

# SPORTS WON THE DAY FOR US

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**MERDEKA  
MEMOIRS**



A keen sportsman, it was the sporting spirit in Tunku Abdul Rahman that made him a relaxed and accessible leader, writes archivist **PRABHAKARAN S. NAIR**



A football competition held on Independence day at Merdeka Stadium in 1957. — Pictures courtesy of National Archives

*"You will find that having been sportsmen in your younger days you will know how to deal with people, how to win friends and how to get along with the world at large."*

**Tunku Abdul Rahman**

TUNKU was an expert in human relations and he believed it was this skill that contributed to his success in getting Malaya its independence.

Tunku also believed that his sporting instincts played a big part in his success with people, be they sportsmen or otherwise, within or outside the sporting field. He was assured, in the spirit of a true sportsman who values each member of his team, that friendships were for life.

"Throughout his life, and especially during the struggle for independence, we see time and again that his old friendships from boyhood, student days and his early civil service life were absolutely crucial in helping him open doors and win hearts and minds over to his point of view," says Mrs Emma Davidson, the wife of one of Tunku's great nephews.

In London, it was his friend Lord Ogmores who made it possible for Tunku to have discussions with Labour Party leaders such as Oliver Lyttelton in 1954, and to build support for Malayan independence within the House of Commons. Lord Ogmores and Tunku had been friends since their student days in London and used to revise their lessons together for their Bar

exams in the 1940s.

At home, it was an old friend from Tunku's student days who was largely responsible for persuading the Malay rulers to accept Tunku's plans for independence. He was none other than Tuanku Abdul Rahman, the Ruler of Negri Sembilan, who went on to become the first king of the newly independent Malaya.

Tuanku's intervention was crucial, for without the agreement of the Rulers, there was absolutely no way the British would have accepted Tunku's proposals for independence.

It is interesting to note that they had been sportsmen during their student days.

At the time of independence, the nation was fortunate in

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**Tunku Abdul Rahman**

that it had both a king as well as a prime minister who were equally enthusiastic about sports since their years together as law students in England.

When Tunku wanted to form his cabinet, he first thought of his friends.

Tan Sri Mohd Khir Johari, one of Tunku's "Young Men" in the Seberkas movement in the 1940s also became a key ally in government.

Tun Abdul Razak who had studied with Tunku in London was given a position of trust as Tunku's deputy.

Besides the spirit of team loyalty, there was another important aspect to Tunku's sportsmanship that came to his aid at crucial stages of his life. It was, according to Tunku, his "sporting instincts".

On Nov 27, 1967, at the presentation of colours to the students of the University of Malaya, Tunku recollected how his sporting spirit had helped him during the difficult negotiations for independence: "I remember the time when I went to England the first time to negotiate with the

British over the question of our independence.

"At one stage of the discussions, there was serious danger that the talks might break down. My sporting instinct, however, won the day for us. I told the British team that I could not stay the whole day to decide this trivial issue because I had a very important thing to do."

At the moment of intense tension he told the British team that he would like to watch a football match.

Tunku went on, "The leader of the British team was so

amused with my remark that he decided there and then to give in to me, for he said that dealing with such a fine sportsman like me, they could also expect a fair dealing in all matters.

"And because of the sporting manner in which both teams approached our subject, the talks for Malaya's independence were concluded in a most happy and friendly atmosphere.

"Today, the chairman of the British team, Lord Boyd and I have become the firmest of friends."

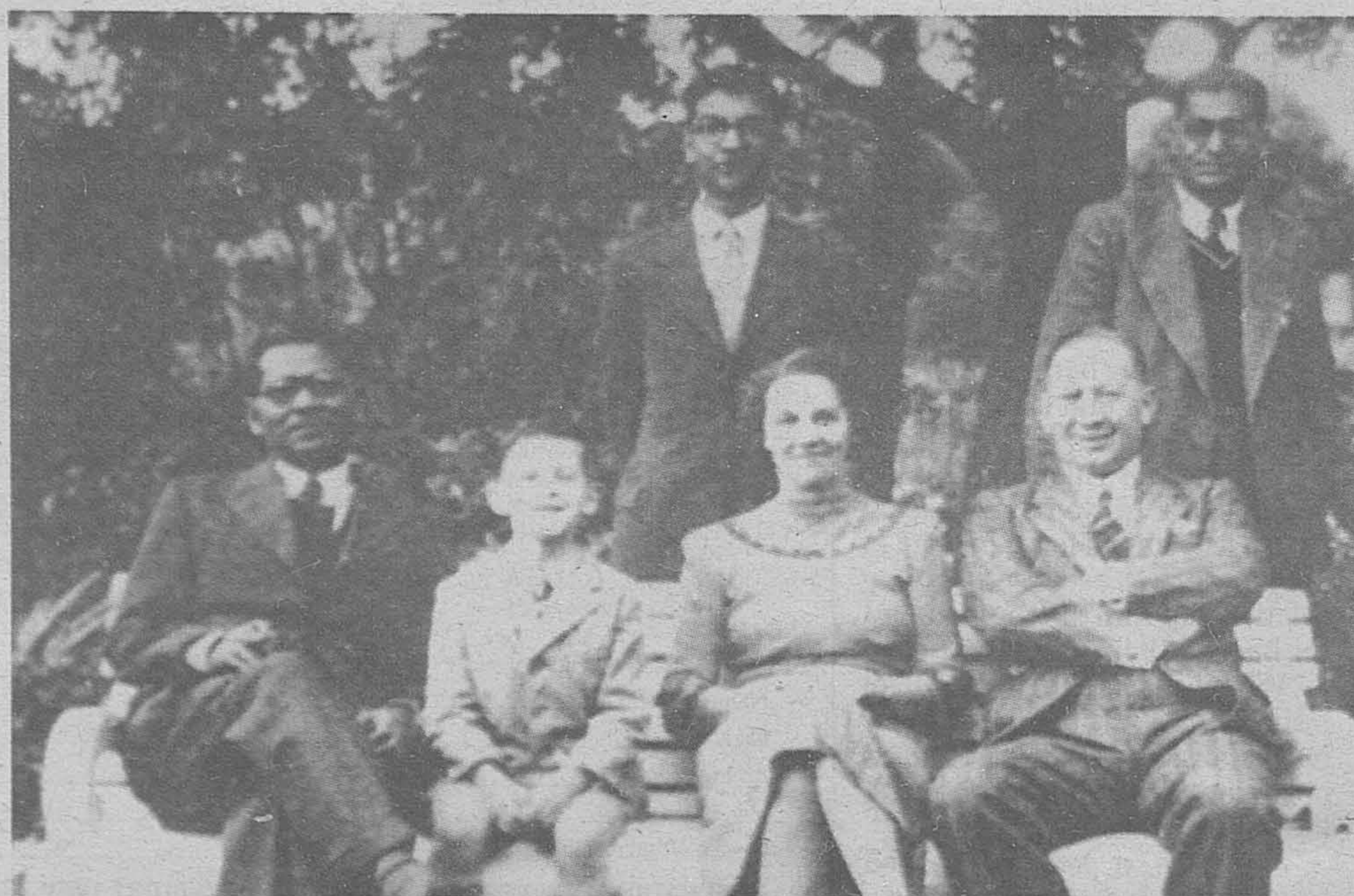
During the Merdeka talks, Tunku was also able to prevail over Donald MacGillivray, the high commissioner for Malaya through his sporting instinct.

"On another occasion when the former high commissioner for Malaya, the late Sir Donald MacGillivray, who was in the British team, made it difficult for us in another matter, I asked him to agree to a toss of coin to decide the issue. So again, he gave in to me."

In the same spirit of sportsmanship, Alan Lennox-Boyd, the secretary of state for the colonies, expressed hope that no one would look upon the negotiations as a victory for either side.

"Indeed, there have been no 'sides' in this matter. Many of us were old friends when we started these talks.

"All of us have, I think, found in the course of them, new bonds of trust and friendship and have emerged from the conference with a greater



Tunku Abdul Rahman (seated left) at the home of Lord Ogmores in Croydon, London, in July 1947. Seated with him are (from left) Master Rees-Williams, Lady Ogmores and Lord Ogmores. Standing behind them are Eusoffe Abdoolcader and Eusoffe's brother-in-law.

There have been no more inspiring moments in this young nation's history than these victories gained by teams drawn from many races striving so mightily in Malaya's name and urged on by huge multi-racial crowds throbbing with a common Malayan patriotism.

*Tunku Abdul Rahman*

knowledge of each other's problems and of our mutual interests."

The sporting spirit had continued relevance for nation-building in the post-independence era, especially in promoting national unity and a sense of patriotism among the various races.

To him, the spirit of unity and patriotism is best inculcated on the sports field, where the different races come together and co-operate with one another in gaining scores for the country.

In Tunku's words, "there have been no more inspiring moments in this young nation's history than these victories gained by teams drawn from many races striving so mightily in Malaya's name and urged on by huge multiracial crowds throbbing with a com-



Tunku Abdul Rahman in a sporting mood, with Tun Abdul Razak in the background, in the late 1950s.

mon Malayan patriotism" (*Straits Times*, Dec 9, 1959).

Besides helping to forge unity, sports played an important role in the field of foreign relations. In 1963, at the Manila talks, Tunku tried to convince Macapagal, the president of the Philippines, to take up golf.

On the last day of talks, Tunku expressed delight that Macapagal had agreed to take up golf if that would contribute towards the success of the nascent regional grouping that Tunku was promoting.

Addressing Macapagal, he said: "I am very happy about this because in golf, as I have been able to convince you, Mr Chairman, we can establish not only links on the golf course, but also links towards one another."

Tunku wanted every Malaysian to have the sporting spirit. In his speech to the UM students, he told them that sports would help them win friends and get along with the world at large. However, he pointed out that there was a difference between being merely good in sports and be-

ing a good sportsman.

"There are people who are good in sports — and I have known many of them — but that does not make them sportsmen. A good sportsman is one who can take victory with defeat, who can fight a battle and find glory in his victory, and at the same time suffer defeat with grace and a smile."

According to Tan Sri Dr Abdul Majid Ismail, his golfing partner, it was Tunku's sporting instinct that explained his empathy, forgiving spirit and great sense of humour.

It also explained his ability to break tense situations with wit, and make visitors feel at ease. Tunku's love of sports also brought him into contact with all kinds of people, offering an informal forum for discussions that sometimes led to the clinching of deals and the making of major decisions affecting the nation.

Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu, former chief minister of Penang, recalls one of the speeches that Tunku delivered as an old boy of Penang Free School. In

that speech, Tunku told the boys about the lesson he had learnt on the football field — that when playing football one must learn to play it as a team, and uphold the team spirit.

And in the true spirit of the sport, one must accept the fact that it is the team that wins or loses, and not the individual as such. To play a good game one must expect to be kicked around, just as one would want to kick others around — all in good fun and true sportsmanship.

Interestingly, the attributes of good sportsmanship such as team spirit, mutual understanding and accommodation of interests also represented the essential ingredients for the success of the Alliance Party led by Tunku.

Needless to say, this legacy of tolerance has been inherited by the Barisan Nasional, whose strength in the years ahead will continue to depend on Tunku's success formula.

Today, the Merdeka Stadium where the nation proclaimed its freedom 50 years ago has survived as a lasting symbol of Tunku's aspirations for the new Malaya. Tunku's sporting instincts had indeed stood him in good stead as indicated in the following news comment: "It can be truly said that Malayan sports' best friend is its prime minister. Where in the world is there any sports-loving country so fortunate as Malaya?" (*Straits Times*, Dec 20, 1959)

On this golden anniversary of our independence, let us revive the sporting spirit with which our country was born and help forge better human relations among one another over the next 50 years and beyond, in our effort to build a happy and successful nation.

There is no better way of thanking the Tunku on this auspicious anniversary of our independence.

■ The writer is the director of Pustaka Wira Negara at the Tunku Abdul Rahman Memorial in Kuala Lumpur



St Catherine's College football team, 1924-1925. Tunku Abdul Rahman is seated on the right.