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Sporting Heroines: The 1960s

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The 1960s: Swimmers Surface for Singapore

The competitive sporting traditions of the 1950s in Singapore had focused initially on track athletes. The endeavours of, first, Tang Pui Wah at the inaugural Asian Games held in New Delhi (1951) and at the Helsinki Olympiad (1952), and then Mary Klass (winner of the silver medal in the 100 metres sprint at the 2nd Asian Games) together with Janet Jesudason in the Melbourne Olympiad (1956) had briefly signalled the presence of women athletes from Singapore at the highest levels.

The evolving traditions of women's sport in the 1960s were marked by a shift, at least in terms of success, away from track athletics towards swimming. However, competitive swimming for women was slow to get off the mark at a regional level.

There were few public pools at the time, although the centres at Mount Emily, Yan Kit, River Valley, and Farrer Park provided unrestricted access. The main focus of activity centred on the private clubs such as the Chinese Swimming Club and the Singapore Swimming Club, and the YMCA, the Tiger Club and the Services Britannia Club.

Elsie Lim Bie Lin (Backstroke - 13 years old) and Norma Hutchinson (Freestyle - 14 years old) had represented Singapore at the 2nd Asian Games in Manila in 1954, the year in which the colony's Water Polo team won the Gold medal. Norma incidentally had held all the swimming records with the exception of the backstroke until her (early) retirement and return to England in 1955.

In 1958, Elsie Lim was the sole female representative in the 3rd Asian Games team, finishing out of the medals in the 100 metres backstroke. Her personal best for that event that year was one minute 24.5 seconds. Elsie Lim and her sisters, Nancy and Luanne, were regular record holders at the Teacher Training College (TTC) events.

Expatriate participants generally dominated swimming. For example, the Malaya Amateur Swimming Association championships held at the Chinwoo pool in Kuala Lumpur in August 1959 were swept by expatriate competitors. Sometimes guest swimmers such as Julie Hoyle (UK Olympian) took part. At the schools level, Raffles Girls were the leading proponents in the late 1950s, ousting Thompson Chinese Middle school.

The first South East Asian Peninsula (SEAP) Games were held 1959 in Bangkok minus female swimmers. The following year, Yeap Ean Ee (freestyle and butterfly) and Vicky Chan (backstroke and freestyle) were identified as potential Olympians for 1960, when the Games were to be held in Rome. "Today's sports heroine is 21-year-old state swimmer Yeap Ean Ee ". She was a Federation born student of Nanyang Girls' High, who had competed at the 1959 Merdeka Games in Kuala Lumpur.

The first Olympic trials were held on June 30 1960. The qualifying times indicating the standards of the day.

100 m freestyle:	1 min 7 secs
400 m freestyle:	5 min 20 secs
100 m backstroke:	1 min 17 secs
200 m backstroke:	3 min 5 secs
100 m butterfly:	1 min 20 secs
4x100 m freestyle:	4 min 40 secs

The first ever Open National swimming championships were held in October 15, 1960. And the first Schools' Inter-District competition was organised (with representatives from Katong, City, Serangoon, Bukit Timah, and Pasir Panjang) on the 21 October of the same year.

It is apparent that many women at that time were reluctant to participate in swimming, particularly local women: "President MIC Bain yesterday said that he was disappointed by the poor support given by Singapore's women to the open swimming championships on Friday and Saturday at the River Valley Road pool. In the 100 metres freestyle, he said, there were only six entries, all European women. In the 100 metres backstroke, of the six entries, two were Chinese. The butterfly attracted six women, one of them Chinese. Local women seem shy of coming forward, he added." This may be one reason why younger girls, with presumably fewer inhibitions, but also subject to the persuasion of adults, gradually started to dominate the swimming scene.

The 1st South East Asian Peninsula games (SEAP) were held in Bangkok in 1959, but there were no swimming events for women. The 2nd SEAP Games were held in Rangoon (Burma) in 1961, this time there were a number of women's events, but no female representatives from Singapore were selected or qualified to participate. However, at about this time a number of younger swimmers were making their mark locally. Marny Jolly stood out in the under 14 category at the Singapore Swimming Club meeting at Tanjong Rhu. Touted as one of Singapore's most promising 13 year-olds, Marny was also an outstanding performer at the SASA annual Junior championships held at the Chinese Swimming Club in Amber Road.

September 1963 marked the point at which Singapore merged with the Malayan States to create Malaysia. Political unrest in the region prevented the staging of the biennial SEAP Games. Swimming was directly affected by the concurrent conflict between the International Swimming Association (FINA) and the Indonesian organisers of the Games of the Newly Emerging Forces (GANEF). SASA was advised by FINA not to compete in the Games threatening that representation would result in the suspension of Singapore from the Tokyo Olympic Games the following year.

However, in 1964 a team of six young Singaporean swimmers became Olympians under the flag of Malaysia. Three of the team were entered in the women's events. Jovina Tseng, Molly Tay Chin Say, and Marny Jolly competed in the 18th Olympic Games, which were

held in Tokyo, Japan during October of that year. Euleen Tseng, mother of Jovina, attended as a chaperone.

The 1964 Games were marked by some memorable performances in the swimming competitions. Dawn Fraser won her third gold in the 100m Freestyle, but generally the Americans dominated the pool Cathy Ferguson and Sharon Stouder setting world records. All three of Malaysia's female swimming team were young teenagers: Jovina (13 years at the time), Chin Say (12 years), and, a little older Marny at 16 years of age. Jovina Tseng had recorded 79.8 in the 100 metres backstroke in an official time-trial held in August 1964. She was from a family of five children, her father was a school Principal and her mother, Euleen, was a school-teacher. Euleen was largely responsible for the successes of her children, being the driving force behind their efforts. In the Tseng household, equal emphasis was placed on academic and sporting success, and continuing to swim was contingent upon academic progress. Euleen provided the transport to training, the payment for board and lodging when needed, and acted as chaperone and mentor. Jovina's younger sister, Justina, would later make her own mark in the pool under the guidance of Euleen.

Jovina swam in two of the freestyle events, the 100 m (1 minute 13.9 seconds) and the 400 m (5 minutes 46 seconds). She also appeared in the 100 m backstroke event (1 minute 20.7 seconds). In the 400 m Jovina was entered in the same heat as the American world record holder Marilyn Ramenofsky and the Australian star Dawn Fraser. It was reported at the time that the 14-year-old failed to qualify for the semi-final, but 'the little school girl never gave up and continued to plough through the pool to the cheers and clapping of appreciative spectators packing the swimming stadium'. Ramenofsky eventually won the silver medal and Fraser took fourth place in the final.

Jovina would later win medals at the 5th and the 6th Asian Games (both held in Bangkok): a bronze medal in the 4x100 freestyle in 1966 and a silver medal in the 4x400 freestyle in 1970. There would be medals too at the SEAP Games and the SEA Games, when a full programme for women was established in 1965.

1965	100m free	Silver
	100m back	Bronze
	100m fly	Silver
	200m fly	Silver
	200m IM	Silver
1965	4x100 free	Gold
	4x100 medley	Gold
1973	100m fly	Bronze

Jovina lives and works in Singapore today. She is totally committed to the hectic demands of employment as an anaesthetist in a major private hospital.

Molly Tay Chin Say also came from a family of swimmers. She attended Methodist Girls School and later Anglo-Chinese School. Chin Say began swimming while living in Kuala Lumpur. Her family were members of the Selangor Golf Club, and she and her brother and

sisters were often found swimming laps or diving. Chin Say's competitive career began at the age of approximately eight years old (1960), and like many who followed her, continued until the training regime became difficult to sustain and other interests in life were developing.

Her parents were a positive source of encouragement; happy with her individual achievements, providing transportation to training, comfortable with the decision to quit swimming when it ultimately came. During her mid-twenties, Chin Say went to study at Brigham Young University in the USA. After graduating, she married and worked as a Financial Analyst for Revlon in New York. She now lives in Westchester, New York State.

In Tokyo, Chin Say swam in heat one of the 100 m butterfly. She recorded a time of 1 minute 23 seconds. It was stated in the Singapore press that the 'slightly built Singaporean girl ... will undoubtedly find this international swimming experience valuable in the future when she is expected to develop a stronger physique and will certainly make her mark in Asian swimming circles'. Kathleen Ellis of the USA won the heat and went on to claim the bronze medal in the final.

Chin Say was an international medallist, together with Jovina, 12 year old Patricia Chan, and eleven year old Tay Chin Joo (Chin Say's youngest sister), she would later win a bronze medal at the 5th Asian Games in Bangkok. Chin Say represented Singapore in number of international events including the South East Asian Games (SEAP) Games.

1965	200m free	Silver
	400m free	Bronze
	100m back	Silver
	200m back	Silver
1967	100m free	Bronze
	200m free	Silver
	100m back	Silver
	200m back	Silver
1969	100m back	Silver

Very little is known about Marny Jolly, partly because she departed from Singapore after her Olympic experience thirty five years ago, and partly because there was little documentation of swimmers like herself at that time. It is believed she was an Australian, who qualified to represent Singapore on the basis of residency. Marny was aged about sixteen when she competed in the 200 m breaststroke in Tokyo. She achieved a time of 3 minutes 11.0 seconds, but did not reach the second round in an event, which was ultimately won by a swimmer even younger than herself. Galina Prozumenshikova, a fifteen year old from the Soviet Union broke the existing Olympic record with a time of 2 minutes 46.4 seconds. Marny was the holder of both the Singapore national 100 m breaststroke (1 minute 28.1 seconds) and 200 m breaststroke (3 minutes 6.4 seconds) events until both were broken by Esther Tan in 1969. It has been rumoured that Marny met a young American Olympian in Tokyo and later departed for the USA to marry him.

The exploits of these three early Olympians are significant because they took place at a time when women in Singapore had not benefited from international competitive exposures. Not forgetting the pioneering endeavours of Elsie Tan and Norma Hutchinson during the 1950s, these three represent the vanguard of swimming success in Singapore. They were an emerging force and the predecessors of the more famous compatriots Patricia Chan, Tay Chin Joo, and later Elaine Sng, Justina Tseng, Junie Sng, Mavis Ee, and Joscelin Yeo.

In conclusion, two observations deserve to be made concerning the traditions set at that time but which now have become self-evident. First, Jovina, Chin Say, and Marny were young girls when they participated in the Olympics. Today, with the age for peak performance having stretched to the later teens and early twenties, it would be anticipated that greater physical maturity is an important prerequisite for international competition. The three Singapore Olympians could not contest really successfully against the physically bigger and stronger Americans, Australians, and Europeans. Second, the young swimmers emerged from a family base with the support of coaches and private clubs. It should not be surprising that brothers and sisters, in turn, made their impression on the swimming record books at that time. However, the dominance of families like the Chans, the Tays, the Tsengs, and the Sngs for example, are not so readily noticeable today.