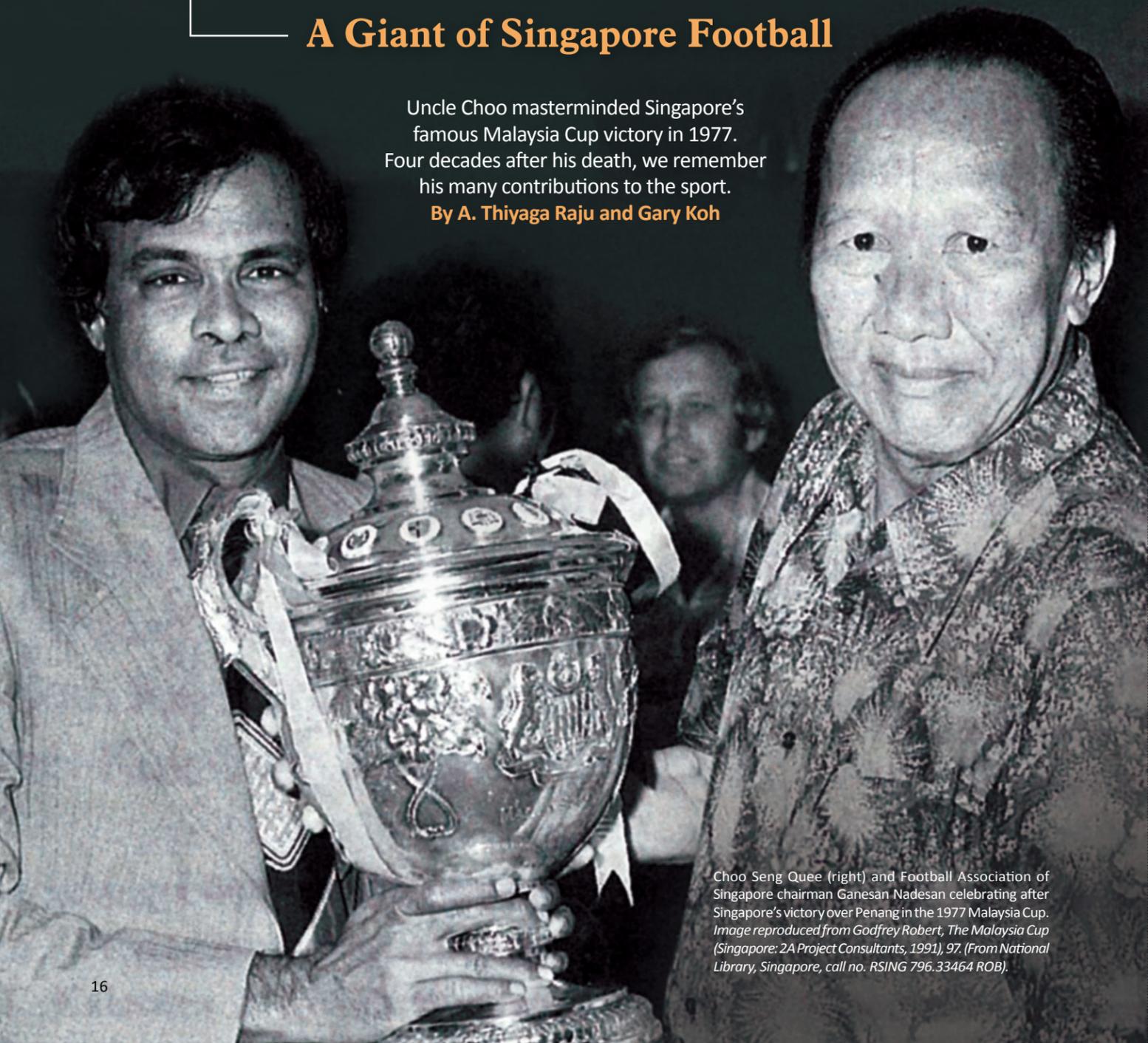


Coach Choo Seng Quee

A Giant of Singapore Football

Uncle Choo masterminded Singapore's famous Malaysia Cup victory in 1977. Four decades after his death, we remember his many contributions to the sport.

By A. Thiyaga Raju and Gary Koh



Choo Seng Quee (right) and Football Association of Singapore chairman Ganesan Nadesan celebrating after Singapore's victory over Penang in the 1977 Malaysia Cup. Image reproduced from Godfrey Robert, *The Malaysia Cup* (Singapore: 2A Project Consultants, 1991), 97. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 796.33464 ROB).

There are many coaches who can guide and mastermind their teams to win matches, but only a select few have what it takes to bring them over the finish line and claim victory.

Choo Seng Quee was a rare breed in the latter category among Singaporean coaches, for he instinctively knew how to lead his players to victories and lay the foundation for future successes.

Having developed a reputation for his coaching ability in Southeast Asia, Choo cemented his legacy among the Singaporeans in the 40,000-strong crowd at Merdeka Stadium in Kuala Lumpur on the evening of 28 May 1977.

Singapore was playing Penang in the finals of the Malaysia Cup and attempting to lift the cup for the first time in 12 years. The hopes of a young nation rested on the shoulders of stalwarts like Samad Allapitchay, S. Rajagopal, Dollah Kassim and Quah Kim Song. However, by the time the half-time whistle was blown, those hopes had dimmed considerably. The Lions had squandered an early lead and were now a goal down.

The second half, though, was a different story as Singapore managed to claw back an equaliser and the game went into extra time. During the first half of extra time, Quah dived in to head home the vital third and winning goal to send the Malaysia Cup back south.¹

As the *Straits Times* noted: "The manner in which Singapore came back to win the cup just when everyone had given up hope for them made the hair stand on the back of necks."²

Credit for that historic win should be laid at the feet of a Singapore team who played their hearts out.

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But one other person played just as important a role, even though his name did not appear on the starting 11. Choo (or Uncle Choo as he was fondly termed) had assembled the team, trained and motivated them, and planned and strategised their matches. He did all this in the face of detractors who said he was too old to do the job and who had organised petitions to remove him.

With the win, Choo, in his trademark batik shirt, earned his place in the annals of Singapore football. So it is not surprising then that when he died just six years later, at the age of 68, an outpouring of grief swept over the nation. Four decades on, it is safe to say that no other football coach has occupied the imagination of Singaporeans in quite the same way.

Early Beginnings with Raffles Institution

As with many coaches, Choo was a footballer first. Born in Singapore on 1 December 1914, Choo played for Raffles Institution, before progressing to the Singapore Chinese Football Association (SCFA).³

After obtaining his Senior Cambridge qualifications, Choo joined the SCFA in 1933 where he rose through the ranks to eventually make his first-team



The Singapore Chinese Football Association team at Anson Road Stadium, 1939. Choo Seng Quee is standing fourth from the left. Courtesy of Singapore Sports Council.

debut at the First Division two years later.⁴ He later earned a spot in the Singapore team for the Malaya Cup (renamed Malaysia Cup in 1967) in 1936.⁵ He was part of the backbone of the squad that managed to reach the Cup final in 1936, 1937 and 1938, and he was part of the team that defeated Selangor in 1937.⁶

In 1939, the All-China Olympic Committee invited Choo to attend the preliminary selection in Hong Kong for the football team that would represent China at the 1940 Olympic Games in Helsinki, Finland. “He displays fine head work while his accurate ball distribution is as good as the best we have seen in Singapore,” wrote the *Malaya Tribune*. Choo said that “he appreciated the honour and that he would give of his very best if finally selected”. Choo never made it to the Olympics though as the games were eventually cancelled because of World War II.⁷

Forays into Coaching

Choo retired from playing in 1948 and turned his hand to coaching. His first formal coaching job was at the Singapore Chinese Athletic Association (also known as Chung Wah). In 1949, he was named Singapore’s head coach and tasked with guiding the team in the Malaya Cup campaign.⁸

However, it was when he went overseas that he experienced success as a coach. He coached Indonesia between 1951 and 1953⁹ and then Malaya/Malaysia from 1 February 1958 to 30 January 1965.

During his three-year stint, Choo laid the foundation for the Indonesian national team, known as the Garuda, that subsequently became one of the best teams in the region. This was during the period when international football was beginning to take root in Asia.

The Garuda made headlines in 1953 when Choo led them to three successive wins in Hong Kong, which was then one of the leading bastions of football as a British colony boasting top Chinese internationals and excellent expatriate players. It was a feat never accomplished before by visiting Asian teams until the

Indonesians came along.¹⁰ With the solid foundations laid by the Singaporean tactician, the Indonesian team managed to finish fourth in the 1954 Asian Games football tournament in Manila. They would subsequently win the bronze in Tokyo four years later.¹¹

After this Indonesia stint, Choo was personally appointed by Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaya’s founding prime minister and president of the Football Association of Malaya (FAM), as the national coach on 1 February 1958.¹² It marked the beginning of a seven-year stint during which he would demonstrate his coaching and scouting abilities at their finest.

Choo guided Harimau Malaya to Pestabola Merdeka (Merdeka Cup) successes from 1958 to 1960 and a second-place finish in the same competition in 1961.¹³ He also guided the national youth team to a runner-up placing in the inaugural Asian Youth Championship in 1959.¹⁴

In addition, Choo helped Malaya’s national team clinch gold in the 1961 Southeast Asian Peninsular Games (now South East Asian Games) football tournament in Burma and a bronze a year later at the Asian Games football tournament in Indonesia.¹⁵

Coaching Singapore

Despite his successes in Indonesia and Malaya, Choo’s heart lay with Singapore and when asked to guide the Singapore Lions in the Malaya Cup in 1964 and 1965, Choo obliged without hesitation.¹⁶

On 8 June 1964, Choo was given permission by the FAM to be released to coach Singapore in the Malaya Cup.¹⁷ He would eventually guide the Lions to back-to-back successes in the competition, the second just days before his country of birth exited the Federation of Malaysia and announce its independence.

After leaving the FAM on 30 January 1965 following his failure to return from his months-long leave,¹⁸ Choo opened a sport shop on Owen Road. He later became a caretaker coach with the national team for the Merdeka Cup in 1971 and guided several local teams, notably Burnley United, Marble and Tampines

Rovers, in the local First Division league where several of his proteges came under him at club level.

Choo returned to guide Singapore for the final time in the pre-World Cup qualifiers and the Malaysia Cup in 1977, and coached neighbouring Johor a few years later in 1980. He guided the Johor team to a respectable mid-table finish, ending up seventh in the Malaysia Cup league phase, before retiring in early January 1981.¹⁹

Although Choo made his name coaching various national sides, it was his work with young players at Farrer Park’s fabled football fields that he cemented his reputation as Singapore’s finest coach.

The earliest evidence of him coaching young talents there dates to 1950 when he had 18 teenage boys between the ages of 13 and 15 under his wing, including future national players Majid Ariff and Charlie Chan. He taught them the fundamentals of the game through individual technique training and theory lessons.²⁰

Under his tutelage, some of his proteges would take the local leagues by storm with their team Star Soccerites during which they easily conquered the lower divisions and won the top-flight First Division in that decade.²¹

“Uncle” Choo, the Legend

This was when the legend of “Uncle” Choo began to take shape in these decades as he personally took care of his young boys’ well-being off the pitch, making sure each had a pair of boots and proper nutrition to aid their adolescent growth.²²

His dedication was remarkable. R. Suriamurthi, the 1980 Malaysia Cup winner, attested to how Choo helped him. “In those days, money was very hard to come by at home, so I had no sports gear with me. Uncle gave me two complete sets of football jerseys and shorts and two pairs of socks and boots each,” said Suriamurthi.²³

“He sponsored me tea and soup *kambing* [mutton soup] so that I could beef up my physique. Any equipment we needed, we could get from his Maju Jaya Sports Shop at Owen Road. He had no pay from his scouting or youth training. Nor was he sponsored to do so, not like today where coaches are paid to coach secondary school teams.”²⁴

It was also at Farrer Park that Singapore-based British serviceman Peter Corthine, who was once in the books of Tottenham Hotspur as a trainee, managed to revive his professional career in the Football League in England following his training under the great man in 1957.²⁵

In an interview with the *Singapore Free Press* in March 1957, the then-19-year-old remarked that Choo would have been a top English football coach on par with the best in his home country. “[I] maintain that Seng Quee is in a class by himself,” he said. “His methods bring fast results, yet they do not tend to change one’s own style in the least.”²⁶

“For that matter, I strongly believe if Seng Quee was in England, he would be wanted by many professional clubs as a coach... I don’t think I have ever come across a man more enthusiastic in the game. He trains

hundreds of youths now and gets nothing in return, but the satisfaction of seeing them play good soccer.”²⁷

Choo also visited football fields across Singapore to personally scout and select potential footballers for the national team. That was how local football icon Quah Kim Song and his older brothers were recruited. Quah recalled how “Uncle” got him in for personalised training after seeing him play at Deptford Road in Sembawang. “My brothers were all coached by Uncle Choo, so mine was a natural progression,” he recalled. “He spoke to me and said, ‘If you train under me, I can make you a big star.’”²⁸

“He said that with confidence and invited me to Farrer Park, which was a hunting ground for football. I was staying in Naval Base and had to take a bus, which was a 45-minute ride to Farrer Park.”

Quah recalled his bewilderment the first time he arrived at Farrer Park. “When I reached at 8 am, I looked around,” he said. “There was no player around, and suddenly a big, tall father figure came.”

“I told him, ‘Uncle, you are only training me?’ He said there was another guy who was supposed to come, [future national player] Jaffar Yacob. He trained us both together and showed us the ropes on how to play football.”

In the absence of coaching certification, which only commenced in Asia in the late 1960s, Choo was a self-taught man. To advance his knowledge, Choo read many books on the latest methods of coaching football.

Aside from football theory, there were rules that Choo insisted his trainees and players abide by for their self-discipline. “Uncle told me that if I am to become an excellent footballer, I have to make huge sacrifices,” said Quah. “That meant sleeping early, eating well, no girlfriend and so on. I followed his mantra and advice to a tee and became one of the best strikers in the national team.”²⁹

Other rules included a smoking ban at training premises, no consumption of iced water or soft drinks, and compulsory attendance for flag raising and singing of the national anthem at 6 am in the morning before the commencement of the day’s training. Anyone found infringing these rules would be made to run laps around the training pitch before he was sent packing without further participation in the training session of the day.³⁰

Return to Singapore

In 1976, Football Association of Singapore chairman Ganesan Nadesan brought Choo back into the national coaching hot seat.³¹ He was given full rein in the selection and training of players ahead of the World Cup and Malaysia Cup qualifiers taking place in 1977, unlike previous occasions where Choo had to work with teams chosen by selectors such as committee members of the national football association and chairmen of the football clubs, or work with fellow coaches in the coaching committee.

Drama quickly ensued in the aftermath of the appointment. Local football fans were doubtful that Choo, who was then already 62, had the ability to handle the national team. One of his first tasks was to demand the reinstatement of several old stalwarts, whom he had known from their youth training at

Choo Seng Quee at a training session at Jalan Besar Stadium, 1977. Image reproduced from *Asian Soccer July 1977 (Singapore: Asian Soccer News, 1977–), 7. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 796.33405 AS).*



Farrer Park. Among them was Quah who was then serving a suspension. “Uncle Choo told Ganesan that if he was to come back, ‘On my terms,’” said Quah.³²

“He said, ‘I don’t care about all these. I want my players back because they can contribute.’ He knew what I could do for the team and told Ganesan, ‘I have a plan for Quah Kim Song. I want him back.’”³³

Gathering his former trainees into the national set-up was the easy part. They already had the skills and physical fitness, but needed a spark to rekindle the fire in their hearts. “I knew they lacked self-conviction. They were afraid that the home crowd would criticise them. But I made them believe in the Singapore flag – that we must first have the country in mind,” said Choo.³⁴

Choo reintroduced the coaching fundamentals he had previously taught them in their youth. He also started his early preparations by instilling patriotism in the players. “Each morning at 5.30 am the team had to hoist the national flag and sing the National Anthem as loud as they could,” said Choo. “Now I am happy to say that every player in my squad is prepared to give his leg, hand or head to play for Singapore – and win.”³⁵

Quah recalled an incident that showed Choo’s dedication to the game and his players. “One morning



Choo Seng Quee fights back tears after Singapore’s thrilling 3–2 win against Penang in the Malaysia Cup final held at the Merdeka Stadium in Kuala Lumpur on 28 May 1977. Image reproduced from *Asian Soccer July 1977* (Singapore: *Asian Soccer News*, 1977–), 8. (From National Library, Singapore, call no. RSING 796.33405 AS).

it drizzled quite heavily. After breakfast we were only too glad to jump back into bed. But the coach really shamed us all when, punctual as usual, he stood in the rain waiting for us,” said Quah. “‘If you boys want to do well in this tournament you must be prepared to withstand some things,’ he shouted at us. As he spoke, he was drenched to the skin and tears welled in his eyes.”³⁶

Upon hearing this, Quah said they all felt ashamed. “Thoroughly disgraced, we sprung from the cosy warmth of our beds, hopped into our football gear and begun training in earnest. I think it was at this juncture that it suddenly dawned on us what our coach had all along been trying to tell us. From then onwards, we never let him down.”³⁷

Choo also arranged for a series of international friendly matches to help the Lions get up to speed with the essentials of the game ahead of their World Cup Asian qualifying debut. However, the final results in the lead-up were far from satisfactory, with many people calling for the veteran tactician’s head to roll.³⁸

In December 1976, three months after his appointment as national coach, some local fans started a campaign. They planned to submit two petitions to the Football Association of Singapore, Singapore Sports Council and Minister for Social Affairs Othman Wok – one calling for Choo’s replacement with technical advisor Trevor Hartley, and the other for the reinstatement of several players back to the national team. “Results are pathetic because Seng Quee’s methods are out-moded and because of his poor rapport with players,” read one petition.³⁹

“Players like Arshad [Khamis] and Dollah [Kassim] who showed signs of improvement under Mr Hartley are now playing like beginners. Time is running short and Seng Quee must be replaced before it’s too late for even Mr Hartley to do anything,” stated the other petition.⁴⁰

Choo had the final laugh though when the World Cup qualifiers commenced in February 1977. He delivered the results when they mattered, stunning Causeway rivals Malaysia 1–0, defeating Thailand 2–0 and drawing with Hong Kong 2–2.⁴¹

Finishing second in their qualifying group after a 0–4 drubbing by Indonesia, the Lions eventually finished runner-up in the playoff following a 0–1 defeat to Hong Kong in the group final.⁴²

All this, of course, was a lead-up to the historic Malaysia Cup win in May 1977.

Sacrifices and Accolades

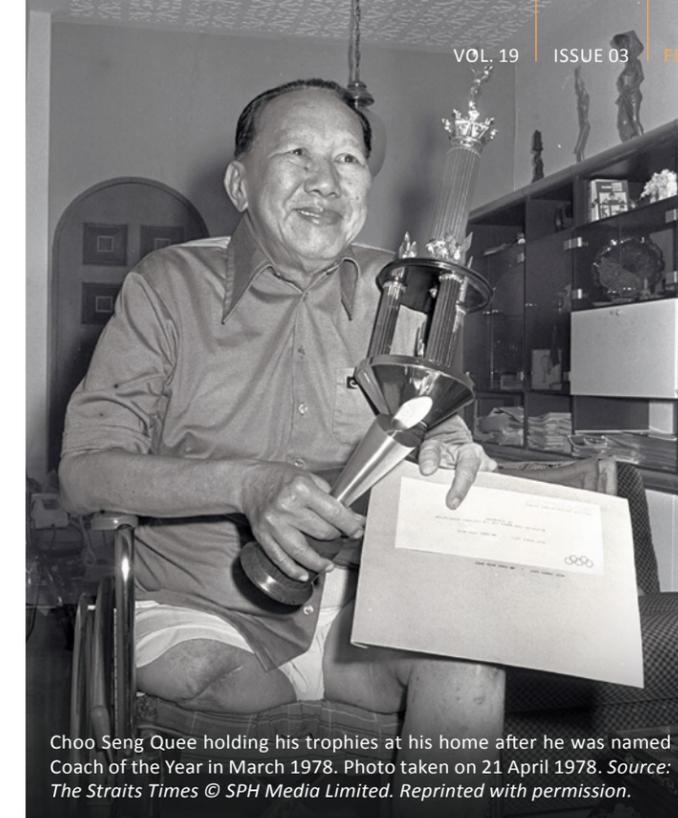
Choo’s dedication to the sport and his players came at a price though. He suffered a fall at the Merdeka Stadium during the Malaysia Cup semi-final second leg between Singapore and Selangor in May 1977, leaving a gash on his right leg. Too engrossed with coaching, Choo neglected to seek treatment for the wound, which worsened and subsequently turned gangrenous, a common problem for people with diabetes.⁴³

The leg could not be saved and had to be amputated up to the knee on 14 September 1977. This came just four months after Singapore had won the Malaysia Cup. Unfortunately, this first operation could not stem the gangrene and Choo had more of his leg amputated in a second operation on 20 September.⁴⁴

Choo remained in high spirits throughout his ordeal though. In January 1978, after a four-month stay in hospital, he pledged to be back on the field. “I’m disappointed and hurt by people who think my days with soccer are over,” he said. “I don’t have to have two feet to teach soccer. I can do it from my house. But I’ll be on the field with a soccer team in three months’ time to prove them wrong,” he declared.⁴⁵

Choo kept his word and proved his critics wrong. In January 1979, he returned to coach Tampines Rovers for the League championship, and crossed the Causeway to guide Johor in the 1980 Malaysia Cup campaign where he masterminded a thrilling 2–2 draw with Singapore at Larkin that season.⁴⁶

At the tail end of his career, Choo was awarded a gold medal by the All-Indonesia Soccer Federation on 19 April 1980 for his trailblazing work in making the Garuda a Southeast Asian force. The team under Choo was considered the best in Indonesia’s soccer



Choo Seng Quee holding his trophies at his home after he was named Coach of the Year in March 1978. Photo taken on 21 April 1978. Source: *The Straits Times* © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission.

history. Two years earlier, he had been named Singapore Coach of the Year in March 1978 and awarded the Public Service Medal (Pingat Bakti Masyarakat) by the Singapore government in August 1978 for his “contribution towards the promotion of the game”.⁴⁷

Choo finally retired from coaching in January 1981.⁴⁸ When he died on 30 June 1983 at his home on Wolskel Road after a battle with kidney disease, there was an outpouring of grief nationwide.⁴⁹

“‘Uncle’ Choo Seng Quee... was the greatest football coach Singapore has ever produced, the best talent scout in Asia, and the soccer saviour of our two closest neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia,” wrote football journalist Jeffrey Low. “He was respected sometimes beyond logic, sometimes beyond toleration, sometimes even beyond one’s self-respect. But in the end, his ‘sons’ never questioned the biggest lesson he taught them: ‘To die for the country.’”⁵⁰ ♦

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