

# WHEN WE WERE KINGS

A GOLDEN ERA OF  
SINGAPORE RUGBY

GODFREY  
ROBERT

FOREWORD BY D. J. FORBES  
FORMER ALL BLACKS SEVENS CAPTAIN

**WHEN  
WE WERE  
KINGS**

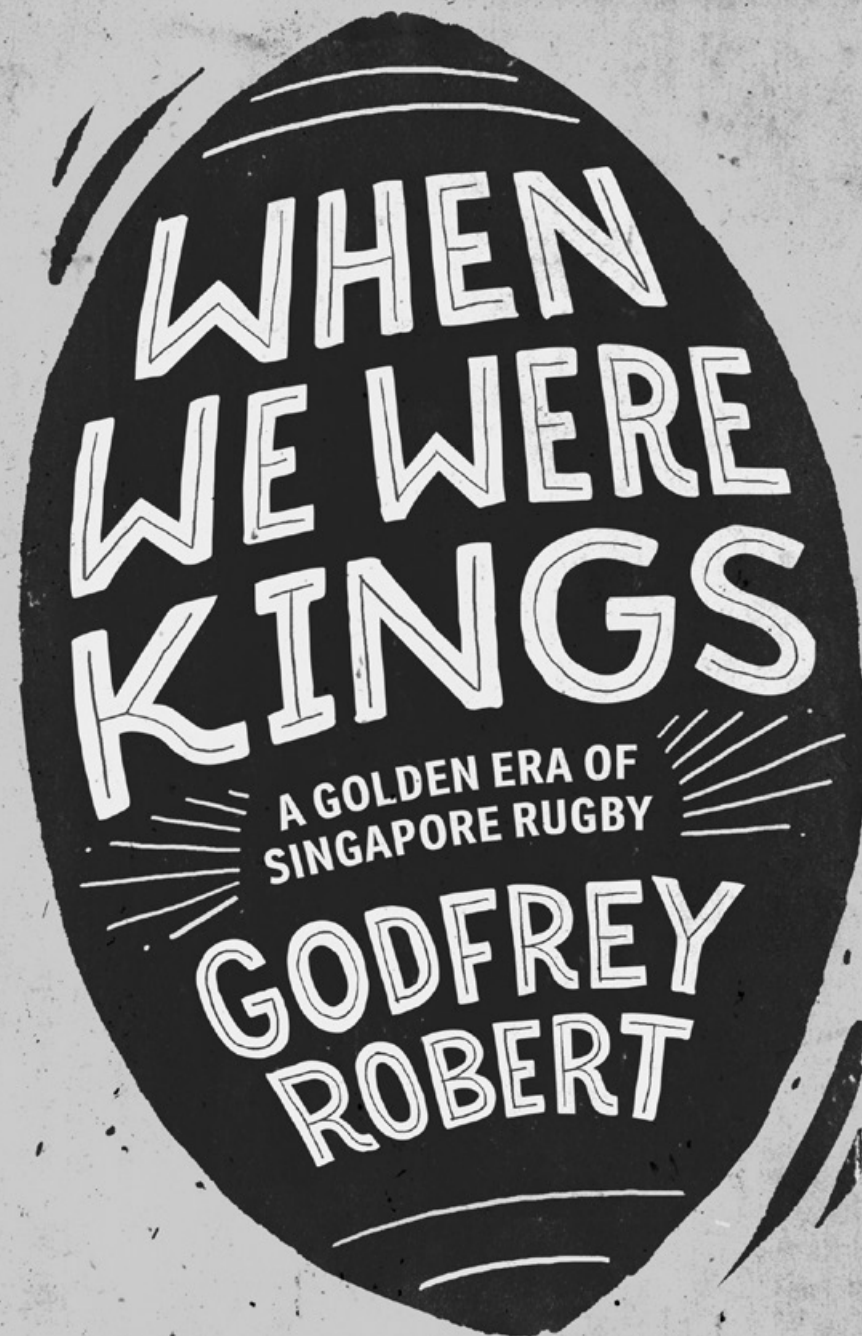
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For my wife Jessica, who gave love and  
enduring support as I spent hours in  
the basement researching and writing

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## MESSAGE FROM S. S. DHILLON

The sport of rugby has always been close to my heart. I was a player, a referee, a coach and also an adviser during my long tenure as an educationist and administrator.

And I was deeply involved as the Singapore National Olympic Council secretary-general when, in 1978, the body awarded unprecedented triple honours to the sport.

I was, however, not on the selection panel that decided to give influential pack leader Song Koon Poh the Sportsman of the Year award, motivator Natahar Bava the Coach of the Year award, and the entire side the Team of the Year award after their historic Malaysian Rugby Union Cup triumph in 1978. But looking back, it was good that I did not cast a vote because I could have been accused of being biased. Although I had dabbled in other sports, such as football and hockey, on a club basis, my heart has always been with rugby.

But I was witness to what transpired at the selection as I was sitting with the panel of distinguished gentlemen, namely Law

Minister and Singapore National Olympic Council President E. W. Barker, General Winston Choo from the Singapore Armed Forces, Lau Teng Chuan from the Singapore Sports Council, and *The Straits Times* Editor-in-Chief Peter H. L. Lim.

There were some big entries, namely from swimming, but it was a unanimous decision by the panel to award rugby the honours because of the magnitude of the triumph that had won the hearts and minds of the four gentlemen.

That being the backdrop, when I was approached to write a message for this book, I had no hesitation and accepted this honour for I believed that I was part of this team.

I was part of this team because I watched them train whenever I had time in my busy schedule. I had a great rapport with the players because they were a committed lot who worked for each other. I knew Bava as a fellow educationist and a great sportsman who had represented Singapore in athletics and rugby. I admired Song's dedication and drive. I was impressed by skipper Jarmal Singh's unselfishness in always placing team before self.

All in all, for me, this was a team to be admired. A team to be hailed. A bunch of boys who deserved high praise for their sheer drive and common desire. A sporting group who could be role models to athletes of other sports in any era.

I also know the author of this book, Godfrey Robert, the former sports editor of *The Straits Times* who has been in journalism for 48 years. We met often, we travelled together to many games, even the Olympics, and we shared a philosophy about sport as the perfect vehicle to bring a people together.

The enormity of the 1978 Malaysian Rugby Union Cup victory was further highlighted as it came 44 years after Singapore won

outright the Malaya Cup (its predecessor which was run on an inter-state basis from 1921) in 1934.

So history formed the basis of this big story. A dive into the record books showed that this was a major coup. Therefore, the sport deserved the major honours. Threefold (Sportsman, Coach and Team) they came. Fourfold (result of the selection panel) was the verdict. Nationwide, they were acclaimed.

And rugby was the biggest winner.



S. S. Dhillon, MSc, PBM  
 Secretary-General (1971–1996),  
 Singapore National Olympic Council  
 Honorary life member, Southeast Asian Games Federation

## FOREWORD

I heard about the 1978 historic triumph of the Singapore team at the Malaysian Rugby Union Cup through a chance meeting with fellow coach Alan Wee at a rugby clinic here. Wee, who was a member of the team that regained the Cup after 44 years, also told me about this book commemorating that massive triumph.

Hearing the details from Wee, I have to sincerely applaud the gutsy players of the team for the manner in which they wrote this chapter into the annals of rugby history.

And what was sensational was the fact that Singapore beat the New Zealand Forces in the semi-finals, a result that gave me a bittersweet feeling because I was myself a former All Blacks Sevens player and captain.

Still, sporting conquests have to be appreciated and, in this respect, this great rugby story not only has to be told, but retold again and again. So, what better way to do this than to have it chronicled here.



I am sure this book will make every Singaporean proud of what the rugby lads of 1978 did, and inspire all sportsmen and sportswomen to emulate them for punching above their weight to create history.



D. J. Forbes  
Former captain of the All Blacks Sevens,  
Rugby World Cup Sevens champions 2013

## INTRODUCTION

**M**aking money was not the motive for this book. That is why we are offering it free to rugby schools and institutions, and releasing it to the public at a very reasonable rate.

A bestseller it is not going to be, we accept.

For unlike popular fiction, from which imagination flows, this book is about hard facts.

It is about recording history. About remembering major feats. And about telling Singapore's sportspeople that success is achievable if you set your mind over matter, even in a gloomy climate where support—financial or moral—is absent or lacking.

The main goal is to tell Singaporeans about a group of die-hard officials and players from 1978, and their stirring story of blood, sweat and tears as they pursued what was thought to be unachievable glory. Under the stewardship of Singapore Rugby Union President Howard Cashin, the coaching expertise of Natahar Bava and the on-the-field leadership of Jarmal Singh—

not to mention the banner of the Singapore Civilians—the brave hearts won the Malaysian Rugby Union Cup in sensational style.

Singapore's team had not only brought home the popular Cup, but it had also beat the bigger and stronger New Zealand Forces in the semi-finals, the magnitude of which was biblical—of David beating Goliath proportions. Mind you, in the earlier rounds, the stalwarts from the country of All Blacks had beaten the daylights out of the Singapore team in a preliminary match.

The triumph marked 44 years since Singapore managed such a feat, dating back to a pre-World War II colonial era. Then, they won under different circumstances, against easier opponents and with a team dominated by British expatriates. This time, the victors were a truly Singaporean team, players born and bred here but possessing qualities that belonged there—in the rugby worlds of New Zealand, Australia, Britain, South Africa and Argentina, where guts and grit were often displayed.

In 1978, sporting history was also made when the Singapore National Olympic Council (SNOC) awarded rugby a treble of honours for Team of the Year, Coach of the Year (Bava) and Sportsman of the Year (Song Koon Poh). A sport sweeping all three titles—which prompted Cashin to quip that if his association had a women's team it could have been four awards—was unprecedented.

The due recognition from the SNOC and its then president, E. W. Barker, did not transform into a fully national celebration, but its momentum did carry through to the Asian Rugby Football Tournament, the second oldest international rugby tournament in the world. At that competition in Kuala Lumpur, Singapore finished third—again unprecedented—behind heavyweights

Japan and South Korea. In the process, Singapore also beat giants Hong Kong and Thailand.

And because of the team's professionalism and commitment, the 1978 feat was repeated four years later when Singapore beat New Zealand Forces in the Malaysian Rugby Union Cup final.

Those landmark victories in one of the oldest rugby competitions in the world, in 1978 and 1982, are recorded in this book. They culminated a golden decade, from 1972 to 1982, that saw laudable triumphs in tournaments like the Asian Rugby Football Tournament and Southeast Asian Games. They vindicated the initiative by Singapore Rugby Union President Niaz Mohamed Shah to form an all-citizens team, which at the time was controversial but proved to be the right decision.

The apt title, *When We Were Kings*, brings a perspective of Singapore rugby at its peak. These “kings” of rugby, now in their sixties and seventies, reminisce about their glorious past, their finest hour of rugby supremacy and an achievement to share with aspiring rugby players.

Another paramount reason is that at the time of writing this book, the Singapore Rugby Union, in its drive to restructure for modern times, had inadvertently wiped out the previous records and history from its annals and removed all material related to the golden era. The records were later rectified, but before that perhaps the rugby union felt that looking to the past would also have meant reliving some of the less than glorious episodes of Singapore's rugby history, such as the 164–13 thrashing by Hong Kong at the 1994 Asian Rugby Football Tournament. At the time, that was the highest score in the Asian tournament.

So how else to remember a group of individuals who sacrificed time and effort to play for the love of the game?

How else to cherish this bubbly bunch who coughed up their own money for travel, accommodation and meals to carry the flag for a young nation?

And how else to honour this tenacious team for whom little else mattered but the game of rugby and its virtues of teamwork, character building and camaraderie?

By releasing a book about a rough and tough Singaporean journey that truly speaks of the *semangat*—“never say die”—spirit often referred to in sport.

And keeping it for posterity.

# 1

## A BOLD, PATRIOTIC MOVE

The history of rugby in Singapore began in the late 1800s after the arrival of the British East India Company. During the colonial days, the British also introduced games such as football, tennis and cricket. But there was a special relationship with rugby.

In fact, the sport, many say, was invented in the English town of Rugby in 1823 by William Webb Ellis. Before that, rugby was a variation of football and it was not until the middle of the century that rugby rules were codified. Rugby union was later formulated under a separate code by the late 1800s.

The game picked up momentum in England and spread within the United Kingdom before colonisation saw the sport flourish in places such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa.

The game thrived in Singapore and Malaya in the late 1800s to mid-1900s despite breaks for the two World Wars (1914 to 1918, and 1939 to 1945). The Singapore Cricket Club (SCC) was thought to be the first rugby club in Singapore, and its annual

sevens event, started in the 1940s, is one of the world's oldest ongoing tournaments.

From the mid-1880s, there was no formal Singapore representative team to play the Malayan state teams and the visiting sides. Instead the Singapore side comprised members of the Singapore Cricket Club and employees of the British East India Company. The British servicemen from the air force formed their own team and played for Royal Air Force (RAF) Changi/Seletar, and the navy and the army had their own divisional teams; together they were known as the Joint Services, a very powerful outfit.

In the early 1900s, the team that represented Singapore was named All-Blues, again made up of expatriate players who were civilians working in the island. This team played in the interstate competition for the Agong Cup and in games right through to the formation of the Malaya Cup tournament in 1921. Singapore also annually competed against Johor, Negeri Sembilan/Malacca, Selangor and Perak for the All-Blues Cup.

The All-Blues later gave birth to the Singapore Civilians, which was made up of nonmilitary personnel both local and expat. Notable Singaporean players were Yee Teck Peng, John Koh, Natahar Bava, John Stevens, Seow Watt Choon, Koh Yeow Tong and Kwan Yue Yong. Among the expatriates were Neil Aitken, Jeff Allen and John Burgess, who later helped promote the game as officials or coaches.

The All-Blues and Civilians, for all intents and purposes, represented the state in all competitions, including the Malaya Cup, until independence in 1965, after which talk of forming a fully Singaporean side emerged. (The Malaya Cup became the Malaysian Rugby Union (MRU) Cup in 1975.)

The idea received further airing when a Singapore side was formed in 1971 to play an international friendly against the famed England team at Jalan Besar Stadium. Leow Kim Liat was named captain and two other Singaporeans, How Wai Chew and John Koh, also made the team. Unfortunately Leow was injured before the game and could not feature in the big match.

Also in the 1960s and 70s, clubs such as Blacks Rugby Football Club (RFC), Police Sports Association and Singapore Armed Forces Sports Association (Safsa) were active and dominated the local league, fuelling the idea of the "Asianisation" of rugby.

But the local clubs had little voice in national rugby administration as the Singapore Rugby Union (SRU) was run by British presidents and management who oversaw the sport as though it were their almost-exclusive domain. No doubt, the rugby union was run efficiently because the British who ruled the roost had position and clout, and could get things done, even where finances were concerned.

The Singapore Civilians were dominated by them as well. Because of postings to Singapore, a plethora of British civilians and servicemen became strong candidates for the field. If any Asian made it to the team, he must've been extra special and most worthy.

A landmark decision came when police Superintendent Niaz Mohamed Shah was named president of the rugby union, taking over from Dennis Bindon in 1972.

Since Singapore's independence in 1965, the passionate Niaz, who had played for All-Blues in the then Malaya, believed that the local players could stand on their own against regional opposition. He was further encouraged by the many Singaporean youngsters emerging from the schools

and clubs. Local clubs Police, Safsa and Blacks were engaging good coaches and developing young talent.

Niaz also knew that baptism into the big leagues with an all-Asians squad was an uphill task; rugby is a sport where size and height matter and Singaporeans were generally handicapped in these two areas. Failure could lead to his position as president being questioned.

But Niaz, who made it a point to attend most training sessions, was convinced that a start had to be made because of what he saw. There was fire in the eyes of the Singapore players and steel in their hearts. His view would be echoed by subsequent presidents, namely Colonel Gurcharan Singh (1976), Howard Cashin (1977 to 1984) and Dr Chan Peng Mun (1985 to 2004).

Among the players who stood out and gave Niaz the reassurance were Salleh Senan, Mohd Taib, Leow Kim Liat, Lee Cheng Huat, Sng Eng Khim, Bohari Sarmani and Hamzah Mohd from Police, and Teo Boon Hoe, George Thomas, Foo Kia Fai and Yeo Eng Kia from Safsa.

Blacks RFC provided further good talent in Sng Yew Jin, Tay Boon Seng, Peter Pang, Mahat Zainuddin, Natahar Bava and How Wai Chew. Bava had played for the under-23 as a student at Raffles Institution. He went on to the All-Blues in 1962 and 1963 and for the Civilians in 1964.

This core group of Asians convinced Niaz to believe that Singapore could give Malaysia and Thailand a run for their money in regional tournaments, and so 1972 became a turning point.

Niaz decided to send an all-Asians side, with Leow Kim Liat as the captain, to the 1972 Asian Rugby Football Tournament (ARFT) in Hong Kong, fully aware that his move was under great scrutiny and that things could fall flat on his face.

The all-citizens team did not let Niaz down when they finished fourth behind Asian powerhouses Japan and South Korea, and tenacious Thailand, the Asean kingpins.

The baptism had a sour taste as the mighty Japanese won convincingly, despite efforts that resulted in a single try in the last few minutes of the one-sided match, 60–4. In fact, that one moment of glory sent the stadium into rapture and the team's liaison officer said that those who walked into the Happy Valley stadium late would have thought that Singapore had shocked Japan.

Instead of keeping their tails between their legs, Singapore bounced back and took revenge on Malaysia, after taking a beating at the first annual game at the Padang just a few months earlier. The revenge was sweet as Singapore won by 26–13, and it was an honour for forward Bava to score one of the tries.

In the third group match, played under adverse weather conditions because of a typhoon, Singapore managed to beat Sri Lanka, 9–6, and gained a spot in the third or fourth placing game.

And it was to be expected when Singapore lost the third-placing match, 26–3, to a lightning-fast Thailand side to finish fourth.

No doubt, while revelling in that early success, Niaz felt somewhat disappointed that his bold vision suffered some lapses soon after that.

Recalling Niaz's dream, Bava said the decision was a tough but inevitable one. "Mind you, it was not a national competition, so expatriates could be fielded, as evident with the Hong Kong teams."

Bava added: "I suspect that Superintendent Niaz, who played for the All-Blues, must have been disappointed that he did not

‘qualify’ to play for the Singapore Civilians which was dominated by the Caucasians, many from Singapore Cricket Club. Howard Cashin was part of the team.

“So, when Niaz was elected as SRU president, he saw the light at the end of the tunnel and initiated drastic changes to the composition of the players in the Civilians team for the MRU Cup. This was followed by his bold move to field an all-citizens team in the third ARFU (Asian Rugby Football Union) tournament in Hong Kong.”

Despite the success in Hong Kong, the team could not sustain the consistency in the early years. One of the reasons was National Service, which contributed to the loss of good players in their prime who had to serve full time. Work schedules and personal problems also led to disastrous results, and the practice matches against the New Zealand Forces and Australian Forces North showed the disparity of standards. Poor showings for the all-citizens team became the norm.

Still Niaz continued to persevere with his idea, and supported the team wherever he could with his clout and contacts as a senior police officer. He was an imposing presence at the training sessions and the practice matches, always keeping the players on their toes.

From 1973 to 1976, the locals team underwent a period of growth. Niaz continued to field them against the services teams of the New Zealand Forces and Australian Forces North to give his players the proper training.

“Playing the many Kiwi company teams stationed in Singapore was a big plus for us,” Bava said, “as it gave us good, stiff competition.”

When Cashin took over the rugby union presidency in 1977,

he did not abandon the team but supported them whenever he could. That was when things started to change.

A prominent lawyer then with Murphy and Dunbar, Cashin was a man with clout and contacts, and had been a top player himself in his younger days. Subsequently becoming a leading referee, he knew what the game was all about.

Cashin, in fact, found the right coach for the team: none other than the former national athlete and rugby player Bava. This partnership proved fruitful as they started building yet another historic tale.

He gelled with Bava in all aspects of the game, namely training methods, player recruitment and future strategies, and the two supported the core group of players who came together from 1977 onwards. “What was needed was the right dedicated coach to guide the team with the right players,” said player Song Koon Poh.

Cashin knew it was still strictly an amateur game as the players had jobs or were studying, and could train only during their free time. But he also was aware that many of his players had a deep passion for the sport and were willing to stretch themselves, sometimes even beyond their limits. He was deeply impressed by their strong camaraderie and bold spirit, and he was confident that the backbone of a future national team was intact.

From the players’ perspective, Cashin provided invaluable support by coming to most of the training sessions. This went a long way in boosting morale and camaraderie.

“The boys stuck together because they believed in each other and the dream. They accepted that they were playing for the flag, the country,” said Song.

This attitude paid dividends as gradually the margins of defeat against the New Zealand and Australian services teams were

reduced from what used to be cricket scores. In fact, when the margins dropped to single digits, the players were encouraged to stay and battle on.

As Song remarked: “The games against the New Zealand and Australian services teams helped a lot and these were key to building a good Asian team.

“The Asian players were kept together as a unit and they became the core key deliverance to the success in years to come till 1982.”

He praised the team’s *semangat* spirit.

“Even if we had moaned and groaned or cursed and swore at Nat for his very tough regimen and emphasis on building physical fitness, we completed the tasks on the training field,” he continued.

“And often, we beat these good teams over the last quarter of the game because we outlasted and outpaced many of our rivals with our supreme fitness and correct attitude. The local lads showed toughness and compatibility against bigger oppositions. This continued until 1986–87 when the Kiwis pulled out from Singapore.”

Bava was a strong believer in going beyond fitness and strength training. He was a top national athlete and physical educationist, and knew the demands of the game.

“I put the boys through a tough regimen, cross-country runs, beach workouts and gym training. Then I worked on tactical plans,” he said. “I also believed in mental strength, motivation and team camaraderie. So I would also organise social gatherings to get the boys to understand each other and gel as a team.

“No doubt, it was very demanding, and some players thought that I was going overboard with the strict discipline and adherence

### IF TOILET CUBICLES COULD TALK

From the get-go, Coach Natahar Bava had emphasised that he was a stickler for supreme fitness in every athlete, especially rugby players. He put his charges through a tough and demanding training regimen, and try as they might, not every rugby player could meet his demands.

So it was not surprising that behind Bava’s back, the players who could not meet his high expectations would swear and curse at him. Bava, for his part, was not oblivious.

On some occasions, surprise of all surprises, he heard his players swearing while doing his business—big and small—in the toilet cubicle.

With a grin and a hint of humour and understanding, he said: “I had often heard them swear, but they never knew that I was in the toilet cubicle. No doubt, there were faces of embarrassment when I appeared. And many had profusely apologised.

“But I took it in the right spirit. And never was I influenced to change my style or be biased or show partiality against the players for what they had said. In the end, it is making them understand that in a sport like rugby, where size matters, you can only bring the bigger down with strength and superior fitness.”

to codes. And I had to counsel many of them, and that was not easy.

“It was an amateur sport here that demanded a professional approach. That meant that even during off-rugby hours, the

players had to behave, follow a strict schedule. That was hard to implement and I had brushes with some players.

“But on reflection, all that paid off, for we worked as a team to put rugby on a high pedestal.”

Where the Singapore Rugby Union faced severe criticism was from the expatriate members of the Singapore Cricket Club who felt that Cashin and his team had bypassed them in the selection of representative teams.

Cashin even received verbal abuse and ribbing for fielding an all-locals national team, according to Song. “As a member of SCC, I too have heard their taunts, some of which were uncalled for. But Cashin continued to keep faith and trust in Natahar and the boys.

“Our above-par showings, in a way, absolved Niaz and Cashin. After one big win, I had the greatest satisfaction when I often saw Cashin put on a big smile at the SCC men’s bar.”

Niaz and Cashin were obviously inspired and believed in the players, for whom rugby was not just a passionate pastime but also a sport. It was a lifestyle indeed.

## 2

### A RUGGED SOCIETY

**R**ugby players are fascinating to watch, both on and off the field.

On the field, they are deadly foes to their opponents, but off it, they are all the best of friends. In one moment, they are beating the daylights out of the opposing team, but by the final whistle, they are shaking hands and hugging each other as though nothing had happened earlier.

Injuries are common in a rugby match because tackles are low and can be intimidating. A lung-busting run is a treat to watch, but it may result in a hurt limb (usually the leg) for the runner.

They get into scrums but come out with broken noses and badly bruised bodies. They lock themselves in tackles but limp out of the match. And oftentimes, following medical attention, they are back in action on the field soon after.



The rucks and lineouts seem simple, but when a player is brought down, a pile-up could result and burden him with a weight of bodies.

Simply put, rugby players are a tough, hardy lot, and this game is not for cowards.

This conclusion was what elevated rugby in the eyes of one of Singapore's pioneer leaders: Dr Goh Keng Swee. He was a strong proponent of a fit and rugged society, wrote his daughter-in-law Tan Siok Sun in his biography, *Goh Keng Swee: A Portrait*.

When the young nation's second Deputy Prime Minister introduced the sport into the armed forces in 1975, Lee Kuan Yew's words were ringing in his ears.

The first Prime Minister had said in 1966: "What is required is a rugged, resolute, highly trained, highly disciplined community."

Believing in the words whole-heartedly, Dr Goh founded the outdoor, educational retreat Outward Bound in 1967.

As the country's first Defence Minister, he also introduced rugby into the fledgling Singapore Armed Forces, thinking the sport would build hardiness in the new recruits. By then it was nearly a decade into the government's compulsory National Service for youngsters, and he wanted the servicemen to be tough. More so than any other sport at the time, rugby could develop such traits as well as create team players and strategists, he thought.

Dr Goh himself had not played rugby while studying at the Anglo-Chinese School, which fielded teams for the National Schools Championships, but he saw merit in pushing rugby in schools and amongst youngsters.

So he lent his name to the Dr Goh Keng Swee Shield, a trophy for the under-14 schools rugby tournament, to boost the profile of

the sport. It has been forty years and more, and the tournament is still a key event in school sporting calendars.

He also launched a scheme in which the Singapore Armed Forces supplied rugby coaches to schools to help raise the standard of the sport.

To make his idea work, Dr Goh went out of the way to champion rugby, even finding space for a field—next to the People's Association's former headquarters in Kallang—purely for rugby. Alive with a carnival atmosphere, this field not only hosted the national schools tournaments, but it also built friendships, inspired team spirit and nurtured camaraderie.

It was also timely that Dr Goh's call came at the height of Singapore rugby's history. Besides the schools tournaments, other competitions such as the Kiwi Cup between Raffles Institution and St Andrew's School, and the Malaya Cup were also drawing attention.

The game started to soar in popularity within the ranks of the army, police force, special constabulary and vigilante corps. Annual tournaments were held amongst their teams, mostly staged at the then police grounds at Thomson Road. Record turnouts, mostly uniform personnel, were a given.

Why did Dr Goh choose rugby to be a vehicle to strengthen those in National Service?

Rugby's values of teamwork, respect, enjoyment, discipline and sportsmanship are what make the game special. But what are essential are the physical and mental battles that players must train for and endure.

Other life skills are part of rugby, too. Players must understand one another's psyche and mindset. Without mutual understanding and social cohesion, a team will break down.



**“This great rugby story not only has to be told,  
but retold again and again.”**

**D. J. Forbes, former captain of the All Blacks Sevens**

The 1978 Singapore rugby team made history by beating the powerful Kiwis, clinching the Malaysian Rugby Union Cup and winning a treble of national awards. Yet their triumphs were all but wiped from sporting history.

Veteran sportswriter Godfrey Robert traces the blood, sweat and tears behind an extraordinary decade for Singapore rugby, starting in 1972 with the first all-Asian team and culminating in another unthinkable victory in 1982. *When We Were Kings* includes first-person accounts and colourful anecdotes from the heroes of the decade: Coach Natahar Bava, skipper Song Koon Poh, Singapore Rugby Union boss Howard Cashin and many others.

**A 40<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY COMMEMORATION  
OF AN UNDERDOG TEAM IN AN UNDERDOG SPORT**

NON-FICTION

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