

# THE STEADFAST DEFENDER

As part of the Lions' "Dream Team" in the 1990s, former national footballer **KADIR YAHAYA** tackled his way to fame and glory on the pitch. Today, he is a coach dedicated to using the sport as a platform to instill the right values in young players.

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If you have the chance to meet Kadir Yahaya in person, you will understand why he excelled as the tough-as-nails defender of the Singapore Lions in his heyday. In his role, he was never flashy, preferring to do his job quietly out of the limelight.

"A defender is an unglamorous role," says Kadir in his characteristically soft-spoken way. "He can make 10 tackles with no mention of it in the newspaper report after the match. But when he fails in one tackle, and the opposing striker scores, he gets the blame." Not that it has ever put off the man from trying to become



the best defender in town.

As a professional footballer, Kadir's teammates knew him as a remarkably disciplined player who would never allow himself to slacken. Whenever he ran – be it during training or the Cooper Test (a physical fitness test that requires an athlete to run as far as possible in 12 minutes) – he always pushed himself to be first. For an eight o'clock training in the morning, 44-year-old Kadir would turn up at seven. And he had Manchester United manager, Alex Ferguson, to thank for that.

"I read his book, 'The 90-Minute Manager'," says Kadir, who is now a school football coach. "I was so amazed by his passion and dedication to football. He wrote about waking up at 5.30 a.m. every morning and reaching the training grounds by 7 a.m. There, he would walk around to greet each and every staff, from the laundry lady to the team members."

At that time, Kadir told himself that he would replicate what Ferguson had done. "These little practices were what made him extraordinary, and the only difference between him and me was that he was in Europe while I was in Singapore." He believed that he could do the same. And with the right qualities and attitude, he would become a good defender. For Kadir, a good defender goes beyond a good tackle. He adds: "He has to be disciplined, diligent and determined."

### DISCIPLINED TRAINING

As a boy, Kadir was naturally drawn to sports. Whenever his school's annual Sports Day rolled by, he would enthusiastically participate in as many events as he could. "I ran in middle-distance and cross-country races," he recalls. "I was also in the school's sepak takraw and football team."

Of all the sports, football was his chosen love. And it was not just because he relished kicking a ball around with his friends at void decks. In a way, football was a way for young Kadir to remember his father, who passed away when he was in Primary One. "I had a photograph of him posing with his team after a friendly match, and it remained etched in my mind. Later, I found out from my mother that he was a recreational goalkeeper and enjoyed the sport."

Like his father, Kadir played recreationally until the age of 15, when a friend persuaded him to go for the trials at Geylang International (now Geylang United). He was then selected to join the under-16 division. He considers himself fortunate, especially since that period is what many consider to be the golden age of local football.

"Geylang United had amazing players like Fandi Ahmad and Malek Awab, and they really inspired me," says Kadir. "I used to watch them play football on television, and joining the club meant I had the chance to get up close and personal with them. If they even so much as spoke a word to me, I would be so encouraged."

Beyond these "fanboy" moments, the football pitch became an outdoor classroom for Kadir. He picked up many worthy life lessons just by observing his seniors. Once, he happened to arrive early for his training at the football club. As he was changing into his gear, he noticed a lone player conducting his own shooting practice. "After a while, I realised it was none other than Fandi. At that time, he was already a well-known player, but still he set a good example by showing up early and training on his own. That left a deep impression on me, and it was the first time I understood what discipline was all about."

That lesson came in useful. By then, he was training daily and playing matches on weekends. Whether it was a training session or a match, he was always on time – if not early. But juggling schoolwork on the side was physically exhausting and mentally taxing. Fortunately, he knew discipline – and embraced it.

"I made sure that I didn't neglect my schoolwork even as I played football." As he persevered, his passion for the sport kept him going. "In those days, euphoria for Singapore football was at an all-time high, so I knew I was living every boy's dream." He felt strongly that he had a future in football – and was ready to go all out.

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### MORAL GUIDANCE

At Geylang United, Kadir found a mentor that he could rely on. Throughout his years at the Vocational and Industrial Training Board (VITB), now the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) Bedok, the then-chairman of the club, Patrick Ang, ensured that the talented teen turned out right.

He would call Kadir at home after training to make sure that he wasn't hanging out in clubs, smoking or doing anything that would be detrimental to his budding football career. Kadir adds: "He even stepped in to help when I couldn't pay my school fees as my mother was struggling to raise three children and care for my bedridden grandmother." Football, it seemed, had given Kadir the father figure he needed.

Through facing such challenges, Kadir grew up imbued with the right values – and progressed gradually in football, moving up to the feeder squad before reaching the first team. When he was 24, an offer came in from the Football Association of Selangor, one of Singapore’s traditional rivals during the Malaysia Cup days. The young professional was tempted to take it up. “I felt that I could earn more money and win more fame,” says Kadir. “But Patrick gently pulled me back to the ground, and told me that I would be able to achieve more in football if I stayed with Geylang United.”

That turned out to be a wise decision. Over time, Kadir matured not just as a person, but also as a footballer. As a right-back, he was known for his flawless man-marking skills that would nullify opposing strikers. “I was taught by my coach never to let a striker go,” says Kadir. “His exact words were: ‘Even if he runs off the pitch to the toilet, you follow him there.’”

For Kadir, his role was straightforward: To outwit and outplay the opposing strikers. He explains: “It was my responsibility to stick to the striker like a leech. If he didn’t score during those 90 minutes, I’d have done my job.”

And that was all that mattered. In his playing days, he was often dubbed “The Shadow”, silently working on the field to impact the outcome of the game.

By the early 1990s, Kadir was in his element. With him, there was a solid line-up in the national team consisting of seasoned players like Fandi Ahmad, V. Sundramoorthy and Malek Awab. Dubbed “The Dream Team”, they would go on to mount a serious challenge for the 1993 Malaysia Cup. “We made it to the Malaysia Cup finals, and played against Kedah,” remembers Kadir. “I even told my mother before the match that I would reward myself with a new second-hand car if I won.”

But victory was not meant to be. The “Dream Team” lost 2-0 to Kedah in the final. It was a crushing defeat, made worse by how fans and the Singapore public were hyped up for success. “Our dream crumbled in 90 minutes. After the loss, I went on my knees and cried. The first thought I had was how confident I had appeared in front of my mother,” says Kadir, his voice noticeably lowered. It was the lowest point of Kadir’s career, one from which he was not sure he would be able to bounce back.

## STAGING A COMEBACK

The following year, the Singapore Lions returned to the training ground. For Kadir, it was after months of cooping himself up at home and avoiding the media glare. In the meantime, he had come to the realisation that in football – and indeed, life itself – things couldn’t be taken for granted. “Even if you are confident, there may be other factors that will influence the result.”

That said, he was determined not to lose again. The team and the country came together, and training resumed with a strong dose of indomitable spirit. “The coach got senior players like Fandi and Malek to give us pep talks. They told us to forget about the defeat, and focus on doing better the next time.” Kadir adds: “The way they carried themselves professionally, and that attitude of refusing to be second best, spurred me to train harder.” The “Dream Team” went on to win the 1994 Malaysia Cup final against Pahang.

In 2001, Kadir sustained an anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injury in the knee. The condition, commonly seen in athletes, meant that he would not be able to play for a year. At the height of his football career, Kadir now had to consider retiring. “It was crushing news. I hadn’t prepared for life after football.” He eventually decided to switch roles and become a coach.

The transition was not easy. Kadir had to take a pay cut, half of what he used to earn as a professional player. Thirty-three years old and newly married, Kadir drove a second-hand Datsun and lived in a five-room Housing & Development Board (HDB) flat. “I had many bills to pay, and had to drastically readjust my life,” says the man. “My wife even had to return to work.” The fortunate thing was that Kadir had been frugal all his life.

“I had a small Malay wedding at the void deck and never bought flashy cars,” says Kadir. Even today, he only buys training software and books when they are on sale. He attributes these penny-wise habits as something he picked up indirectly from football. Growing up, he would train very hard – just to be able to receive a brand new kit from Geylang United. “I would not have been able to afford football boots otherwise.” That was a life lesson learned early, and it ended up serving him well when he decided on a career change.

Over the years, Kadir has coached at the Singapore Sports School, St. Joseph’s Institution (SJI) and helmed the Singapore Youth Olympic Games (YOG) football team to a bronze medal in 2010. He was also the assistant coach of LionsXII until December 2012, working with former teammate, V. Sundramoorthy.

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## INSTILLING VALUES

He not only sees coaching as a job but also grew to truly appreciate the role. “Coaching children and youth gives me greater joy and satisfaction, without the pressure and limelight,” says Kadir, who adds that he has a different approach from most coaches.

Instead of pushing the schoolboys towards a desired match result, he believes in cultivating character while drilling them in football skills. “Sport is not always about the winning. It is an effective platform to instil the right values in youths,” he says earnestly. As a coach, Kadir first ensures that the boys learn how to balance their studies with sports – just like how he used to as a student.

Discipline aside, he takes great care to teach his boys about respect on and off the field. “A football team can be made up of boys of different races and religions, so I make sure they speak a common language – English,” he says. Kadir goes a step further by organising field trips to places of worship like a Christian church, a Buddhist monastery, a Hindu temple and a Muslim mosque. “When they understand one another’s race and religion, they learn about mutual respect, and teamwork quickly follows.”

Building character in these boys is not always so straightforward. Kadir says: “Boys tend to play rough, and there will be times when they will shout at a referee or pick fights with the opposing team.” But under Kadir, the boys have learned how to control their tempers, or hold back an angry teammate if a scuffle happens on the field. “It is the coach’s responsibility to impart the right values.” For Kadir, these are the values that the boys will apply in their personal relationships and future careers.

In time, Kadir hopes that the life skills that football brings to the schoolboys will change their lives for the better. He says: “If a coach only focuses on the results, he may be able to churn out winners on the pitch. But off it, he may get players who will scold the referee or pick fights. I think it’s more important to have players who are upright and respectful individuals, than it is to win. So, for me, it’s a personal challenge to see how I can guide these youths well with football.” And with his holistic approach, disciplined manner and can-do spirit, this certainly looks like an achievable feat.

## VALUES

Discipline • Diligence • Respect • Loyalty

## REFLECTION

1. Kadir Yahaya was a defender for the national football team. Defence lacks the glamour of leadership, but Kadir knew he could have a crucial impact on the success of his team – if he played his role to the best of his ability. How do you handle supporting roles? Do you resent being a subordinate? Or do you see the importance of doing your job well for the good of the team?
2. What are the values that have helped you in your studies or career? How do you apply these values in your professional life? Have you coached others on the importance of commitment to purpose or discipline in action?