

THROUGH THE YEARS

The 1930s marked the beginning of Singapore athletics with the formation of the Singapore Amateur Athletic Association – Singapore’s governing body in track and field. In the early colonial days, training and athletics meets were centred at the Jalan Besar Stadium and Farrer Park Sports Complex – icons that would continue to host lots of action and drama for the next few decades. In terms of athletes, a few, including sprinter Ali Ahmad, created interest. While not everyone could be so talented, many found joy in the simple pleasures of track and field – a sport which was accessible regardless of one’s status in life.

A turbulent era, the 1940s witnessed the breakout of World War II in Singapore and Malaya. Post-1945, Singapore struggled to pick up the pieces after the war. There was a breakthrough when high jumper Lloyd Valberg made local history by taking part in the 1948 Olympics in London. At home, athletics enjoyed a revival with the founding of the Swift Athletes. In June 1947, Yeo Choon Bee, E. A. Sears, Goh Teck Phuan, Chin Lye Heng, Tay Boo Jiang, Choy Yew Mun, Lam Kah Poh, Ng Gim Seng, Ang Kian Guan and Miss Tham Quee Sim formed the Swift Athletes Association with Yeo Choon Bee as President and Goh Teck Phuan as Honorary Secretary. Going against the prevailing trend then, the club felt that sports should have no distinction in race, class or creed. Its immediate goal was to promote athletics in Singapore. With improved coaching

In the early colonial days, training and athletics meets were centred at the Jalan Besar Stadium and Farrer Park Sports Complex – icons that would continue to host lots of action and drama for the next few decades.

Going against the prevailing trend then, Swift Athletes Association felt that sports should have no distinction in race, class or creed.

and the enthusiasm of the pioneers, it became very popular. It competed actively in competitions like the Mercury Trophy Championships (Kuala Lumpur), Mercury Triangular Athletic Meet (Malacca) and Malacca A.A.A Relays Championships.

Indeed, the formation of Swift was the beginning of a new era in athletics in Malaya and Singapore. Its impact on local athletics history would prove to be tremendous: the association, with its motto “Faster, Higher, Further”, produced many top athletes who went on to represent the country at regional competitions.

The 1950s witnessed some new developments. During this decade (which saw the rise of top athletes like Chan Onn Leng, Tan Soo Liat, Tan Soo Hian, Lim Jit Imm, Ronnie Sng and Daniel Sng), a vibrant club scene emerged in both Singapore and Malaya. Clubs like Swift Athletes Association, Mercury Athletic Club, Klang District Amateur Athletic Association and Selangor Chinese Recreation Club competed in various meets, including the Pan-Malayan Inter Club Invitation Athletic Relay Championships for the Mercury Trophy. The era was not without controversy and conflict. For example, in 1950, the Singapore Chinese Amateur Athletic Federation barred Swift athletes like Tan Eng Yoon, Yeo Choon Bee, Ronnie Sng and Daniel Sng from competing in the Malaya Chinese A.A.A. Championships. Passionate letters to The Straits Times ensued, with the colony champion sprinter Tan Eng Yoon writing to the paper to criticise the

attitude of the S.C.A.A.F. In his letter, he praised Swift Athletes Association for helping him to win, citing the training, facilities and sportsmanship among athletes. The tense relationship continued into 1951 when Swift, stressing that athletics should be non-communal, refused to lend S.C.A.A.F their Chinese athletes for the Singapore A.A.A.

Yet obstacles in terms of finance, training facilities and strong opposition from communal organizations did not deter the pioneers of Swift Athletes Association from making their mark. They answered their critics in the best possible way – through solid results on the track and in the field. Winning at competitions such as the Mercury Trophy Championships in Kuala Lumpur and the Mercury Triangular Athletic Meet in Malacca, they soon built up a premier club.

At the junior level, competition was intense. The schools scene was lively and colourful. Anglo Chinese School, for instance, enjoyed much success with its many star performers, including the young Chan Onn Leng who shone in events like the 440 yards, 880 yards and the mile. Other young athletes with much promise included Daniel Sng, Alfred Wee, Khoo Boon Seng, Charles Hannam, and Tan Soo Liat. Often these boys could take on the seniors confidently. ACS athletics captain Tan Soo Liat, for example, once finished second in the high jump at the Malayan A.A.A. meet in Kuala Lumpur, losing only to the experienced Lloyd Valberg. Other noteworthy junior

Obstacles in terms of finance, training facilities and strong opposition from communal organizations did not deter the pioneers of Swift Athletes Association from making their mark.

The 60s brought a wealth of talents, many of whom continued to be in the limelight till the 70s.

athletes included distance runner Harpal Singh, middle distance runner Dason Mani and sprinters Chan Kai Ming and John Fernandez. In the jumping events, the likes of Lim Tiang Quee, Koh Kia Hua and Lim Cheng stole the show. For many athletes, one of the highlights of the decade was the visit to Singapore by the legendary Jesse Owens in 1955. Apart from those in the limelight, others contributed quietly. For example, the survival of Swift Athletes Association in the beginning was made possible through generous sponsors such as Richard Eu Keng Mun, Wee Aik Koon, Yeo Kee Loon and Ng Ghim Seng.

The 60s brought a wealth of talents, many of whom continued to be in the limelight till the 70s. Athletes like sprinters Mani Jegathesan, C. Kunalan, Ho Mun Cheong, Loh Chan Pew, Low Sin Chock, Yeo Kian Chai and Glory Barnabas started to show tremendous potential. Others like hurdler Wong Fey Wan, long jumper Evelyn Lee, middle distance runner Mirza Namazie, high jumper Noor Azhar Hamid, pole vaulter Pal Singh and cross country runner P. Pillai also began to make their mark. The 60s were a crucial decade for Singapore athletics as the foundation built during this era led to our subsequent success in the 1970s at not only the SEAP Games but also at the much more competitive Asian Games. The role of Swift Athletes Association in Singapore's track & field was underlined by its success at the Malacca AAA Relays Championships in 1964 when it won all the events for both men and women.

The 70s proved to be a fruitful decade. The era yielded track stars like hurdler Heather Siddons, 400m/800m champion Chee Swee Lee, long distance stars P. C. Suppiah and K. Jayamani, and sprinters Ong Yeok Phee and Eng Chiew Guay. Other athletes from the era included middle distance runners S. Surendra and Tan Ming Jen, decathlete Tang Ngai Kin, marathoner S. Kumaravelu, javelin thrower Ng Bock Huat, shot putter Fok Keng Choy, hammer thrower Sankaran Gawade and high jumper Chan See Huay. Meanwhile, emerging faces of the 60s like C. Kunalan and Glory Barnabas – by now seasoned athletes - continued to shine with breakthrough performances. The powerful combination of experience and youth was best manifested at the 1974 Asian Games in Tehran where our athletes put in the best performance ever at this level, with Chee Swee Lee leading the way with gold in the 400m. Adding more colour to the era was the vibrant schools scene, with athletes like sprinters Richard Seow and Yvonne Cornelius as well as 400m/800m/1,500m runner Sandra Deans among the most prominent. The role of Swift Athletes Association as breeding ground for talents was underlined by the club's phenomenal success in various competitions such as Team Championships for Cross Country, Open Relays and Road Relays. In addition, Swift members like C. Kunalan, P. C. Suppiah and Noor Azhar Hamid did the club proud by winning the country's Sportsman of the Year award while Maurice Nicholas shone with his Coach of the Year award. There were also the many dedicated officials working on the bitumen and cinder running track at the Farrer Park Sports Complex, a site for

The powerful combination of experience and youth was best manifested at the 1974 Asian Games in Tehran where our athletes put in the best performance ever at this level.

Singapore athletics entered the 1980s with high hopes but it was soon evident that the glorious 1970s would be hard to match.

many local track and field meets. Also there were the meets held on the grass at Jalan Besar Stadium, Victoria School and St Joseph's Institution. As oil was forbidden, white lines used in competitive races had to be drawn by hand with chalk. Technical officials were deployed to draw the lines before races, and sudden downpours meant that the lines had to be redrawn before the event could start. Yet no one seemed deterred and the show always went on.

Singapore athletics entered the 1980s with high hopes but it was soon evident that the glorious 1970s would be hard to match. Providing the much-needed continuity were athletes like distance runner K. Jayamani, high jumper Noor Azhar Hamid and decathlete Tang Ngai Kin. Other athletes from this era included marathoner Toh So Liang, high jumper Ranjit Kaur, steeplechase runner M. Maran, 1,500m specialist Perumal Pugalenthir and sprinters Hong Jinsheng and Mona Kunalan. While the exploits of the athletes didn't rise to the level seen in the 1970s, they certainly tried their best. Meanwhile, in terms of organization of international sports events, Singapore began to make its mark. For example, led by the indefatigable Goh Teck Phuan, the Singapore Marathon, which started modestly, grew from strength to strength as a global event, with American publication, Runner's World, describing it once as "fast becoming one of Asia's most competitive races." The club scene also saw competition among clubs like Lotto Track and Field Club, Flash Sports Club, Police Sports Association, Prisons Sports Club, United Malayan Banking Corp and Swift Athletes Association.

The 1990s brought to the fore some fine talents, including sprinter Mohd Hosni, marathoner Yvonne Danson, high jumper Wong Yew Tong and thrower James Wong. James, for example, started his reign as SEA Games discus champion with his win on home ground in 1993 – a feat he would repeat every two years without fail throughout the 90s and even beyond. Other athletes of note during this decade included heptathlete Yu Long Nyu, marathoner Toh So Liang, sprinters Hamkah Afik and Yusuf Alias, and pole vaulters Mok Hay Foo and Chan Chin Wah. The walkers too made an impact, including Khoo Ching Mong and Helen Low. At the junior level, it was a good era for local sprinting, with names like Timothy Yeo, U. K. Shyam, Nurulaini Arifin and Lim Joo Lee showing promise. Meanwhile, the Singapore International Marathon continued to enjoy phenomenal growth among both the locals and overseas athletes. As for the club scene, from the 90s onwards, those that kept it alive included Swift Athletes Association, Wings Athletics Club, Singapore Masters, MR 25, SAFSA, Flash Athletics Club, Prisons Sports Recreation Club, National University of Singapore, Temasek Polytechnic, Singapore Polytechnic, and Nanyang Polytechnic.

The Singapore International Marathon continued to enjoy phenomenal growth among both the locals and overseas athletes.







