

PRESS RELEASE

Release No.: 38/NOV
03A-1/96/11/15

96-MBT-35

**SPEECH BY MR MAH BOW TAN,
MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND
ADVISOR, FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE (FAS),
AT THE S-LEAGUE GALA NIGHT/AWARDS PRESENTATION
AT BALLROOM 1 AND 2, ORCHARD HOTEL
ON FRIDAY, 15 NOVEMBER 96 AT 7.30 PM**

I am happy to be here with all of you to acknowledge some special people who have given their best in promoting excellence in Singapore's first-ever professional football league - the S-League.

The Awards Selection Committee has told me that there were many close calls - just like those made by the man-in-the-middle during a football game - but like in any other competition, there can only be one winner. I am sure this will only serve to spur all those who have missed out to try harder for these awards next year.

Tonight's Honour Roll covers all levels of the game, from team, player, scorer, team manager, young player to the referee. It also includes our partners in the media as we congratulate those who have, through their writings, telecasts and broadcasts, made positive contributions to this game called football, a game that is probably the most loved sport in Singapore.

1996 has been a hectic year for Singapore football fans, with a tight calendar of international, regional and S-League matches. It was like having ten-course dinners every month! While some fans had their fill and left happy, others

were more critical, and indicated their displeasure by not turning up at the next one! This, of course, was reflected in gate attendance of the S-League Pioneer Series despite a rousing response to the earlier Tiger Beer series.

But I am confident that football is still on the menu of many Singaporeans. It was a pleasant surprise for me to learn that S-League matches telecast over TV12 had a higher viewership rating than telecasts of English FA League games. The S-League Championship Match that took place last weekend between the SAF Warriors and the Geylang Eagles is a classic example of what good football between two top-rate teams can do to bring football fans back to the stadiums. Let us have more of this.

The message from the fans out there to those of us involved in the game is very clear. They want to see exciting and entertaining football. This can only come about with professionalism and commitment at all levels - from the Board right down to the ball boy! We all must know what we are doing and we must do it well.

The S-League's inaugural season of professional football has given everyone an insight into what needs to be done to enhance professional football here. The Football Association of Singapore (FAS) is conscious that our national team's performances in recent international competitions indicate that we have not been keeping pace with the standards of football in the region.

With this in mind, the FAS will concentrate on its youth development programme that was revamped two years ago. It is now in place and progressing well. Together with a comprehensive four-year rebuilding programme that will take us to the year 2000, this will I am sure, provide us with the new Fandis, David Lees and Maleks that football in Singapore desperately needs.

A strong national team can only come about by having a keenly contested, thriving domestic league, hence the S-League. S-League Chairman, Mr Kwek Leng Joo, has recently unveiled the new format for the 1997 S-League season, after many discussions with the media, club chairmen, managers and coaches and feedback from football fans. The response to the new format changes so far is encouraging. I am sure all fans are looking forward to an exciting and successful second season of the S-League.

As Advisor to the FAS, I am constantly updated on the needs of both the FAS and the S-League. The S-League Board has made some bold decisions to introduce changes to the League. These changes will be in place next season. They have been made with the long-term interests of the game in mind.

Singapore has taken a bold step into the arena of professional football. Our inaugural season has had its pluses and minuses, ups and downs. But as they say, a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. I am sure that our second and subsequent steps will be that much more confident, that much steadier and that much more satisfying and successful.

In conclusion, it only remains for me to thank the S-League Board for their unstinting efforts, the eight S-League Clubs, the sponsors, without whose help nothing would have been possible, the media and particularly, the fans, for taking this step together. May I also thank our friends from overseas, Dato Peter Velappan, Mr Kawabuchi and Dato Paul Mony, for their advice, encouragement and support. We look forward to the day when our league is as successful as yours and we can do more together.

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