

Wee Tian Siak

by Nick Aplin

Many Olympians have become world-famous. An even greater number remain heroes, but only in their own country. For a tiny minority, their reputations have taken on bizarre cross-national characteristics. Wee Tian Siak was one such sportsman, who proved to be equally recognised in a number of countries. He was officially selected by three different countries to be an Olympian. At three consecutive Olympic Games he could have shown a different national affiliation. In 1948, he captained the Chinese basketball team in London. In 1952, he was selected by Taiwan (Formosa) to make the trip to Helsinki, but his team did not arrive because the rift between the communist and nationalist Chinese prevented both countries from participating. In 1956, Wee captained the Singapore team that played at the Melbourne Games. Ironically his team was placed in the same qualifying league as the rival Chinese team.



Wee could claim one other Olympic distinction. Has it ever happened before, that two sportsmen born and residing in the same country have simultaneously, and legitimately, carried the national flag of two different countries during the Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Games? Wee Tian Siak occupies such a place in the unique history of Singapore's early Olympians.

In 1948, as captain of the Chinese delegation he carried the nationalist flag in the Opening Ceremony in London. Some considerable distance behind him, came Jocelyn de Souza, the Eurasian team manager of the one-man team from the newly IOC-affiliated Singapore. De Souza took the honour of carrying the colony's flag rather than high jumper Lloyd Valberg, who was the sole athlete in the team.

The China Connection

In the days following the conclusion of World War II, a Chinese sportsman from Singapore might well have considered China to be his motherland. For Wee it was natural to play for China, as Singapore did not have a strong international team and could not afford to send many athletes to London anyway.

Growing up in the heart of one of the most densely populated cities in the world, he first represented the Straits Settlement of Singapore in basketball in 1939 at the age of eighteen. In 1948, he joined the Malayan Chinese basketball team that travelled to All-China Games in Shanghai. On the basis of his performance there his was the first name on the selectors list for the London Games.

Close Competition or a Travesty

In London the Chinese team were extremely unfortunate to finish in eighteenth place out of twenty three teams. The Official Report indicated that the most scintillating ball play had come from the far eastern teams, namely Korea, Philippines and China, all of which played in Group B. China won three of their five preliminary games – exactly the same record as Korea, Chile, Belgium and the Philippines, who finished above China in the standings. The China team scored more points (281) than any other country in any group, with the exception of the USA (325) – including a massive 125 against the hapless team from Iraq. The Chinese had managed to defeat Korea, Belgium and Iraq along the way and yet found themselves playing-off for seventeenth to twenty-third place. How the Philippines, with a points score of 262–200, managed to oust China (281–202) from the playoff for ninth to sixteenth place remains a mystery. According to the regulations – “In the case of a tie on match points the proportion of points for and against was used to determine the group placings.” Was the decision in reality based on points conceded?

In the final group matches, China defeated Switzerland and Great Britain before losing to Italy.

In Melbourne, eight years later, Wee gained some consolation by leading the Singapore team to victories over the Korean side and Thailand, thus securing thirteenth place overall. In the Group C semi-finals, Wee was faced with an emotional battle. Singapore was drawn to face the Republic of China team. There were no former teammates, and there must have been a keen sense of national rivalry. The Republic duly scored a narrow victory 67–64.

Players like Wee were brave pioneers. They flew to play exhibition matches in major cities in Asia. There was one memorable yet terrifying moment for the team that occurred in 1957 during a flight to Taiwan. The plane lost power in one turbo-prop engine. The passengers, including the 21-man Singapore team and the 17-man Thailand team, had to throw their luggage out of the plane in order to ease the burden on the single remaining engine. The plane eventually regained altitude and landed in Taipei.

After retiring from competitive play, Wee remained heavily involved in coaching. Until the end he remained an affable and well-respected man – one who showed pride in achievement and his unique Olympic record of representation.

Biographical information

Wee Tian Siak
* 26 April 1921
† 29 July 2004

Olympic results

1948

Basketball: 18th

1956

Basketball: 13th

Further Reading

- Nick Aplin, David Waters, Leong May Lai – Singapore Olympians: The Complete Who's Who (1936–2004). SNP International & Singapore National Olympic Council. ISBN 981–248–072–2.