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Sporting Heroines: The 1980s

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The 1980s: A Sharpshooter for Seoul

Competitive success for women experienced a period of decline in the 1980s. After the tragedy of Chee Swee Lee's injury in the 800 m at the Montreal Olympics, there was a gap of 12 years before the next female Singaporean graced the Olympic stage. There were two main reasons for this. First, The US-led boycott of the 1980 Games in Moscow denied a number of potential Olympians the opportunity to participate. The names of Junie Sng (swimming) and K. Jayamani (athletics) immediately spring to mind. Second, the relative level of performance in women's sport in the early 1980s did not justify the selection of Singaporean participants to the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

The traditionally strong sports for Singapore (swimming and athletics) were not able to provide female contenders for places in Seoul. Instead, it was one of the least likely of all sports for women in Singapore - Shooting - that was to raise its sights to the Olympic stage. The sharpshooter, who achieved the qualifying standard was an Indian Muslim, Khatijah Surattee.

Khatijah Surattee

Khatijah Surattee has pursued one of the longest competitive careers in Singapore's sporting history. She has more than thirty years of shooting experience, beginning when she was an eighteen-year-old Army recruit in 1968. She is semi-retired now, having competed most recently at international level in the 19th SEA Games in Jakarta in 1997.

Khatijah was born on the 5th February 1950; approximately 5 years before the trio of Pat Chan, Tay Chin Joo, and Chee Swee Lee, who were to don national colours at the Olympics in 1972 and 1976. She was an only child, brought up in a strict, traditional Indian Muslim style. Her family lived in Katong, where she attended Haig Girls' School and Tanjong Katong Secondary Schools. She recalls early attempts at softball, hockey, netball, and running, but with little lasting interest in their sporting demands. This was a time when sports were experiencing considerable promotion at the school level and pupils were required to run ten laps every morning before lessons.

There was no particular encouragement from her family to develop any latent sporting talent that she possessed. Khatijah reveals that she was left completely to herself, being somewhat rebellious anyway. She describes herself as a black sheep: headstrong, independent, and outspoken. Her father, it should be noted, was against her studying and wanted her to accept an arranged marriage.

Khatijah joined the Army in 1968, and, was introduced to guns at the age of 18 years by Captain (Dr) Benny Chan. She was trained to operate Submachine guns and M16s. The

general life style suited her well and she was able to socialise through the sporting activities that were organised within the camp. Within two years she had married Syed Mahmood Al-Junied and has resided until today in Lorong 8, Toa Payoh. Her eldest daughter Shwikar, who is married to national sprinter Hamkah Afik, works at the Singapore Sports Council. Her youngest daughter lives in Melbourne, Australia.

Khatijah was to make her name with the air-pistol, which she used first in 1974. Work and family commitments prevented extensive training, but she did become champion at M16 competitions in 1978, 1979, and 1980. The 1983 South East Asia Games, which were held in Singapore, was to be her first international representation. Indeed, it marked the first time that women shooters had represented Singapore in the SEA Games. Khatijah immediately made her mark when she won an individual bronze in the 10 metre Air- Pistol event. She was helped by Major Philip Goh, who had represented Singapore in the 8th Asian Games in Bangkok and by Iwo Lieno Abbas.

Khatijah's progress to the Olympics was hampered by the lack of coaching expertise in Singapore. In 1985, Khatijah had to direct her own training and she felt that she mistakenly over-trained. She fell into the trap of over-shooting and becoming over-zealous. She had no coach and no satisfactory training regime. At the 1985 SEA Games she finished out of the medals, experiencing bouts of anxiety and feeling very disappointed.

In 1986, there was a busy competition schedule, but Khatijah had little opportunity to train as intensely as the year before and she was obliged to focus on her Army duties. These limitations actually worked in her favour because they served to sharpen her motivation and focus. Her scores improved and in one series she even achieved a perfect 100/100. The Pesta Sukan, with invited participants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Malaysia, was a success.

In June 1987, Khatijah recorded a score of 380/400 at the 125th Anniversary Meet at the Mount Vernon range: a record that still stands today. Later in the year, she won a silver medal in the SEA Games at Senayan in Jakarta, shooting 375/400 and also breaking the 365 qualifying mark set for the Olympics. This performance, in a ratified International Shooting Union competition, provided her with a wild-card entry for entry to the Olympic Games the following year.

Voted Sportswoman of the year in 1987, Warrant Officer Class II Khatijah Surattee was 37 years of age when she defeated the likes of Glory Barnabas (World Veterans Gold Medal), Catherine Oh (Equestrianism), Jenny Lim (Softball), Mah Li Lian (Squash), and Tan Ai Lian (Pugilistics) for the title. Mr E.W. Barker, the former Law Minister and President of the Singapore National Olympic Council, at that time, was quoted as saying that 'she shoots so straight that the Ministry of Defence should think of conscripting women into National Service'.

In June of the Olympic year, the World Championships were held in Munich. Khatijah shot a 370/400, finishing approximately 30th out of 50 competitors. Lacking further competition before the Seoul Games resulted in a loss of form and declining confidence. This was

compounded by a sense of disappointment at not getting a place at the Wiesbaden Training Institute in West Germany. Khatijah was the sort of athlete who needed not only guidance and competition, but also personal moral support in order to achieve her best.

In the build-up for the Games, Khatijah successfully applied for a training grant from the Singapore Sports Council's Sports Aid Fund. Furthermore, some assistance was provided in the form of coaching and advice from the Hungarian expert, Tibor Gonczal, who had been employed to coach the Australian team. He visited Singapore briefly and offered some expert knowledge during the month before the Games. However, the impact of these ad-hoc sessions was minimal, and even letters and phone calls later on could not dispel a growing sense of unease in Khatijah's mind. She was, by all accounts, very nervous about the prospect of participation in the Olympics. She complained of the pressure and of being depressed about her state of preparation. Referring to the so-called 'stagnant waters of Singapore sport' writer Ken Jalleh Jr reported that there was lack of opportunity to devote the kind of time and effort that is really needed for preparation for the Olympics. He added that 'Khatijah's was a lonely trail to the Olympics. There was no one to offer advice or encouragement at training'.

The 21st Olympiad was held in Seoul in 1988, 38 year old Khatijah was the only female representative from Singapore. She had beaten all of her male contemporaries in Singapore except Chia Hock San, and on the basis of her silver medal at the SEA Games she took the only quota place allocated to Singapore. Khatijah did meet up with Gonczal again in Seoul, but even then she felt like a lost sheep. She lost 5 kilograms in weight and spent many sleepless nights trying to prepare adequately.

At the Taenung shooting range in Seoul, in the face of the strongest opposition, Khatijah succumbed and finished in 36th place out of 37. She scored 361 out of 400, registering series scores of 89, 90, 87, and 95. Her national record performance of 380 would have brought her sixth place in the final. Khatijah recalls the high standard of performance and the relaxed manner of the Yugoslav shooter Sekaric, who, aided by the calming effect of chewing gum, proceeded to win the gold medal with a world record composite score of 489.5.

Happily Khatijah was not to be permanently affected by her poor performance, and there were no thoughts of retiring after the Games. In November 1988, she defeated Rumpai Yamfang (who had been ranked 12 in the world) and took the gold medal in the South-East Asia shooting championships held in Subang, Malaysia. In 1989, a problem related to scoliosis induced a nerve injury in her arm and she was prevented from participating in her fourth consecutive SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur. The following year, however, at the Asian Games in Beijing (1990) Khatijah scored 369/400 and came in tenth.

The SEA Games in Manila in 1991 provided the sharp shooter with another silver medal in Air Pistol. Unexpected support was provided by a representative of the Philippines Armed Forces, who offered words of encouragement during the competition. Khatijah again recorded a qualifying score for the Olympics but this time, on the basis of superior performance at the SEA Games, the wild-card was offered to the Trap representative Chng Seng Mok.

Khatijah continued to represent Singapore in regional competitions, providing guidance and support for the younger shooters at the 1993 SEA Games, which were held in Singapore and in the 1997 Games, which were held in Jakarta.

Senior Dental Supervisor Khatijah Surattee was awarded the 30th Anniversary Special Commendation for performance, participation and significant contribution to sports in SAFSA in 1998. The citation read:

"Her national and international achievements in the field of shooting had brought glory, repute and inspiration to SAFSA shooting. From an unknown shooter in 1973, she shot her way to the 1988 Olympics with true grit. She is credited with a still unbeaten 1986 National record for Air Pistol (women). For her achievements she has been voted SAFSA Best Sportswoman for 1987. She is SAFSA's shooting star."

Recently Khatijah has even returned to the ranges in competition. Her team recently won the gold medal in the Pesta Sukan. Such is the measure of her love for shooting that she claims that if she doesn't shoot, she is not her normal self.

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