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# Sporting Heroines: The 1950s

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## The 1950s: Female Olympians of the Colonial Era still Inspire as Sporting Heroines

In March this year, the Singapore Sports Council hosted the first-ever, national Women and Sport Conference at Anglo-Chinese School (Independent). There were many interesting and notable presentations during the two-day event, and the ratification of the Brighton Declaration, at its conclusion, provided further impetus to the promotion of women's sport in Singapore. However, an informal lunchtime celebration on the first day also caught the collective interest and imagination of the participants, and in so doing provided the Conference with an important and significant moment.

Eight Singapore Olympians were acknowledged for their achievements and they shared briefly with the audience some of their sporting experiences. Each woman had represented Singapore on the ultimate sporting stage, and in so doing had instantaneously provided the nation with further inspiration to challenge and compete with the best in the world. These eight women and a further eight, who were unable to attend, together represent the cream of Singapore talent in Olympic sports. Their stories, which spanned the last 12 Olympiads (1952-1996), deserve to be more fully documented and preserved, because they give an important glimpse of the origins of competitive sport in Singapore.

The role of national heroes in the development of the nation has been identified at the highest levels as significant in gelling national identity. So too, sporting heroes and heroines are unifying symbols for Singaporeans.

What follows is a brief outline of the experiences of the three women who were Singapore's Olympic pioneers. These are the stories of three track and field athletes, who attended the two Olympiads to be held during the 1950s, and who followed immediately in the steps of Lloyd Valberg, the colony of Singapore's first ever Olympian in 1948.

**Tang Pui Wah** (Deng Peihua) was an 80-metre hurdler at the Helsinki Olympiad in 1952. She travelled with a small contingent that included three weightlifters and the legendary swimmer Neo Chwee Kok.

**Mary Klass** and **Janet Jesudason** were both 100-metre sprinters at the Melbourne Olympiad in 1956. They were the only women in Singapore's largest ever Olympic team, which included full hockey, basketball, water polo and weightlifting squads.

There were similarities in the ways these three athletes emerged to become the leading runners of their time, but there were also distinct differences in their personalities and backgrounds. Like three sisters they were born within three years of each other, but within very different social settings. Each one peaked at or just before the age of 21 years. Each one

retired completely from the athletics scene at an early age because other challenges and life priorities captured their attention. One was apparently a quiet thinker and observer, who happily took a back seat in a male dominated environment. Sometimes described as highly strung, she nevertheless displayed the qualities of a champion on the track. Another was more openly and fiercely competitive and expressive, one who thrived on the big occasion and who could produce peak performances at key moments in her career. The third found that her natural sporting talent provided a perfect means for continuing personal expression, one who was prepared to experiment and experience the varied challenges of life.

### **Three biographies**

Tang Pui Wah was born in 1933 in Tanjong Pagar. She spent most of her early years in the Cross Street area, attending first Fairfield Girls' School in Neil Road, and later Nanyang Girls' High School in King's Road. It was here that she made a name for herself as an all-rounder. First as a higher jumper, then a hurdler and sprinter, her height and speed gave her an advantage at the Chinese Schools sports meets. She also represented her school against the visiting Philippines women's basketball team in 1950.

Pui Wah competed regularly during an 8-year period 1948-1956. She benefited from the meets organised by Singapore Chinese Amateur Athletic Federation, her victories featuring regularly in the Chinese press. She owed no particular allegiance to the two main athletic clubs (Swifts and Achilles) being content to attend different training sessions on invitation.

Pui Wah broke the China Olympic record for the 100 m Hurdles in 1949 at the age of 15. A year later she created a new All China record in the 80 m Hurdles with a time of 13.3 seconds. In 1951, at the age of 17, she won the Malayan Games 100m sprint and was selected to represent Singapore in the First Asian Games, which were held in Delhi. She came in 3<sup>rd</sup> in her heat but did not advance further in the competition. Nevertheless Ken Jalleh named her the 'best Chinese woman athlete' of her day. It was during these Games that Neo Chwee Kok won an uneclipsed four gold medals for swimming and the Water Polo team also brought home the gold.

The 15<sup>th</sup> Olympiad was held in Helsinki, where the cold weather, the strange track, and the size of the crowd were negative factors in Pui Wah's performance. Little has been written about these experiences, but it is clear that Pui Wah was at a disadvantage in terms of the coaching expertise available to her at the time. She had developed a rather upright style leading over the hurdles and probably spent too long in the air. Pui Wah recognises these limitations today, but amusingly responds that the solidity of the hurdles somewhat discouraged a lower trajectory. Fellow team-mates in Helsinki were the three weightlifters Chay Wung Yew, Lon Bin Mohammed, and Thong Saw Pak, and swimmer Neo Chwee Kok with his coach Kee Soon Bee.

In 1953, the Helsinki girl dominated the Singapore Chinese Inter Schools championships and was successful in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Malayan AAA Championships. Pui Wah broke the record for 80 m Hurdles coming in 'at least 10 m ahead of the field'. However in the 100m sprint, she was defeated by Annie Choong and Fay Siebel of Selangor.

In 1954, Pui Wah returned to the Asian Games, which were held in the warmer climes of Manila. Clearly affected by the death of her mother the month before, she was unable to attain the gold she sought. Although winning her heat in the Hurdles against a Japanese rival, a poor start in the Final relegated her to the Bronze medal position.

In 1956, the Singapore Olympic and Sports Council set a qualifying time for the hurdles that was to prove beyond Pui Wah's capability. Rather mysteriously, she failed to join the state team for the 35<sup>th</sup> Malayan Championships held in Penang. Singapore, nevertheless, won the overall title for the 8<sup>th</sup> consecutive year.

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Mary Klass was born eighteen months later than Pui Wah and lived first in McNair Road and later in Rangoon Road. She attended St Anthony's Convent until the age of 13, but showed no inclination for competitive sport. She joined the Eurasian Youth league and later discovered that she could run much faster than her friends. Living in the vicinity of Balestier Plain (opposite the old Malay Football Association ground and the Ceylon Sports Club) provided her with more opportunities to participate in sport than many of her contemporaries. However, Mary did not emerge as a sprint star until 1953 when she won the Coronation Triangular meet which was held on the Padang. Mary was a member of Achilles – coached by Ng Liang Chiang and Joselyn de Souza.

In April 1954, the trial for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Asian Games in Manila was held at Victoria School. Mary qualified for the 100m with a time of 12.6 seconds, although some controversy threatened to spoil her victory. Had she beaten the gun? Eleanor Ross was left in her wake in a time of 13.0 seconds, and the time stood.

Just two weeks before her nineteenth birthday, Mary Klass stunned everyone by winning the silver medal in the Asian Games 100 metres final in a race somewhat misleadingly described as a dead-heat. Both women were given the same time of 12.5 seconds, yet some partisan observers at the time claimed that Mary might well have even have been awarded gold but for the greater regional fame of her Japanese rival Atsuko Nambu.

In 1955, the Malayan AAA Championships were held in Ipoh. At the age of nineteen, Mary completed a dramatic double, winning the 100 yards in 11.5 seconds and the 220 yards in 26.7 seconds. In 1956, the rivalry with Tang Pui Wah's former nemesis, Selangor's Annie Choong, featured highly in Mary's preparation for Olympic qualification. Still suffering the after effects of a spiked ankle, experienced the month before, Mary travelled with the Singapore team to Penang, where they were due to defend their inter-state title. According to Lloyd Morgan in the Malayan Monthly, the duckling had become a swan, for the 'vivacious, black-eyed, golden skinned' runner attacked her rivals mercilessly taking the sprint double and in winning the crown, confirmed her eligibility for Olympic selection and the title of the fastest woman in Malaya.

Melbourne, in the early weeks of November 1956, was cold and windy. The Singapore contingent were not fully prepared for these conditions, having received little guidance or material support from the Singapore Olympic and Sports Council. Yet, Mary was to achieve

her supreme moment in the second heat of the 100 metres sprint. Pitted against Marlene Mathews who equalled the Olympic record time with 11.4 seconds, and later won the bronze medal, Mary Klass achieved what few Singaporean athletes have ever done at the Olympic Games. She raced to a personal-best time and shattered the existing national record. In setting a time (alternatively reported as 12.1 or 12.2 seconds) Mary established a bench mark performance that continues to elude most Singaporean runners today. The current record incidentally, set in 1983 by Prema Govindan, stands at 12.0 seconds.

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Janet Jesudason was born in Taiping (Malaya) in December 1936. After the Second World War, she moved with her family to the Katong area and was dubbed 'speedy Gonzalez' by her classmates at Katong Convent. Subsequently she joined CHIJ and later Bartley Secondary School where she established herself as a leading figure in the school athletics scene, competing against such schools as Methodist Girls' School and Raffles Girls' School. In 1955, Janet competed at the 34<sup>th</sup> Malayan Championships in Ipoh, taking third in the 100 metres behind Mary Klass and Annie Choong. She also ran the anchor leg in the 4x100 relay team.

Janet was also a member of Achilles, a club containing many Eurasian and Services athletes. She was coached and guided by Ng Liang Chiang the 440-yard hurdler. Janet was involved in the typical triangular meets that often featured athletes from the British Armed Forces. She trained with Mary Klass at Raffles Institution and often competed at the Jalan Besar stadium, at Tengah (the Royal Air Force base), and most significantly at the Nee Soon Garrison. It was here in 1956, on a well-tended grass track that Janet was, in fact, the first to qualify for the Melbourne Olympiad. The absence of Mary, whom she had always recognised and acknowledged as the golden girl of sprinting, coupled with the availability of a flat racetrack coincided to produce the desired qualifying time of 12.5 seconds. Janet readily admits to experiencing shock as the announcement, at that time, signalled her elevation to Olympian status. The Bartley schoolgirl was to accompany Mary Klass to the 16<sup>th</sup> Olympiad.

With little time to acclimatise and unable to match her team-mate's fierce determination and inspiration, Janet Jesudason ultimately came fifth in her heat. Disappointed with her time, Janet nevertheless recalls her moments at the Melbourne Cricket Ground with obvious pride. She can vividly recall the mood of apprehension in the waiting room before the heat, the sound of the crowd cheering over the loudspeakers, and the words of de Coubertin written to inspire the attending athletes: "The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well."

These three women, all of them active and vibrant today, just as they were in the years before self-government, should still be an inspiration to young Singaporean athletes of today. They shared many important characteristics - they had the drive and the determination to succeed. Largely self-supporting, they were able to focus on improvement

in performance without the distraction of material gain. They shared a national pride, and perhaps most significantly the sense of enjoyment and satisfaction that is inseparable from the hard endeavour that is involved in the pursuit of excellence.

These three athletes, representatives of different racial groups and from different social and economic backgrounds, were introduced in different ways to sport. Yet ultimately, they reached the same pinnacle of performance. Not Olympic medallists perhaps, but just as important - Olympians.

Where are these women now? Tang Pui Wah returned to the public gaze during the Women and Sport Conference this year. She remains agile and vigorous, still contemplative and a listener but also a stimulating and amusing speaker, who thrives on the company of sporting people. Mary Klass (wife of Sandy de Souza), who retired unchallenged in the local scene, impresses with her indomitable spirit and her forthright criticism of young athletes who fail to take advantage of vastly superior conditions today. Her joy at personal success coupled with her ready smile creates an impression of total self-confidence in her abilities. These two athletes now live a short walking distance away from each other in Toa Payoh. Janet Jesudason (now Janet Stevens) has become the most widely travelled of the three Olympians. A teacher by profession, Janet worked in Singapore, England, France, and the United States. She is now a citizen of Australia, who remains passionate about physical activity in its different forms. She is a Yoga exponent, a rock-climber, a windsurfer, and a runner. Probably the most versatile of the three Olympians, Janet Jesudason was even able to contemplate the possibility of an additional Olympic challenge as a fencer.

The presentations to the Olympians at the Women and Sport Conference highlighted the need to make names and events come alive particularly for young and aspiring sportswomen. There is clearly a great need for such heroines to provide stimulation to those who follow. After all, track and field athletics in Singapore today is greatly in need of female role models. The Olympians who fought equally hard for themselves and for Singapore in 1952 and 1956 represent the first reference points for athletes of all disciplines.

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Special note: Dr Aplin is interested in compiling documents, written information, photographs, official records, and other material relating to the development of sport in Singapore. The donation or loan of suitable research material to the Academy that might enhance the database of archival material would be very much appreciated.