

What Soccer Means To Me: National Integration through the Prism of Soccer in Singapore

By Leonard C. Sebastian

For Singaporeans of my generation born in the 1960s, soccer dominates our lives. It's hard now to imagine an era where children did not have fancy gadgets with bells, lights, and sound effects—let alone television. But that was the reality of growing up in post-Independence Singapore, where poverty was endemic and forms of recreation for children were limited.

Yet for me, like so many Singaporean children growing up in the 1970s, our lives revolved around soccer. I started playing soccer at age five and continue to play the game today with my colleagues at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University. Back in the 1970s, soccer enabled me to understand my neighbors and society better. Now, it not only keeps me fit but is an important part of my social interaction with my office colleagues.



Playing soccer with my RSIS colleagues. Source: Photo courtesy of the author.

In the 1970s, the medium of soccer allowed me to form strong social bonds with Singaporeans of other races and religions. This is still the case today, however, with one difference. The university is a microcosm of what Singapore society is now becoming. With large waves of migration over the last fifteen years, Singapore is once again an immigrant society, and soccer matches are an opportunity for me to get to know my colleagues, many of whom are new immigrants, and find out how they are adapting to the Singapore way of life. Considering the importance of soccer to people living in Japan, Korea, China, and the countries of Southeast Asia, it is surprising to me why so few Asian Studies scholars study

sports in Asia, considering its usefulness as a topic of academic research. Studying soccer in Asia can provide insights into cultural, historical, political, and social processes whose ramifications go beyond the sporting arena.

1965 was a pivotal year for Singapore, with the threat of revolutionary Communism in Southeast Asia growing. President Lyndon Johnson had just begun the process of escalating the war in Việt Nam. These were testing times, with state- and nation-building processes in a decolonized Southeast Asia starting to unravel. To Singapore's south, the Indonesian confrontation was at its height, and deepening tensions between the army and Indonesian Communist Party would by the end of September bring about cataclysmic change. Across the causeway an increasingly bitter and intractable crisis within the Federation of Malaysia between Singapore and Malaysia's ruling parties would by August lead to the separation of Malaysia and Singapore.

On July 21, 1964—scarcely a year since Singapore became part of the Federation of Malaysia—a scuffle broke out between Malays and Chinese bystanders during a procession to mark Prophet Muhammad's birthday. The fracas escalated into nationwide violence. When a thirteen-day curfew was lifted, twenty-three people died and 454 people were injured. Later, it became evident that the initial brawl was an orchestrated attempt to stir up racial tensions. Two months later, another riot broke out following allegations that a Malay trishaw rider was killed by a group of Chinese men, resulting in thirteen dead and 106 injured. Fifty years on from those fateful incidents, young Singaporeans live in an environment of relative peace and prosperity. Now, July 21 is commemorated as Racial Harmony Day, when generations of schoolchildren adorn racial garb and are taught the virtues of respecting diversity. Prior to separation and concerned that race relations would be compromised due to growing acrimony between the Malay elite dominating the federal government in Kuala Lumpur and the leadership representing majority Chinese Singapore, sport was used by the government of Singapore as a means of mitigating communal tensions and promoting a multiracial framework for the Federation of Malaysia. This is a little-known story.

When opening the 1965 *Pesta Sukan*, or Festival of Sports, then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in response to the question “Is sport so completely devoid of politics?” gave this answer “Sport is politics—very much politics in a very international way. And sport, I’m sorry to say, is also very much internal politics.” Lee went on to say, “Sport militates toward a noncommunal, multireligious, multilingual approach to life.”¹ In describing the objective of *Pesta Sukan*, Lee stressed that it was about “politics” and was designed by the Ministry of Social Affairs to emphasize the point “that Malaysia’s multiracial society gives out its best in sport and other pursuits ... when it makes use of the best in Malaysia”. He went on to add, “If the chap can run faster than you, then you can’t decry the fact that he belongs to a different religion or race, and therefore he is necessarily inferior.”²

More importantly, soccer at the grassroots or community level can provide a useful way of creating an environment where people can come together to show respect for others and share the common space. Indeed, this was my experience growing up in Singapore in the 1970s.

I grew up in a housing estate built in 1960 for civil servants. My abiding memory was the playground in the middle of Windsor Park housing estate where children of all races would meet regularly for a game of soccer. Windsor Park was a cross-section of Singapore society. The smaller houses closer to Upper Thomson Road housed clerks and lower-ranked civil servants. The semidetached homes where I lived were owned by middle-management civil servants. Up at the top of Windsor Park Hill was where people in top leadership positions in the Singapore Civil Service lived, like the late Chief Justice Wee Chong Jin. There was no sense of elitism among young people in those days. Elite schools, the gifted education program, or streaming that shape the attitudes of young people today did not exist. Then, we all were relatively equal. Children got along well and, invariably, soccer was the bridge.

Soccer broke down barriers created by race, ethnicity, class, and educational status. I began to realize that it was more than a game and could do more than just provide dirty laundry (which was always a source of consternation for my poor mother during the rainy season). During the school term, we would play soccer in the evenings. School holidays were memorable because we would play all day, every day. The match would start at nine in the morning and last until seven in the evening. Players joined in as and when they liked. There were no other distractions. For those of us privileged enough to own a television set, soccer on Radio and Television Singapore (RTS) was limited to a thirty-minute soccer program from the United Kingdom called *Star Soccer*, screened on Sundays. With an acute shortage of soccer on television, my life revolved around that playground in Windsor Park.

We did not play with a referee, so disputes would break out whenever there were objections over foul play or the legitimacy of a goal. Yet, rather than deepening racial divides, the need to negotiate and find an amicable solution to any dispute on the soccer field with a person of another race gave me deeper insights into secrets of developing solid intercultural relationships. In the course of play, you begin to understand how youth of different racial backgrounds respond to stressful situations. Over time, you learn to adapt and develop greater tolerance for each other. This allowed us to develop not only empathy, but also our own system of fair play, which meant that we did not require the presence of a referee as an arbiter. I have no doubt that my interaction with Chinese, Malay, and Eurasian Singaporeans on the soccer field laid the groundwork for my Singaporean identity. For many of my neighbors, the experience of playing in a diverse soccer setting also led them to become comfortable playing with others whose backgrounds may not resemble their own.

Going beyond the traditional components of Singapore government language and community integration policies, soccer united the youth population of my generation through a shared love of sport and recreation. Racial intolerance was still an issue during my early years. Despite government efforts to deepen racial harmony and change, the perceptions that some Singaporean youth held toward peers of other ethnic backgrounds, stereotypes, and bias still existed and were perpetuated within preceding generations. Yet I never encountered racial discrimination on the sports field. When I played competitively, racist remarks directed to me may have come from the opposing team’s supporters, but such opinions were not manifested in the players themselves.

In fact, soccer in the late 1960s and early 1970s was very much a part of national life. People had a good balance between work and soccer. Employers such as government agencies the police, prisons, the postal service, National Electricity Board, customs, and port authorities all supported soccer, and the national team drew its players from the civil service.³ In the 1970s, government institutions would regularly organize interservice games to foster better understanding and closer cooperation among their employees. The Singapore Combined Secondary Schools Sports Council would

regularly recommend a multiracial pool of school talent that the Football Association of Singapore (FAS) would channel to its various club affiliates to be nurtured into good soccer players.

Green spaces have always been evident in Singapore since the “Garden City” vision was articulated on May 11, 1967. Yet the urban sprawl that now characterizes the Singapore of today is not what I remember of the 1970s. There were a lot of open spaces. Coming home from school, I would pass fields and note crowds gathering, each person there hoping the other would bring along a soccer ball. A soccer ball would not always be available. On many occasions, a tennis ball or even an ordinary ball made of plastic or rubber would suffice for an impromptu game. Soccer brought Singaporeans together, creating public spaces for exchange and dialogue.

The completion of the National Stadium in 1973 was a boost for soccer fans. As recreation time decreased due to work pressures, statistics still indicated that soccer remained deeply etched in the lives of Singaporeans. In 1975, nearly one million people attended soccer games at the National Stadium.⁴ For Singaporeans like me growing up in the 1970s, the republic’s great moments in the Malaysia Cup captured my attention.

The soccer rivalry between Singapore and the Malaysian states also framed my Singaporean identity. Both my parents were born in Malaya and were civil servants in Singapore when separation took place on August 9, 1965. For my parents, the Singapore–Malaysia soccer rivalry may not have captured their attention. Being preoccupied by work-related demands or perhaps an unwillingness to take sides on account of familial relations may have been factors. I could not say for sure. For me, however, born and bred in Singapore, the national soccer team was the center of my world. Over the years, the acrimonious relationship between Singapore and Malaysia soccer officials would mirror the state of the political relationship between the two countries. For soccer fans though, the Malaysia Cup became our platform for uniting Singaporeans and affirming our national identity.

What I have learned through the experience of playing soccer in a multiethnic environment is that while politics may provide the framework for integration, the rest has to come from the individuals themselves. Soccer captivates people from all cultural and social backgrounds, and growing up in post-Independence Singapore, it represented a connecting element for Singaporean society transcending ethnic divides. Adults can learn a lot from how children interact with each other. Unless influenced by the biases of adults, children do not distinguish between ethnicities. They approach each other as human beings and, in my own personal experience, as young people who have fun playing soccer. By exposing a child to soccer in parallel societies that exist within his or her home environment, we can promote integration amongst future generations.

NOTES

1. “Sport Is Politics, Says Lee,” *The Straits Times*, June 29, 1965. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/zx6m3wq>.
2. *Ibid.*
3. “Give Football This New Start,” *The Straits Times*, September 19, 1968. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/zkq5zyj>.
4. “Don’t Just Watch,” *New Nation*, February 4, 1976. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/hs43s9z>.

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