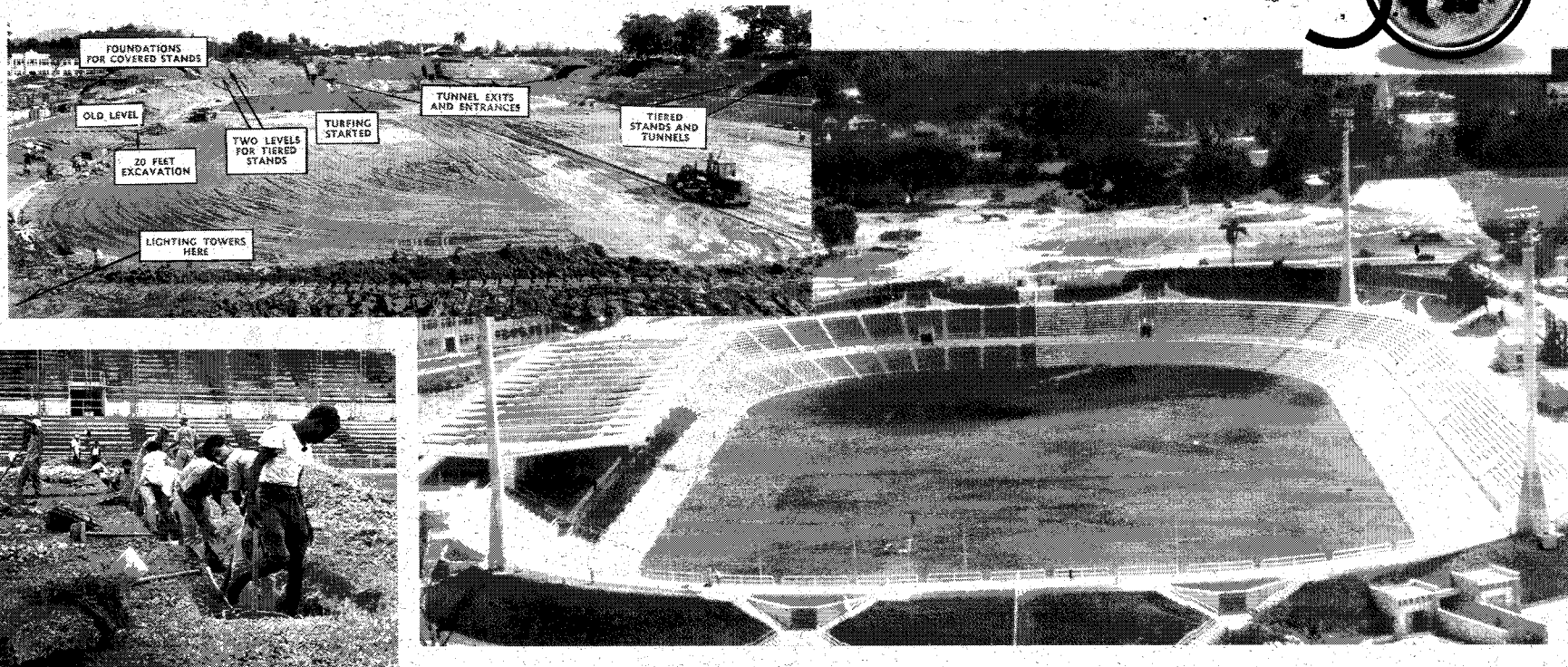


Merdeka... and sporting thrills

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The history that Merdeka Stadium holds within its walls is monumental. **MALINA JEYA PALAN** talks to one of the project members who was involved in the building of this national heritage



(Clockwise from top left) The site of the Merdeka Stadium project; the completed stadium; and Malabari men busy at work at the construction site.

YOUNG Chinese women clad in black *samfoo* carrying small pails of concrete dangling on either end of the *kanda* sticks they carried over their shoulders, whilst "walking down precariously narrow gangways and sloping ramps in continuous convoys".

Strong Malabari men working on the lighting towers and other construction workers with wheelbarrows carrying building materials into the site or mixing concrete.

This was the scene at the \$2.3 million Merdeka Stadium project at the Coronation Park in Kuala Lumpur in 1957, and site supervisor Lee Kwok Thye was at the centre of it all.

"It was a difficult task to undertake by any standard because of time constraints, but it was achieved by focus and determination," said Lee at his home in Damansara Heights, Kuala Lumpur.

Sports-loving Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, who was at the forefront of the independence movement, had decided on building the stadium to celebrate Malaya's independence.

And it would also be the venue of the Merdeka Tournament, a football tournament to commemorate independence.

Work started in late 1956 and the Public Works Department completed the stadium in 11 months, two weeks ahead of schedule for the Tunku to declare independence on Aug 31, 1957.

There was an air of expectancy in the country and



Lee Kwok Thye was the site supervisor for the project

while the political leaders were working round the clock towards independence, the Merdeka Stadium project team, led by Stanley Edward Jewkes, the deputy director of PWD, was also putting in the hours.

"We worked round the clock, 24 hours, seven days a week, rain or shine," remembers Lee, who joined the PWD in 1949 after he studied civil engineering at the Technical College in Kuala Lumpur.

"I feel that most of the credit should go to Jewkes, who was personally asked by Tunku to design the stadium.

"Jewkes was truly a remarkable man and I have the highest respect for him."

Remarkable in the sense that Jewkes was not an architect, but a civil engineer.

It was through sheer ability and talent that he drew the blueprint for the stadium at his home.

"He saw to every detail of the project," said Lee, who was born in Kuala Lumpur in 1929 to Lee Thing Chong, a mathematics teacher at St

John's Institution, and Yow Yoke Lin.

"He was always present on site and was very focused on his goal of completing the project."

Lee, who did his primary and secondary education at St John's Institution, had done structural designing and he left PWD in 1970 to join the private sector before retiring in 1994.

Today, at 78, Lee is enjoying himself immensely in retirement, going on fishing trips, and ballroom dancing with his favourite partner, his 72-year-old wife, Lee Lian.

His fishing trips have taken him to as far as Mauritius and Christmas Island.

And when he is not travelling or at the dance hall, Lee looks forward to spending time with his son, Lee Mun Wai, 45, daughter, Lee Poh Yoke, 42, and his three grandchildren who visit often.

When the Merdeka Stadium was mentioned again, Lee reflected with pride about how the job was done on time, especially in the days when there was no pre-mixed concrete, no high-rise cranes and no cutting-edge technology like CAD (computer-aided design) to help the architect or engineer.

"We had to mix our own concrete with sand and stones. It was all done manually, unlike the technology we have these days."

Lee said they were very fortunate to have a good labour force of local and foreign workers.

from poor families, brought a meagre lunch of salt fish and rice.

Lee said the project commenced at the height of the

work progress.

It was no eight-to-five job for members of the project team and Lee recalls that visiting the site at night was

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The dream of this sports-loving country has come true in time to herald the greatest of all events in the history of this country. It was a tremendous task (construction of the stadium) tackled with determination, unequalled in any project which we have undertaken in the past.

Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj in his speech at the opening of Merdeka Stadium on Aug 31, 1957

This stadium is not only the biggest engineering project that has ever been undertaken in this country but it is also an outstanding example of constructional design.

Datuk Abdul Razak Hussein, deputy prime minister and chairman of the Merdeka Stadium Board, at the opening of Merdeka Stadium on Aug 31, 1957

It was a fantastic experience playing at the stadium. Every time we played there, it was amazing to see the home crowd cheering us on. It was the best stadium in the region.

Former international Datuk Soh Chin Aun who first represented Malaysia in 1971

There were about 600 Malabari workers who came from the Malabar coast of south-west India, and were responsible for erecting the lighting towers and steel structures.

Each lighting tower took one and a half months to be erected, and there were four towers.

Local Chinese women, some as young as 19, came to work on their bicycles.

These women, who were from poor families, brought a meagre lunch of salt fish and rice.

Lee said the project commenced at the height of the

north-east monsoon season.

It was a challenging task to ensure that the 10-foot-deep stadium bowl that had been excavated was not filled with rainwater.

Jewkes designed a pipe culvert to drain the water from the stadium into a drain located along Birch Road (Jalan Maharajalela).

Tunku used to visit the site frequently and Jewkes was on hand to brief him on work progress.

It was no eight-to-five job for members of the project team and Lee recalls that visiting the site at night was



Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj laying the foundation stone of the Merdeka Stadium on Feb 15, 1957.

part of the dates with his wife-to-be.

“After the movies, we would go over and have a look at the construction in progress.”

And Lee says with a twinkle in his eye: “My wife did go to Merdeka Stadium with her friends to watch the Merdeka Tournament football matches. I only found this out recently.”

If walls could talk, it would speak volumes about the events that took place at the Merdeka Stadium since Tunku declared Malaya’s independence from colonial rule on Aug 31, 1957 to

shouts of *Merdeka!*

Fans used to fill the stadium when the Merdeka Tournament was the tournament in Asia.

And never had hockey matches seen such a crowd anywhere in the world when up to 40,000 fans filled the stadium for the 1975 Hockey World Cup semi-finals and finals.

There were also the national athletic championships, the Malaysia Cup football matches and numerous school sporting events.

Boxing legend Muhammad Ali whipped Joe Bugn-

er at the stadium and on the musical front, Cliff Richard and Michael Jackson sang their hearts out to capacity crowds.

When the Bukit Jalil sports complex was built for the 1998 Commonwealth Games, it was felt that Merdeka Stadium served no purpose for sport and it was slated for demolition. But it’s not over yet for the venerable Merdeka Stadium.

The stadium, now under the jurisdiction of the Culture, Arts and Heritage Ministry, is being restored to its original state.