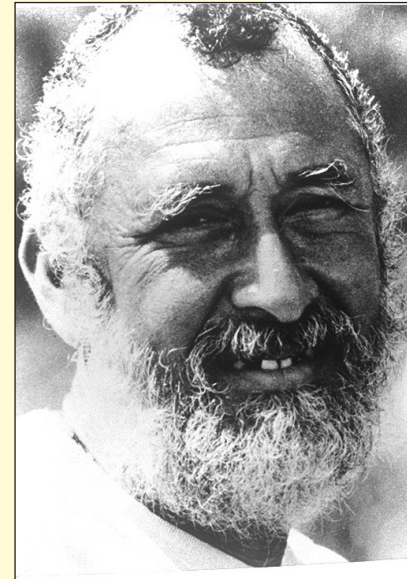
Patrick Zehnder

Behind every great sportsman is a great coach. For Singapore's track and field, there weren't many better than Patrick Zehnder. He is the only Singaporean coach to produce an Asian track champion. That happened in 1974 when Chee Swee Lee won the 400m Asian Games gold in Tehran.

The man - known affectionately as "The Beard" for the straggly facial hair - had joined the Physical Training College in 1955, shortly after leaving school. The next year, he joined the staff of Haig Boys' School, before being transferred to Telok Kurau West Primary five years later. That led to his discovery of Chee and the beginning of one of Singapore's most successful sports partnerships.

He first watched her streak to victory in school competitions as a 10-year-old and brought her under his wings. A decade later, she became Asia's fastest woman over 400m, winning the gold medal at the 1974 Asian Games in Tehran.

He was Singapore's Coach of the Year in 1973, but after more than 20 years of training athletes like Chee, Gan Bee Wah, Godfrey Jalleh and Cheah Kim Teck, he quit the national team in 1985. It was clearly a big loss for Singapore track & field. But at least, he has continued to coach at club level. Even today, he occasionally coaches youngsters in his free time.



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Many remember top athletes due to their achievements but few acknowledge the ones who pushed them to run faster, further and better. For star athlete Tan Eng Yoon, Lim Jit Imm played this crucial role in the 1950s.

THE MOTIVATOR

Lim Jit Imm

Many remember top athletes due to their achievements but few acknowledge the ones who pushed them to run faster, further and better. For star athlete Tan Eng Yoon, Lim Jit Imm played this crucial role in the 1950s. Then a teenager, the sprinter and long jumper tried his best to beat Eng Yoon at his game, even winning the support of the local media.

The competitive relationship worked both ways, as Jit Imm – then Singapore's second fastest sprinter – went on to establish the combined schools 100-yard record. But he was unable to make it to the international scene, often missing the mark narrowly.

Undeterred, he went on to contribute in other ways, becoming a sports administrator at the Swift Athlete Association. Then as vice president of training and selection at Singapore Amateur Athletic Association, he was responsible for organising training programmes, overseeing preparations for the SEA Games, and talent spotting athletes with potential.

Dipping into his experience as an athlete and police officer, he used his persuasive style and belief in making each training session meaningful to build rapport with young athletes like Hamkah Afik, Mohd Hosni and James Wong.

Now 72, Jit Imm lives in Canada with his wife. He may have given up his running spikes, but he keeps active by walking and visiting the local gym.

CURVE SPECIALIST

Low Sin Chock

It's a challenge that all competitive runners face on the track: running the curve effectively. Sprinter Low Sin Chock, however, had no such reservations. In fact, he was dubbed the "fastest curve man in Asia".

Talent spotted by his teacher and coach, Charles Hanam, while he was a student at Beatty Secondary School, Sin Chock's curve technique was honed on the school's field – a field so small that it couldn't fit even a 200m track. Following success at school meets, his first regional success came shortly in 1958 when he won a relay gold medal at the Malayan Games in Kuala Lumpur.

At the first SEAP Games in Bangkok in 1959, he was part of the contingent that created history for Singapore, winning the silver and bronze respectively in the 400m relay and 1,600m relay. This success was repeated at the next SEAP Games in 1971 in Rangoon when the relay team defended its silver in the 4x100m relay. But the biggest achievement for him had to be winning the bronze in the 100m – his first individual SEAP Games medal.

Later, Sin Chock, who also represented Singapore at the 1962 Asian Games in Jakarta, retired from athletics in 1964 to read law at the University of Malaya and Singapore. Then he was awarded a Colombo Plan scholarship to study in Australia. Following that, he built his career with Singapore Airlines as an airline captain before his retirement in 1999. From 1962 to 1963, he continued to contribute to athletics, serving on the Singapore Amateur Athletic Association's selection committee. These days, the 68-year-old indulges in his newfound sport, golf. But he also keeps in touch with the athletics scene whenever he can.



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Following his retirement from athletics, he made his mark as a doctor and researcher. He also contributed much to sports administration.

FLYING DOC

M. Jegathesan

What is a Malaysian athlete doing in a book on Singapore athletics? Those who know Dr M. Jegathesan and how he was so much an intimate part of the Singapore scene would know the answer. Yes, he was an inspiration to many top local athletes, including our own legend C. Kunalan - what with his remarkable feats, both on the track and off it.

As Kunalan himself puts it, "There should be a special page on him in any book on local athletics because of what he did in Singapore where he was based. For example, he was top scholar and athlete at Anglo Chinese School and later went on to get his medical degree despite competing at the highest level. And his success, including his fine run in the 200m at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, could be attributed in part to the efforts of his coach, our very own Tan Eng Yoon."

Indeed, Dr Jega, often called "the Flying Doc", had his fair share of success. In the 1966 Asian Games in Bangkok, he earned the accolade of being the fastest man in Asia by winning three gold medals - in the 100m, 200m and 400m. At the Kingston Commonwealth Games in 1966, he became the first Malaysian to qualify for the final of the 220-yard (now the 200m). In all, he competed commendably in three consecutive Olympics, namely Rome (1960), Tokyo (1964) and Mexico (1968).

Following his retirement from athletics, he made his mark as a doctor and researcher. He also contributed much to sports administration through his appointments in various national and international organisations. He has also made an impact as a medical adviser and lecturer and, not surprisingly, he lends special support to work related to track & field using his training in medicine.

SPRINTING EXPLOITS

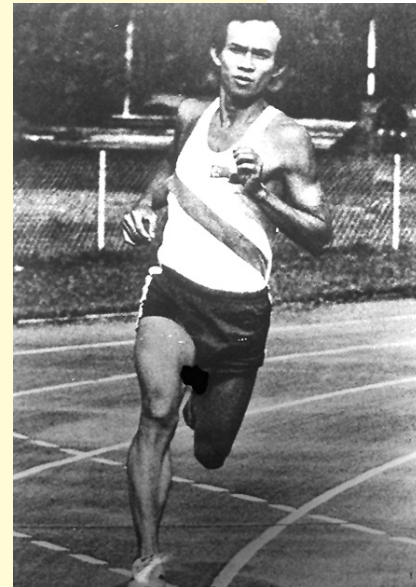
Yeo Kian Chai

This was one policeman that the thieves could never hope to outrun. Yeo Kian Chai was not just a cop but also a national sprinter. The Sportsman of the Year in 1972, he actually began his athletics reign as a long jumper. That was in 1963. He was 19 years old and showing much promise. Three years later, he set the national record of 7.01m and went on to dominate the local scene.

Still, the former Chung Cheng High student is probably better known for his sprinting exploits. He started running in 1967, when he was selected for the national 4x100m relay team for the SEAP Games in Bangkok by athletics coach Tan Eng Yoon. Over the next five Games, he took home three silvers and two bronzes for the event.

His best individual achievement was finishing second in the 100m sprint at the 1971 SEAP Games in Kuala Lumpur. Then in 1974, he became famous as part of the 4x100m relay team that clinched bronze at the Asian Games in Tehran.

There were other highlights in his career. For example, he was one of 32 Asian athletes offered a chance by the West German Track and Field Association to train in Cologne during the build-up to the 1972 Munich Olympics. It proved beneficial. During this period, he set an Asian mark of 9.5 secs for the 100-yard race. At the Olympics itself, however, he could not build on this momentum. He finished sixth in both his 100m and 200m heats. In 1975, he retired but has remained active in the track & field scene as a coach.



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Kuna, as he was popularly known, enjoyed success at the Asian Games level, winning a silver and a bronze in 1966 in Bangkok, and a bronze in 1974 in Tehran.

POPULAR ICON

C. Kunalan

Singapore has had some fine runners past and present but in C. Kunalan, it has its icon. Perhaps it's because he competed in that most prestigious of events - the century sprint. Or the fact it took more than 30 years before U. K. Shyam broke his record of 10.38 secs - a time Kunalan, now 64, had set in the 1968 Mexico Olympics. Or maybe it's simply his success.

Kuna, as he was popularly known, enjoyed success at the Asian Games level, winning a silver and a bronze in 1966 in Bangkok, and a bronze in 1974 in Tehran. That 1966 event brought considerable heartache, as he was edged out into second place by Malaysian Mani Jegathesan by a mere 0.01 sec. South-east Asia brought him more success. It was capped by a stunning performance in Rangoon in 1969, when he captured three gold medals in the South East Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games.

Kunalan retired from the scene in 1979. He was a teacher and lecturer at the College of Physical Education, and is now an assistant professor in Physical Education and Sports Science at the National Institute of Education. Over time, he has been considered one of Singapore's 10 greatest sportsmen.

Yet the country almost lost its most famous sprinter to football. In 1962, sprint legend Tan Eng Yoon, who was a physical education lecturer at the then Teachers' Training College, had already spotted Kunalan flying down the right wing of the football pitch. When Tan approached him to join the athletics team, the football-crazy trainee at first agreed, but never showed up. Six months later, however, their paths crossed again in the college corridor. There was no escape this time - and the rest, as we say, is history.



She joined the national team, training regularly against the wishes of her strict mother, who wanted her to stay home like “a good Indian girl”.

GLORY & GOLD

Glory Barnabas

Mention memorable races in Singapore's track history and Glory Barnabas' stunning 200m victory in the 1973 SEAP Games on home ground easily comes to mind. She was making her comeback after a two-year layoff and was up against the much-feared Burmese runner Than Than. Running in Lane 3 on the brick-red tarmac of the new National Stadium at Kallang, she could barely see Than in Lane 1 after they flew off the blocks. But she knew she was running neck-and-neck throughout the race.

The more than 6,000 spectators did their part, screaming their lungs out to propel her to a photo-finish ahead of her rival. That year, she was also part of the winning 4x100m relay team. Singapore's sprint queen went on to help her country win more medals at the 1974 Asian Games in Teheran: a 4x100m relay bronze and a 4x400m relay silver, where the team missed out on the gold by half a stride.

As a student, Glory had run for Paya Lebar Methodist Girls' School in various inter-school meets but it was at the Teachers Training College that she became a national runner. The year was 1962 and she was training to be a teacher at the college when the women's 4x100m relay team found that they were one person short for the university meet. Glory stepped forward. She was astonished to be placed in the last leg. But that decision was a wise one - when the baton was handed to her, she turned second place to first. She joined the national team, training regularly against the wishes of her strict mother, who wanted her to stay home like "a good Indian girl".

She would go on to compete for her country in the 1965, 1967 and 1969 SEAP Games, bringing home bronze and silver medals before she struck gold in that famous 1973 victory. She retired in 1977 and took a four-year break before starting to compete in the Masters category, where she continued to find success.



The hurdler dominated the 110m hurdles event at the SEAP Games before retiring at 34. He became a national coach alongside the likes of Maurice Nicholas and Patrick Zehnder.

ACCIDENTAL ATHLETE

Osman Merican

As a rebellious 15-year-old, Penang-born Osman Merican ran away from home to stay with his sisters in Singapore. To earn money, he took up odd jobs scrubbing floors, painting and plucking coconuts before taking up his neighbour's suggestion to join the police force in 1959. There the 19-year-old made his accidental debut in athletics. That year, there were only two entries for the high hurdles event at the annual Police sports meet. He decided to join just for fun. He came in last.

Still, the cheeky young man noticed that athletes in the force could take time off to train. So, with that initial thought, he started training regularly for the hurdles. A year later, he was clocking 16 secs for the 110m hurdles though his technique was still raw. It took then champion hurdler Wong Fey Wan to train him before he made the next quantum leap. Renowned coach Tan Eng Yoon had also taken him under his wing, pushing him hard for his international debut at the Kuala Lumpur SEAP Games in 1965.

And what a debut it was. Although Osman had never beaten Fey Wan before, he did so on his biggest occasion, edging the former champion to the tape by one-fifth of a second and winning SEAP Games gold. His time of 14.5 secs was then the second fastest in Asia. It still stands as Singapore's national record after more than 40 years.

The hurdler continued to dominate this event at the SEAP Games before retiring at 34. He became a national coach alongside the likes of Maurice Nicholas and Patrick Zehnder. Now 67, the former police inspector is still involved in athletics at club level. Besides track and field, his two main loves are cooking and painting.

AT THE HELM

Loh Lin Kok

One cannot talk about Singapore's athletics scene in the last two decades without mentioning Loh Lin Kok. After all, the lawyer has been at the helm of the Singapore Athletic Association for the entire period - save for a two-year break - since the early 1980s.

He was first elected to the post in 1982, when he edged out incumbent A. W. Kirby - who had been president for seven years - by 31 votes to 30. Before that, Loh had already been inducted as a committee member in 1966, rising through the ranks to become vice-president for competitions. He was voted out of office but came back to win the right to lead the organisation.

The father of two is known for his outspoken personality that has sometimes put him at odds with officials and athletes. But he still enjoys strong support within the fraternity. Case in point: Although he finally stepped down in 2004 for businessman Tang Feng Wei, he came back two years later and still romped to a comfortable victory.

As for his own athletic ability, Loh was involved in middle distance and long distance running in his youth.



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Young Heather had to be egged on by her father before she competed for the first time in athletics.

SPEED IS BEAUTIFUL

Heather Siddons

When Heather Siddons stepped onto the track, she turned heads for more than one reason. Sure, she, as a multiple SEA Games gold medallist, was arguably Singapore's finest female hurdler. But, with her flowing auburn locks and electric green eyes, she was also the embodiment of beauty and grace.

Young Heather had to be egged on by her father before she competed for the first time in athletics. As a petite 10-year-old, she was afraid of taking on bigger girls in the long jump competition at the Singapore Recreation Club. Little did she expect to outleap the entire field. Her ecstatic father - whom she often credits for her rise to athletic stardom - rewarded her with a pair of spikes and persuaded her to train with renowned coach and former national athlete Tan Eng Yoon.

But fate, too, played a major role - it brought her to hurdling. In 1963, she was supposed to represent her school CHIJ only in the long jump. She was a reserve for the hurdles but was roped in when her teammate fell sick. The next thing she knew, she had won in record time. Dad got his only child a track suit for her efforts this time. Eventually, her progress in hurdling persuaded her to specialise in it in 1966, at the age of 16. A year later, she went on to win SEAP Games gold in Bangkok, finishing first in the women's 80m hurdles. As quickly as her star rose, however, she dropped the bomb by announcing her retirement.

Everyone knows you can't keep a good sportswoman down though. True enough, she made a triumphant comeback in the 1973 SEAP Games in Singapore with two gold medals. Over the years, she would accumulate a few more SEA Games medals. Her last appearance was in 1983. Now 57, Heather is a grandmother and lives in the United States with her children.

RECORD AFTER RECORD

Noor Azhar Hamid

In a sporting career that spanned two decades - 1966 to 1986 - Noor Azhar Hamid made the high jump look easy, repeatedly smashing his own national record. During this period, he raised Singapore's high jump record from 1.92m to 2.12m. That latest record, which he set in the 1973 SEAP Games on home soil, was also an Asian record and a tantalising 1cm short of the magical seven-foot mark. It was a mark that stood for 22 years – until 1995.

The former Whitley School student first joined the national team at the age of 18, making his SEAP Games debut in Bangkok in 1967. That year, he clinched a bronze medal with a jump of 1.91m. Two years later, he eclipsed Lloyd Valberg's 20-year-old national high jump record and won his first SEAP Games gold medal with a jump of 1.94m.

Noor continued dominating the event in South-east Asia, amassing a total of three golds, a silver and two bronzes, with his last medal coming in 1981 - after a six-year hiatus from the sport. The 1973 Sportsman of the Year steadfastly stuck to a straddle technique when jumping - eschewing the Fosbury Flop, which had become the style du jour of high jump since the 1968 Olympics.



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At the 1974 Asian Games in Tehran, she ran the race of her life to win the 400m in a new record time of 55.08 secs.

BEST IN ASIA

Chee Swee Lee

It's imperative to be quick off the blocks in sprint events - and Chee Swee Lee was quick, in every sense of the word. At the tender age of 10, she had already started running for Telok Kurau West Primary School. One year later, she became the national primary school champion in both the 100m and 200m sprints, under the tutelage of renowned track coach Patrick Zehnder.

Then came national recognition, when she was selected for the SEAP Games held in Rangoon, Burma, in 1969. The 14-year-old burst onto the scene, winning a silver medal in the 400m. She would repeat the feat in the 1971 and 1973 Games, adding another two silver medals to her trophy cabinet.

But the most important accolade of them all was yet to come. It took place at the 1974 Asian Games in Tehran. There, Swee Lee ran the race of her life to win the 400m in a new record time of 55.08 secs. She was 19, the first Singaporean woman to win gold in the Asian Games, and the last time a Singapore track star would be crowned best in Asia. For her achievements, she was crowned Sportswoman of the Year. In 1975, she finally clinched 400m gold in the SEAP Games, stamping her class over rivals in Bangkok.

Unfortunately her meteoric rise was cut short by injury to the Achilles tendon of her right leg, sustained just weeks before the 1976 Olympics in Montreal. The injury was to plague her for the rest of her career. However, she continued to compete successfully in college and club events in the United States, winning athletics scholarships that saw her through university. She graduated with a business administration degree from California State University in 1989.

Today, despite living in the US for almost 20 years, the 52-year-old is still holding on to her Singapore citizenship - just as Singapore holds on to the wonderful memories of their golden girl on the track.



The 22-year-old made a glorious debut for his adopted home country by winning the 10,000m in dramatic fashion.

GLORIOUS DEBUT

P. C. Suppiah

Up till the eleventh hour, middle-distance runner P. C. Suppiah still didn't know if he would be competing for Singapore in the 1971 SEAP Games in Kuala Lumpur. Born in Malacca but living in Singapore, the former Thomson Secondary student was in the process of becoming a citizen then. They left it late, but thankfully Suppiah got his citizenship papers rushed to him the night before the race.

Make Singapore proud, Mr E. W. Barker, the then SNOC President told him. He did exactly that. The 22-year-old made a glorious debut for his adopted home country by winning the 10,000m in dramatic fashion. His Burmese opponent had started strongly and led by 70m going into the final lap. But Suppiah sensed the leader's energy waning. Seizing the opportunity, he gave everything he had though he was also tired. The lead dissolved with Suppiah's sizzling pace as he completed the last lap in 55.4 secs to overtake his opponent and win the gold for Singapore.

At the 1972 Olympics in Munich, he became the first Singaporean to go below 32 minutes in the 10,000m. His record of 31 mins 19 secs still stands today. A father of two, the 57-year-old now works as a facilities officer.

ON THE TRACK, OFF THE TRACK

Ong Yeok Phee

Ong Yeok Phee is among the few who excelled both as a sportsman and a sports administrator. He made his track debut for the Combined Schools in 1968 and went on to become one of the Republic's top sprinters for a decade.

Among other regional accolades, he was part of the famous 4x100m relay team (alongside C. Kunalan, Yeo Kian Chai and Tan Say Leong) that set a national record of 40.34 secs at the 1974 Asian Games in Tehran. Significantly, in the process, the team clinched a much-coveted bronze behind China and Thailand and set a mark which stood for 20 years.

At the age of 33 in 1986, Ong called it a day while he was still one of the country's top sprinters. But that was also the start of the next chapter of his track and field career. In 1989, he was elected as the honorary secretary of the SAAA and went on to become its general manager in 1994. It was a role he excelled in, with friends and fellow sportsmen describing him as an accommodating person with excellent rapport with those around him. When he stepped down in 1997, many had described his decision as a blow to the community.

Now 54, Ong hangs around grass more often than he does tarmac, contributing to the local football scene.

He made his track debut for the Combined Schools in 1968 and went on to become one of the Republic's top sprinters for a decade.



His stint may have been brief but his leadership took SAAA to new grounds, literally, as the Centre of Excellence was established in Bukit Gombak Stadium during his tenure.

FROM ATHLETE TO ADMINISTRATOR

Tang Weng Fei

For Tang Weng Fei, his first race in Secondary Two started his love affair with athletics. In a hurdles event at the Bukit Timah inter-district meet, the newbie finished in third spot. For the next four years, he was unbeatable in the hurdles, earning a call to join the national squad in 1972. He also made waves on the school athletics scene as a part of the “ACS Flying Squad”, the unbeatable 4x100m quartet comprising himself, Tang Ngai Kin, Cheong Thiam Bee and Chan Kheng Kai.

Drafted into the army in 1972, Weng Fei was unable to fulfill his potential, narrowly missing a place in the 1973 SEAP Games squad. But that regret may have spurred him on to excel outside of track & field. The mechanical engineering graduate spent the next 28 years building his career, first in ESSO and then in oil trading companies in the United States, Europe and Japan. Today, the businessman is director of oil trading firm, Ramtron Oil International Ltd, a company he started in 2000.

His foray into sports administration was purely coincidental. He was approached with a proposition: take up the position of Chairman of Woodlands Wellington FC, an S-League club that was lagging in the league table. A lack of interest in football did not stop him from transforming the club. From running alongside his players to scouting for a coach in Ipoh, leading by example was top on his agenda. His efforts paid off over the next few years as the club achieved success.

Weng Fei’s experience with Woodlands Wellington led to an offer to join the Singapore Amateur Athletic Association. After a two-year understudy period as Vice President of Training & Selection, he was appointed president in 2004, a position he held till 2006. His stint may have been brief but his leadership took SAAA to new grounds, literally, as the Centre of Excellence was established in Bukit Gombak Stadium during his tenure. His motto of “leading by example” also meant a close relationship with athletes that has endured to this day.



All of 1.47m and 37kg, the little girl with the big heart and flowing pigtails dominated the 1,500m and the 3,000m events in the 1977 and 1979 SEA Games, winning four gold medals in the process.

DISTANCE QUEEN

K. Jayamani

In a country which has not produced many female distance runners - much less champions - K. Jayamani stands out as an exception. All of 1.47m and 37kg, the little girl with the big heart and flowing pigtails dominated the 1,500m and the 3,000m events in the 1977 and 1979 SEA Games, winning four gold medals in the process. Her achievements were rewarded with two Sportswoman of the Year accolades, in 1976 and 1980.

She had started running because of her family. As a 10-year-old, she took part regularly in Big Walk races around the island with her sister and cousins. Then she, representing Dunearn Secondary, got her big break when she finished first in the schools' section of a major walking competition.

That victory earned her recognition from renowned athletics coach Maurice Nicholas, who started training her in 1973 and developed her into South-east Asia's top middle distance and long distance runner.

Her last major achievement was winning the SEA Games gold medal in 1983 for the marathon. It was a significant victory. The last time Singapore won gold was way back in 1973 and it had to take Jayamani competing in an event which wasn't even her specialty to break the dry spell.



Sng credits his athletics background for helping him turn his company around even though it was badly hit by the 1997 financial crisis.

GIVING BACK

Sng Sze Hiang

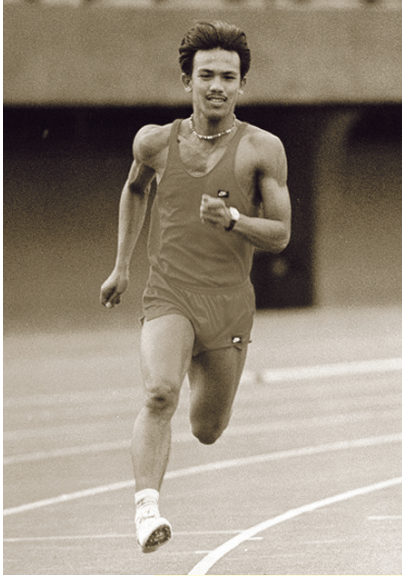
As an athlete, Sng Sze Hiang's career did not last long. The former national 400m runner competed in just one SEA Games in 1983 and then retired to concentrate on his business, at the tender age of 20. But as a businessman, he continued contributing to sports through his company T.T. Importers and Exporters.

In 1994, he offered cash rewards for Singapore's track and field athletes if they managed to secure silver or bronze medals at the Hiroshima Asian Games that year. A year later, in 1995, he sponsored former national junior high jump record holder Hoe Aik Teng to the tune of \$1,000 a month for the then 20-year-old to meet her study and training expenses.

At that time, he explained that when he was a struggling student at Singapore Polytechnic, the Singapore Amateur Athletics Association stepped in to lend him a hand when he didn't have money for training. They paid for his equipment and canvassed funds for him to go overseas for events.

So with his success in business, he always wanted to give back something. Over the years, he has contributed to sports through his company, which deals in consumer electronics and produces the local brand Akira. For some time now, Akira has been sponsoring various athletics meets and programmes run by clubs and the SAA. It has also sponsored S-League football club Geylang United.

Sng credits his athletics background for helping him turn his company around even though it was badly hit by the 1997 financial crisis. During that time, the firm had a large percentage of its business in Indo-China, which was among the region's most severely affected by the crisis. That was when the athlete in him took over. Drawing on values cultivated as an athlete such as resilience, patience and self-belief, he overcame the odds. No wonder this father of five boys hopes his children will take up sports too.



Looking back, the talented Haron will be appreciated as a whiff of fresh air in local athletics.

COLOURFUL CAREER

Haron Mundir

Sprinter Haron Mundir's track career has been nothing if not colourful. In 1980, he burst into prominence with his time of 10.9 secs in the 100m. Then just 17 years old, he was a student with Pasir Panjang Vocational Institute.

Two years later, he turned more heads when he returned times of 10.5 secs for the 100m and 21.3 secs for the 200m during a training stint in Cologne, Germany. His status as Singapore's premier sprinter was sealed when he finished fifth in the 200m at the 1982 Asian Games in New Delhi. The next year, at the SEA Games on home ground, he won silver in the 200m, finished fourth in the 100m and helped the 4x100m relay team to clinch a bronze.

His next career high came in 1987 when he smashed C. Kunalan's national 200m record with a time of 21.14 secs at an Asian meet. A few months later, he won bronze medals in 100m, 200m and the 4x100m relay at the 1987 SEA Games in Jakarta despite being down with the flu bug. In 1989, despite many obstacles, he kept his focus and equalled Godfrey Jalleh's time of 47.4 secs for the 400m. He also performed admirably at the SEA Games that year, winning the silver in the 100m and bronze in the 200m.

In 1991, he took part in the Manila SEA Games. But he pulled out because he felt he was not competition ready. A few comeback attempts were made but he eventually retired. Looking back, the talented Haron, who now works as a legal secretary, will be appreciated as a whiff of fresh air in local athletics - someone who offered a glimpse of hope to the sport at a time when it was perceived to be in the doldrums after the highs of the 1970s.

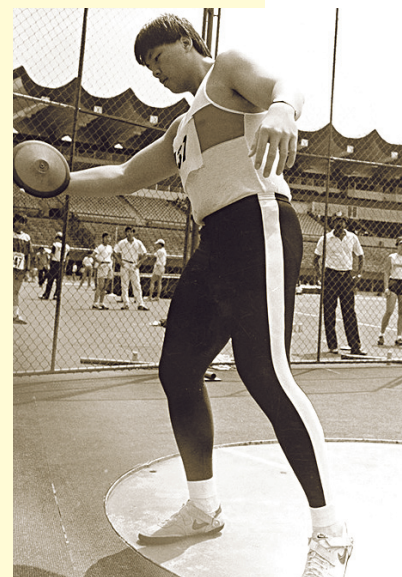
JAMES VS JAMES

James Wong

James Wong once said he wanted to be remembered as “the most bemedalled field athlete in SEA Games history and the greatest discus thrower in this region”. Few would begrudge him this title. After all, the 1.9m giant of Singapore throwing has won the SEA Games discus gold for seven times running. He is also the current national record holder for the discus (59.87m) and the hammer throw (58.20m), both of which were set in 1999.

At the local and Southeast Asian level at least, the only person who could compete with James Wong for the last 20 years is, well, James Wong. At the age of 15, he was already 1.86m tall and breaking discus records for older age groups. Two years later in 1986, he shattered Fok Keng Choy’s record of 40.08m with a hurl of 41.56m, making him the youngest male to set a national mark at the age of 17. He hasn’t looked back since, repeatedly breaking his own records as he pursued his sporting dream.

However, despite his dominance in South-east Asia, Wong, 37, has found the going tough at the Asian Games level. Now retired, he contributes to sports by helping today’s athletes improve their performance through his expertise in the field of Strength and Conditioning.



At the local and Southeast Asian level at least, the only person who could compete with James Wong for the last 20 years is, well, James Wong.



A former student at St Joseph's Institution, he was first discovered by his teacher John Tan when he was 14. His progress was rapid and he soon started to make his mark.

NEW HEIGHTS

Wong Yew Tong

In the 1995 SEA Games in Chiangmai, Thailand, Singapore's high jumper Wong Yew Tong managed "just" a silver medal. But the height he cleared in a highly competitive contest between him and the gold medallist from Malaysia led to one of the best performances in our track and field history. Indeed, Wong's 2.22m, a new national record, was of Asian standard. Riding on such good form, he later earned a place for himself in the Singapore team for the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

It is thus understandable that the 36-year-old looks back at the 1995 SEA Games with much fondness. "For me, it was special. I was particularly pleased with how I could bring myself to new heights each time I was pushed to outdo myself by the intense competition," he says.

Apart from his SEA Games feat in Chiangmai and the "wonderful experience of taking part in the Olympics" in Atlanta, he also counts his gold medal at the 1988 Asean Schools in Singapore as a highlight in his career. The gold, achieved with a height of 2.04m, was not surprising, given the potential he showed as a school boy.

A former student at St Joseph's Institution, he was first discovered by his teacher John Tan when he was 14. His progress was rapid and he soon started to make his mark at the national and regional levels. Given the promise he showed, he was even selected for training stints in Germany and Australia.

Today, Wong, who retired in 2000, works with Outward Bound Singapore and is in corporate training covering areas like leadership, personality profiling and team building. He also recently became a father and now spends his free time mainly with his family. While he is no longer into high jumping, he still swims and runs "just to stay fit".

WHAT A RECORD!

U. K. Shyam

For more than three decades, C. Kunalan's legendary 100m national record stood firm, brushing aside all pretenders to the throne. But in 10.37 breathtaking seconds in 2001, U. K. Shyam changed all that. He could barely believe it when he made the mark, breasting the tape ahead of everyone else in his 100m heats of the 2001 World University Games held in Beijing. After realising that he had bettered the mark by 0.01 sec, he burst into tears.

The new 100m star had first come to prominence as a 17-year-old student, clocking 10.7 secs, just one year after he started training seriously. The St Andrew's School student had secretly admired his school's sprinters but never imagined that he himself could be a top runner. Victory at his maiden competitive outing in the 1993 National Schools 'B' division 100m event - where he clocked 11.2 secs - boosted his confidence. Eight months later, he did his first sub-11sec timing, at the 1994 National Junior Championships. Finally, he believed he had the talent.

After breaking a couple of age-group records, he joined the national team and ran the anchor leg of the 4x100m relay in the 1997 SEA Games in Jakarta. The relay team won a bronze medal that year. Then in 2001, Shyam - who had just broken Kunalan's record - equalled that time again in the 100m final of the SEA Games in Vietnam. In the process, he finished a close second in the blue riband event, marking the first time a local sprinter had won a silver medal in the century sprint since Haron Mundir in 1989.

But he returned home empty-handed in the 2003 SEA Games in Vietnam. Subsequently, he quit running. Now 30, Shyam, who is pursuing a post-graduate diploma in education at the National Institute of Education, still hopes to make a successful comeback.



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