

Indelible memories of Supermokh

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By Terence Netto

THE 25th anniversary of the death of Malaysian football legend Mokhtar Dahari passed three days ago.

More than a few aged aficionados of the sport would have raised a furtive finger to flick away a teardrop of remembrance, not only from recall of the cruel illness that ended Mokhtar's life on July 11, 1991, but also from the depressing certainty that Malaysian football will not see his like again.

With Malaysia scraping the bottom regions of the Fifa rankings — 174th at the last count — prospects for a revival of our football fortunes to what they were when Mokhtar Dahari led the Malaysian team's attack in the 1970s are about as good as our chances of producing another striker of his calibre.

Which is to say they are bleak. And that is probably because Malaysian football is going through the equivalent of the muscle-wasting illness that Mokhtar suffered from before succumbing to its ravages.

Motor neuron disease, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, claimed Mokhtar's life at the age of 37.

It is said that people tend to die the way they live. That could not be said of Mokhtar's end.

He throbbed with speed and power on the field, but Lou Gehrig's disease had reduced him, in a matter of three years, to a shell of his previous self.

If football is the composition of fleeting images of racy, silken action on a rectangular stage, the impression left by Mokhtar in the 13 years, from 1973



Mokhtar holds aloft the Malaysia Cup trophy he won with Selangor in 1981 when they defeated Singapore 4-0.

to 1986, that saw him grace the football stadiums in Malaysia and Asia was akin to a comet in the night sky — streaking, surging, ascending.

As a striker, Mokhtar was powerful of hip, thigh and calf; he was squat yet with all the feline speed born of supple joints and spring heels.

He parlayed these physical gifts into prolific scoring for Selangor in the Malaysia Cup, featuring in 10

championship wins in 14 annual competitions.

He announced his arrival in the national team with 10 goals in his first year in 1972, when he was just 19, and certified his berth as striker with 24 goals two years later when he helped gain the bronze medal for Malaysia at the 1974 Asian Games in Teheran.

Local football aficionados each will have a particular memory of a Mokhtar Dahari goal.

Because he scored so many of them, they will disagree as to which was extra special.

Mine was of his electrifying sprint to reach a punt out from deep defence to collect and then lob the ball over England B goalkeeper Joe Corrigan in a the Malaysian selection's 1-1 draw with the visitors from what was then already the best league in the world.

That thrilling goal on a sweltering April night at the Merdeka Stadium in 1978 captured for a teeming audience the magic of Supermokh, and momentarily gave the crowd cause to be tantalisingly poised between self-belief and self-delusion.

Belief in its capacity to rank with the best in Asia trailed by the delusion that fleeting glimpses of magic from gifted individuals were sufficient to get us there.

Alas, delusion got ahead of belief and as Mokhtar, a few short years after his heyday, began to wither under the onslaught of his illness, saddened fans were reminded of the evanescence of their sports heroes, even ones so endowed with the physical prowess of Supermokh.