

RULING THE GAME

As the second Singaporean referee to have ever officiated football matches at the FIFA World Cup, **SHAMSUL MAIDIN** has proven that top-level referees can emerge from a small country like ours. He reveals what refereeing has taught him about work ethics and family responsibility.

At Stadium Dortmund in Germany, Shamsul Maidin was getting ready to officiate his first international-level match at the 2006 FIFA World Cup – the group stage game between Trinidad & Tobago and Sweden. It was a good two hours before kick-off, but Shamsul preferred to be early. He had arrived, passing a frenzied, cheering crowd en route, earlier than the stipulated 90-minute allowance for referees.

There, Shamsul meticulously inspected the field of play, ensured that the ball used met FIFA requirements, and checked through the players' equipment, which included jerseys, shorts, socks, football boots, shin pads and gloves. "I believe in being well-prepared for



each and every match," says the 47-year-old. "One of the most important qualities refereeing has taught me is discipline, which led me to fulfilling my dream role as a World Cup referee the best I can."

That was a day to remember for Shamsul, who later brandished the first red card of the tournament to Trinidad & Tobago's Avery John at the 46th minute and sent him off. "There were no complaints about the decision," he says. "After that match, people congratulated me for being brave enough to hand out the first red card of the 2006 FIFA World Cup." The defining decision of the 0-0 draw thrust Shamsul into the spotlight.

Shamsul also refereed the group stage game between Mexico and Angola, where he sent off Angola's André Macanga with another red card, becoming the first referee to produce two red cards. He then went on to referee the Poland-Costa Rica group stage game, making him the first referee to officiate three games in the tournament.

But his reputation as a referee goes beyond the mere handing out of cards.

The two-time Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Referee of the Year is widely recognised as one of Asia's best-ever referees, and helped raise the profile of refereeing in Asia. For Shamsul, who only started refereeing seriously at the age of 25, reaching the World Cup was a dream come true. He is the second Singaporean referee to achieve the feat, after George Suppiah in 1974. In his distinctive soft-spoken way, he says: "To be able to represent Singapore was a great honour."

LEARNING DISCIPLINE

As a boy, Shamsul's youthful enthusiasm for football made perfect sense. His father, Maidin Singah, was a FIFA referee and brought him to support local football matches, especially those he refereed. Shamsul remembers the matches as great times of bonding for his family and friends. "We had a lot of fun," reminisces Shamsul. "In particular, the Malaysia Cup matches were memorable to me. The atmosphere at each game was electrifying."

It was only natural that Shamsul started playing football in secondary school. He did so all through National Service (NS), when he was in the Singapore Police Force (SPF) and played at the premier league level. But he acknowledges that he was never talented enough to enter the national team. "We had nine national players, including three goalkeepers, on the police team, so I was always on the substitutes' bench."

Still, he did not stop playing. "It was competitive, but I didn't give up

because of the love and passion I had for football." One thing that pushed him on was the camaraderie he felt on and off the pitch. "We trained daily, and played matches on weekends. It was a sport that kept my friends and I together throughout my NS life," says Shamsul. "Even now, when I sit down to have a meal with friends, conversation revolves around football."

When Shamsul realised that he was not able to go far in professional football, he decided to adapt to a different role – refereeing. "I was very inspired by my father, who became a top referee," says Shamsul. "He went to the Asian Cup, and even reached the pre-World Cup level. But he had to retire then because of an injury in his Achilles tendon." Shamsul was certain that with his father's blessings and guidance, he too could become a top-level referee some day.

In 1990, he took up the Referees Basic Course at the Football Association of Singapore (FAS). It was a five-day certified course that covered both the theoretical and practical aspects of refereeing. "After that, I became a Class 3 referee, and was given low-level local matches to officiate," says Shamsul. He was also fortunate to have his father by his side to guide him along. "In a sense, he was my 'personal coach' in refereeing. When I was learning about the role, he showed me relevant DVDs and did a lot of personal analysis for me."

Shamsul improved gradually, but it was his father's disciplined work ethic that would eventually rub off on him. He says: "Growing up, I tagged along with my father whenever he refereed. I even ironed his jersey and polished his boots before every match." That was an early introduction into the game of discipline for Shamsul. "I watched him prepare thoroughly for every match, and realised that was why he commanded a lot of respect as a referee both locally and internationally. He often told me that referees have to embrace professionalism through discipline, commitment and attitude, both on and off the pitch."

MANAGING MATCHES

Shamsul, a rookie referee, was soon assigned challenging matches. He performed consistently, and rose to become a Class 1 referee in 1995. "There was a lot of talk because my father was, by then, the secretary for the referee

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committee. But we decided to stay focused, do our jobs and let my actions do the talking."

A year later, Shamsul officiated his first international tournament – the AFC Asian Cup in Abu Dhabi. He would go on to feature in two more Asian Cups in 2000 and 2004, as well as the 2001 and 2003 FIFA World Youth Championships.

Shamsul has always stood out on the pitch as a referee who does not flaunt his authority. For him, refereeing goes beyond the mere flashing of yellow or red cards. "I prefer to manage the players within the laws of the game," says Shamsul. "I believe in speaking to errant players and giving them a chance first. But if they refuse to listen, I will go ahead with the necessary disciplinary action."

Doing so was not always easy, especially in major matches where the tempo was high and bags of prize money were at stake. Still, Shamsul carried himself with confidence – and was never ruffled by player aggression. "I've met players who got upset and would shout vulgarities if they were unhappy with my decisions. But as a referee, I would try to bring the tempo down – just like how a conductor would lead his orchestra – by speaking to them calmly. Most players respond better to that."

At 29, Shamsul was appointed a FIFA referee. He was the

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youngest-ever referee to reach that level. That year, he was assigned to officiate at the AFC Under-16 Football Championship Finals and the 2000 Asian Cup. Coincidentally, the 2000 Asian Cup reaffirmed the importance of proper planning – not just in refereeing but also in family responsibility. Shamsul recalls: "The timing of the match coincided with my daughter's approaching birth. Even though I had to be away, I made sure I did everything in my power to ensure that my wife would have a smooth delivery. We decided on a date for the caesarean, checked with the gynaecologist and also arranged for my parents to be around to tend to her needs," says Shamsul, who only saw his child seven days after her birth.

While the doting father of three still feels that he missed out on the birth of his only daughter, Shamsul believes in managing any life situation the best he can. "It's not easy to juggle different life responsibilities, but refereeing has equipped me with skills to do so. Like understanding how planning and preparation can lead to success," says Shamsul. "As my father used to tell



me: 'If you fail to prepare, prepare to fail.'"

In 2004, FIFA announced Shamsul as a World Cup candidate. Two years later, he was one of the seven referees from Asia. From then on, it was a whirlwind of training and thorough preparations for the biggest event in football. He joined the Singapore Sports Council (SSC) formally as a physiotherapist's assistant, but was allowed to devote most of his time to training. "SSC gave me a lot of support, putting together a team consisting of a nutritionist, sport psychologist and even an FAS national coach to train me."

For the young man, each and every match was a learning journey. "The harder I trained for the World Cup in 2006, the more I learned. For instance, following the comprehensive programme that SSC set out for me made me realise what discipline was all about," explains Shamsul. Managing such a world-level match also honed his ability to handle pressure. "I was a little lost when I blew the first whistle. But 10 minutes into the first match, I knew I would do okay as I had prepared amply for it." That same year, Shamsul was also the only non-African referee at the Africa Cup of Nations.

GIVING HIS ALL

Shamsul would have gone on to officiate at his fourth Asian Cup in 2007, but a knee injury five days before the tournament forced him to pull out. "While training for it, I sustained a severe tear to the meniscus of my left knee. I knew I wouldn't be able to give 100% to the role even if I went, so I decided to retire from the scene."

Shamsul has no regrets retiring at the relatively young age of 41. He says: "Having conducted FIFA World Cup matches, I felt that I had reached the highest level of my career. That was enough for me." But he was not about to let football go, and took on key roles in AFC and later, FAS.

In 2008, FIFA announced his appointment as a referee instructor. He was the first referee from Southeast Asia (SEA) to work in that capacity with the international association. Shamsul, who is still with FIFA now, shares: "Educating referees has proven to be challenging work." But it is a challenge he relishes. His role involves looking after the World Cup referee candidates all over the world from a tactical perspective. For the 2010 World Cup, Shamsul was elated to travel to South Africa as a referee instructor.

Today, Shamsul is hopeful about the refereeing scene in Singapore. He observes: "Singapore has four elite referees now. That's not bad for a small country. In Japan, there are six, while Malaysia has two." Still, Shamsul feels

that more can be done to groom potential elite referees who possess the three Fs: Fitness, Fairness, and Firmness. He adds: "A good referee has to be fit enough to run throughout the 90-minute duration of a match, be fair to all players without fear or favour, and stand firm when making decisions."

As Shamsul does his part to groom young referees, he strives to pass on the life lessons he has learned from refereeing. "I do a lot of sharing as I lead them, but I also keep the communication two-way," says Shamsul. "I like to give them the chance to speak their minds, and guide them to the right solutions." It is his dream that more Singaporean referees can make it to the World Cup. "I always tell younger referees that if I can achieve the goal of reaching the World Cup, so can they – dreams can come true as long as you strive for excellence."

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VALUES

Discipline • Fairness • Humility • Perseverance • Leadership

REFLECTION

1. Shamsul was motivated to become a FIFA World Cup referee by his father who taught him the importance of discipline, professionalism and hard work. Who have been your role models in life? How did they influence your values and choices in life? Have you been a role model to others? What values have you shared?
2. Managing others is not an easy feat as it requires soft skills such as humility and fairness. Shamsul has been able to manage the expectations of top-class players at the FIFA World Cup in addition to his fellow referees. What are your personal values that have helped you in managing people and relationships successfully?