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## War Heroes and Rise of a Sporting Hero: Chia Boon Leong



The young Chia Boon Leong (b.1925) in the Rovers team uniform. 1940s. Source: Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No: 20140000148 – 0051)

### Young Olympian - Chia Boon Leong (b.1925)

From the depths of war and the seaside at the west coast, a young Olympian arose. Born on New Year's Day in 1925, and growing up at five and a half milestone Pasir Panjang Road, Chia Boon Leong went on to become a sporting hero for Singapore and Malaya during and after WWII.

Boon Leong lost both his parents in childhood and was in the care of his older brothers and relatives. He played with marbles and kicked about tennis balls in the yard with the

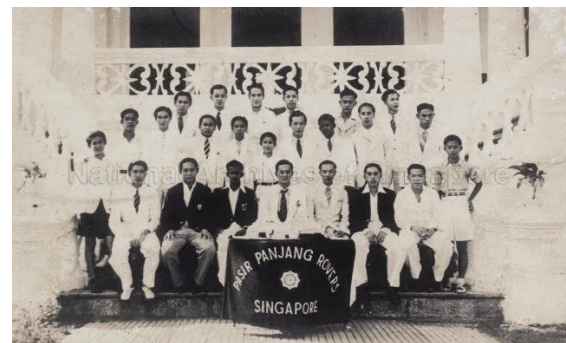
kampong boys. He trained football at Pasir Panjang English School, which was located at Yew Siang Road, a street named after his father.

*"In primary school, all the students played football matches barefooted."*

– Chia Boon Leong, oral archives, National Archives of Singapore



Pasir Panjang Rovers football team in a casual pose. Chia Boon Leong is standing third from the right. 1940s. Source: Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No: 20140000148 – 0206)



Pasir Panjang Rovers 3rd Anniversary celebrations at Chia Keng Thye's bungalow at 610 Bedok on 17 May 1941. Chia Boon Leong is standing in the front row extreme right. 17/05/1941. Source: Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No: 20140000148 – 0195)

### Formation of Kampong Team - Pasir Panjang Rovers

Sometime before the war broke out, the Pasir Panjang Rovers was formed. Boon Leong's friend, Chua Boon Lay, encouraged him to play.

*"I remember some soccer enthusiasts from Pasir Panjang who decided to form the Pasir Panjang Rovers team, and they are Chinese, as well as Malay and Indians. So they got together and formed Pasir Panjang Rovers just for the sake of playing friendly matches because the team being a cosmopolitan team, they are not eligible to play in any of the league organised by the Singapore Amateur Football Association (SAFA). At that time it was confined only to the communal teams (Chinese, Indian, Malay and Eurasians) and teams from the services side (RAF, Army and Navy)."*

- Chia Boon Leong, oral archives, National Archives of Singapore



Raffles Institution First XI Football Team. Chia Boon Leong is in the front row, second from the right. 1941. Source: Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

### Sook Ching – A Narrow Escape

Boon Leong studied at Raffles Institution. When war broke out in December 1941, Boon Leong had just completed his Senior Cambridge exams. The bombings went on day and night. His family thought it would be safer to move to Tiong Bahru for a time.

When the British surrendered on 15 February 1942, Boon Leong had just turned 17. He was called in for 'Operation Sook Ching', a mass screening by the Kempeitai at an open ground at the corner of Tanjong Pagar and Cantonment Road. Being small-sized, he passed the screening and escaped the purge of

anti-Japanese elements. Many others were taken away and killed, including a coach-player of the Pasir Panjang Rovers.

### War Hero – Lieutenant Adnan Saidi and The Malay Regiment at Bukit Chandu

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Two lanes away from Yew Siang Road was Pepy's Road, where an open ground and an opium packing plant stood at the foothill of Bukit Chandu. Boon Leong watched keenly as older boys played friendly matches against other kampong teams at Pepy's Road field and at Farrer Park.

When war came, the youngster Boon Leong witnessed soldiers on vehicles plying Pasir Panjang Road. Little did he imagine that on eve of the Lunar New Year, on 14 February 1942, the historic final Battle for Singapore, fought by brave soldiers of the Malay Regiment and war hero Lieutenant Adnan Saidi, would take place at Bukit Chandu.



National war hero, Lieutenant Adnan Saidi, Platoon Commander of the Malay Regiment, who sacrificed his life at the Battle for Singapore at Bukit Chandu, Pasir Panjang. c.1937-1942. Source: Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



The Malay Regiment fought bitterly and held their stand to the last against a foe that vastly outnumbered them. Their heroic sacrifice is commemorated at Reflections at Bukit Chandu near the battle site.

### Playing During the Occupation – 1942 to 1945

Fortunately, Boon Leong was able to continue playing during the occupation. He was a member of the Rovers team that went through an eight-game league tournament for the Alsagoff Shield. There were charity matches, with the Rovers defeating the fancied Cosmopolitans, while raising funds for the various farming schemes by the Japanese.

In 1943, together with his friends, Chua Boon Lay and Chu Chee Seng, Boon Leong joined the Syonan Goodwill Tour that travelled by rail up to Malaya. The Syonan soccer team won all their games.

*“The Rovers won all the major trophies offered by the Syonan Sports Association from 1943 to 1945.” – Ken Jalleh, The Singapore Free Press, 20 April 1949*



1943 (2603 Japanese Occupation date). The Pasir Panjang Rovers football team posing with many Cups they had won during the Occupation. Chia Boon Leong, a future Olympian nicknamed ‘Twinkletoes’, emerged post-war to reach the 1948 London Olympics. The sporting legend played a pivotal role in the Malaya Cup-winning teams of the 1950’s and represented Singapore at the 1954 Asian Games. Voted most popular player in Malaya, Chia is in the front row, second from the right. Source: Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No: Media - Image No:20140000148 - 0228)



Force 136 member, Lim Bo Seng (Major-General) (1909-1944), a national hero of Singapore for his resistance to Japanese forces during World War II. Following in his footsteps, his grandson Lim Teck Yin served the nation as Brigadier-General in the Singapore Armed Forces, as well as a national water polo athlete and champion between 1985 and 1995. Lim Teck Yin now serves as the Chief Executive Officer of Sport Singapore. c.1940s. Source: Lim Leong Geok Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

### War Hero - Lim Bo Seng (1909-1944)

In 1925, the same year that tiny Boon Leong was born, a young man of 16 years had arrived in Singapore to study at Raffles Institution, where Boon Leong later attended school. His name was Lim Bo Seng (Major-General) (1909-1944).

Bo Seng was destined to become a national war hero, after enduring tortures and sacrificing his life as a guerilla freedom fighter and resistance leader of Force 136, a special operations unit. Buried with full military honours at MacRitchie, the Lim Bo Seng Memorial at Esplanade was gazetted as a national monument in 2010.



War-heroine Elizabeth Choy Su Moi, OBE (nee Elizabeth Yong Su Moi) (b. 1910 – 2006). During the Japanese Occupation, Elizabeth worked as a canteen operator with her husband at Woodbridge Hospital. The couple secretly supplied food, medicine, messages, money and radios to British internees. The couple were caught, arrested and interrogated by the Kempeitai. Elizabeth was subjected to 193 days of starvation and repeated torture. She refused to break and never revealed the names of anyone she had assisted. Post-war, Elizabeth was awarded the Order of the British Empire, and became the only woman member in the Legislative Council in 1951. A dedicated educator for many decades, she was the first principal of the Singapore School for the Blind in 1956. 14/03/1955. Source: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No:19980001106 – 0019)



Lien Hwa (United Chinese) football team in full suit. Chia Boon Leong is in the back row, second from the right. Chia joined Lien Hwa in a 42-day tour of Asia sponsored by N.S. Chinese Recreation Club, Seremban in December 1947, playing in Bangkok, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Manila. 1947-1948. Source: Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No: 20140000148 – 0073)



Chia Boon Leong in Lien Hwa (United Chinese) team uniform taken in Bangkok. 1947. Source: Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No: 20140000148 – 0088)

## Post-war Memories – 1947 Shanghai

Immediately after the war, Boon Leong played in a series of tour matches in Asia – Bangkok, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Manila.

His most memorable game occurred in Shanghai in 1947 playing for the Lien Hwa (United Chinese) team in front of an ecstatic 12,000 capacity crowd. His endurance, speed, and skill in creating chances for his teammates won the hearts and total respect of the home audience.

He was feted by joyful fans after the game, who forgot in a moment of euphoria that China was enmeshed in a civil war.

*“What I remembered most about the match in Shanghai against the defending champions, Tung Hwa, is not so much the game itself, but the post-game reception given by the crowds.*

*It was a once in a lifetime feeling. I can’t really recall how I played. I did not even score a goal. But it was the crowds mobbing me as I walked out of the stadium to the bus after the match that gave me a flutter.”*

- Chia Boon Leong, 5 November 2011, in an interview with Dr Nick Aplin



Mass of spectators in long queues waiting to enter the stadium. 1947-1948. Source: Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No: 20140000148 – 008)



Lien Hwa (United Chinese) team taken against a packed spectators' stand in Shanghai. Chia Boon Leong is in the front row, second from the right. 1947-1948. Source: Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No: 20140000148 – 0135)

## Playing at the 1948 London Olympics

The 1948 London Olympics was the first summer games to be held after WWII and Boon Leong was selected to represent China.

This caused consternation amongst officials of the Malayan Chinese Amateur Football Association and the Singapore Chinese Football Association. He had apparently contravened a rule that required players to seek approval to play abroad. No action was taken as it was recognised that the selection itself was an immense honour.

Fellow Singaporeans Chua Boon Lay (b.1902-d.1976, one of the first Olympians from Singapore, reserve player at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, representing China) and Chu Chee Seng (b.1923, reserve goalkeeper at the 1948 London Olympics, representing China), both went to the Olympics as well, but never played.

Till today, Chia Boon Leong remains the only Singaporean to have played soccer at the Olympics.

*“Swift as a hare, with brilliant ball control and unlimited stamina as his chief assets, he is a schemer of immense value to any forward line.”- Sonny Yap, New Nation, 1975*





Chia Boon Leong at Uxbridge, England, when he played for the China Olympic Football Team at the London Olympics. 1948. Source: Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No: 20140000149 – 0006)



Chia Boon Leong (right) and Edwin Dutton (left) chatting with Arsenal's inside left, Jimmy Logie, at the Highberry training ground. Fraser and Neave ran a competition to select Malaya's most popular football star. The reward for Chia who came up tops, and the runner-up Edwin Dutton of Selangor, was a two-months training stint with Arsenal in London. 1954. Source: Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No: 20140000149 – 0134)

### Speed Legend - "Mr Twinkletoes of Soccer"

Upon his return, Boon Leong played a pivotal role in Singapore's Malaya Cup-winning teams of the 1950s and participated in the 1954 Asian Games.

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A crowd favourite, Boon Leong was also voted most popular player in Malaya in 1954.

After an illustrious career, he retired at the end of the season in 1955. Boon Leong continued to serve the football fraternity as manager of the Singapore national football team in 1978, and later as Council Member of the Football Association (FAS) of Singapore and Chairman of the FAS Welfare Committee.



Singapore Team that beat Penang and won the Malaya Cup 1950. Chia Boon Leong is in the front row, extreme left. 1950. Source: Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No: 20140000148 – 0019)



Singapore Team won the Malaya Cup 1952. Result: Singapore 3 – Penang 2. Chia Boon Leong is seated in the front row, second from the right. 1952. Source: Chia Boon Leong Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore (Media - Image No: 20140000148 – 0071)

## A Singapore Sporting Hero for All Time

In November 2021, author Dr Nick Aplin met with the spritely nonagenarian who was home-bound due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Though rather hard of hearing, Mr Twinkletoes of Soccer did not fail impress with the same bright smile and sporting spirit that helped him to triumph on and off the field.

*“Chia Boon Leong is widely considered to be one of the most talented and highly regarded football players ever to represent Singapore. Close to 97 years of age now, he is a store of precious information about the glory days. He has a number of favourite topics that will easily emerge. His justifiable pride in his own achievements focus on his Olympian status – he represented China against Turkey in the London Games in 1948 – and his representative prowess for the Lien Hwa touring team in 1947.”*

- Dr Nick Aplin, 5 November 2021



Chia Boon Leong, aged 96yrs, in his home during an interview with author, Dr Nick Aplin. 5/11/2021. Source: Courtesy of Dr Nick Aplin

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