

LIVING

# Heart And Soul: Underdogs of SMAL proved their worth on the hockey field

By M SELVANATHAN

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(From left) Bob Chi, the writer, coach Koh, Thomas Ong, Prof Dr Inderjit and Wee Hock Kee.

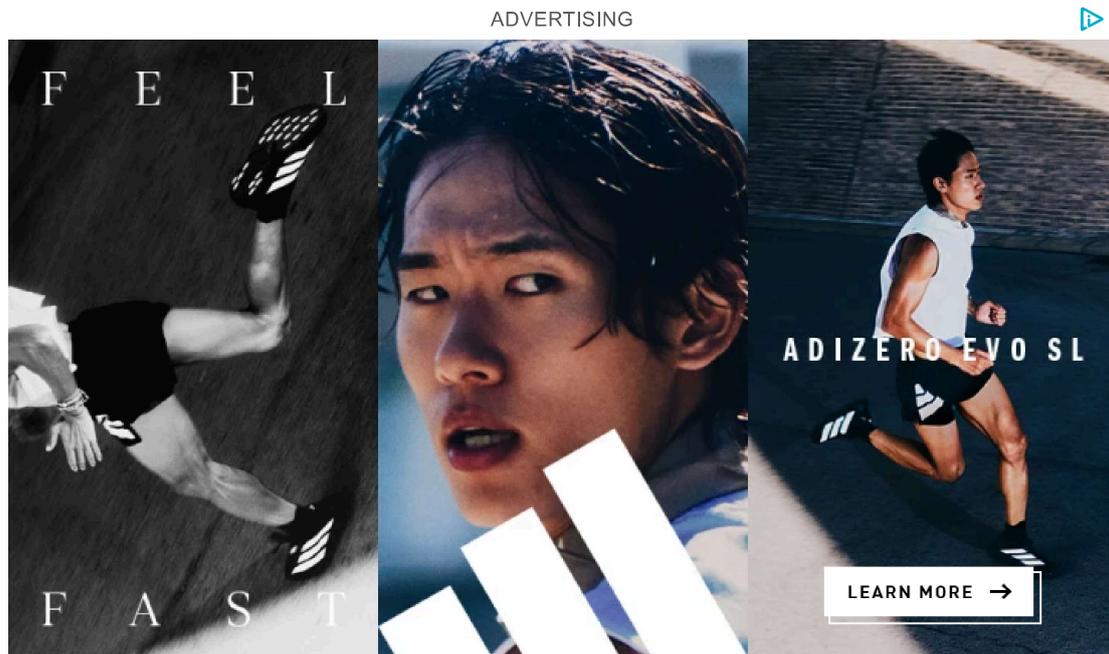
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We attended Bandar Hilir English School (BHES), Jalan Chan Koon Cheng, Malacca, from 1968 to 1973 for our primary education.

In those days, pupils would usually move on automatically to Malacca High School (MHS), located just down the same road, for their secondary studies. However, for our cohort, a new directive was introduced – those who had obtained 2As or fewer in the Standard Five assessment would instead be placed in a new school, Sekolah Menengah Air Leleh (SMAL), located in Air Leleh, Malacca.

It came as a shock, especially since we were only informed of this in Standard Six. Perhaps, in hindsight, it was a blessing in disguise – one we had to accept and move forward with.

Being a newly established school, SMAL lacked basic facilities, including a sports field. Only patches of freshly planted grass could be seen. Our physical education lessons initially involved mostly softball. However, our kind PE master, the late Koh Chye Seng, somehow discovered that some of us had played hockey during primary school. Without delay, he set about forming a school hockey team.



He approached fellow teacher and hockey coach, Koh Soon Peng, who willingly agreed to train us at the Malacca Club grounds – the famed hockey nursery that had produced many of Malacca's hockey legends who represented Malaysia in the World Cup and Olympics. Names like Yang Siow Ming, Koh Hock Seng, Sulaiman Saibot, the late Samad Said, Wong Choon Hin, Tam Chiew Seng, Tam Kum Seng, Wallace Tan, Chin Boon Gee, Michael Chew, and Mirnawan Nawawi come to mind.

Coach Koh travelled 25.6km – a 52-minute drive – from Sungai Udang after school to train us from 3pm. The dedication of both Kohs bore fruit when SMAL emerged as state hockey champions in 1976, defeating powerhouses like MHS, St Francis Institution (SFI), Gajah Berang English School (GBES), and Anglo Chinese School (ACS).

Fifty years on, the 1973–1977 pioneer batch held a reunion at Swiss Garden Hotel, Malacca, on June 28, 2025, where we honoured both teachers – with a posthumous award for the late Koh Chye Seng.



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In his speech, coach Koh recalled, “Only three schools joined the 1973 inaugural Under-13 hockey tournament – MHS, GBES and SMAL. MHS walloped GBES with 15 goals. I thought we stood no chance. But you fellas, simply steamrolled GBES with 23 goals and went on to beat MHS too! I am indeed very proud to have been part of this great SMAL hockey team and I want to thank all of you for remembering me!”

We remain deeply grateful to both men: our late teacher Koh Chye Seng and coach Koh Soon Peng – for their vision, sacrifice, and the values they instilled in us. We salute them.

We also took the opportunity to recognise some of our SMAL school mates who have excelled in their career and honoured them with the Prominent High Achievers Award during our reunion.

Wee Hock Kee was the first recipient. A chartered account by profession, he was appointed on Feb 13, 2025 to the Malaysian Aviation Commission (MAVCOM), recommended by the Transport Minister and approved by the Prime Minister. He is also on the SOCSO board.

Next was Bob Chi Cheng Bok, a MBA holder, who was the CEO of Singapore Airport Terminal Services Ltd (SATS), a commercial aviation company and world’s largest cargo handler.

Ong Tai Chu (Thomas) was the first Malacca-born Chinese to hold the post of Pengarah Majlis Sukan Negeri Melaka (Malacca State Sports Council Director). He was also the Secretary of Melaka Road Safety Council and Town Councillor for Majlis Bandaraya Bersejarah Melaka. He has received many awards from the state government.

Lt Col Professor Madya Dr Inderjit Singh Tara Singh has been in the Malaysian Armed Forces for the past 43 years serving in the National Defence University as a senior lecturer. He has won the Best Lecturer award four times.

Prof Dr Inderjit represented Malaysia in United Nations (UN) Peace Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2004.

He has also represented and captained the Malaysian Hockey Veteran’s Team that finished as bronze medalist in the Tokyo World Cup edition in 2022.

He has played in the Masters World Hockey Tournament in Australia in 2016, Spain in 2018, and was captain in the World Masters in Tokyo 2023 and Hong Kong 2024, where Malaysia emerged champions, twice. A prominent high achiever indeed!

Incidentally, our reunion was held at Swiss Garden Hotel, Malacca and its general manager is Mario Indran, ex SMAL student too!

Not bad for SMAL school, a supposedly lower echelon of “smaller, lesser” graded students in our Malaysian education system who have made it big in life!

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