

WHAT THE FOREIGNERS EXPRESS ABOUT THE ROYAL THOMIAN

by Emma Levine

If I were to be asked what I thought was the best example of audience participation in sports, it would be a close-run finish between a Calcutta Test match (an occasion I had the pleasure of witnessing in 1993, and provided the nearest feeling to a religious experience I have had) and school cricket in Sri Lanka.

Two years ago I had the good fortune to learn of the unique and mad world of the Royal-Thomian (the most notorious and best known match in the country) and during England's tour of Sri Lanka I broke off from their Test match to go and see it.

It was beyond my wildest expectations, and I made sure that the next time I went I would be better prepared for it. It was one of the highlights when I returned for a grand tour of Sri Lanka's end of year big matches. It was when tour that took me to many of the school matches, which were usually between rival colleges placing a highly competitive and celebrated two- or three-day match.

My first taste of these matches was at the Royal Thomian, which is the most famous cricket match in the country. For this reason it is also the match responsible for the greatest number of hangovers that a cricket match could ever be responsible for!

This is because the whole occasion is one great drunken tradition. This should have come as no surprise, as the very nature of cricket is conducive to tradition, whichever country it is played in.

However, for me its ambience had been more in the nature of a genteel summer's afternoon relaxation, nibbling on cucumber sandwiches and sipping warm beer, with a polite round of applause to mark a rather splendid boundary, and an embarrassed silence to accompany the batsmen back to the pavilion after they were out first ball.

Or maybe I was being too English.

In Sri Lanka, tradition demanded that the annual matches be enjoyed in the form of riotous celebration. School cricket, I learned extremely quickly, was a different kind of sporting experience in this country, one which bore no relation at all to the game in the land of its origin. The main way of integrating oneself into the melee was to unashamedly consume as much alcohol as possible, and preferably a mix of arrack (a potent spirit made from palm toddy and positively addictive with ginger ale), vodka, beer and whisky. Start in the late morning as the first ball is being delivered and progress throughout the day, increasing meanwhile the vocal support, dancing, and frequency of pitch invasions. It is difficult to explain the phenomenon of a match like the Royal Thomian.

This annual three-day match is played by two of the premier institutions in Colombo: Royal and St Thomas' colleges. It has the significance of being the second longest continuous school's cricket match in the world, and is beaten only by an annual Adelaide college match which bowled its first delivery in 1878.

That is between Prince Alfred's-where the Chappell brothers were educated-and St. Peter's. The Eton-Harrow encounter, which is the only schools event remotely comparable in England, was interrupted during World War I. There is something absurdly incongruous about the main reason for these celebrations.

After all, the reason for the Royal Thomian match is to celebrate the rivalry between the two most respected and prestigious schools in the country, and yet the behavior displayed by most of the crowd is anything but respectable.

But there is much more to the event than the cricket. The match is really a vehicle for an annual reunion and celebration where all ages of people, from 20 to 95, can act like schoolboys again. People return year after year to see the match, and I spoke to many ex-pupils who now living overseas, make it a great excuse to come back to visit. As with most cricket scenes in the subcontinent, this one was a male-dominated affair, which, as many spectators would defend, is the charm to it. Female spectators were so few that it was difficult to spot them. Many of the young women I spoke to said that it would be easy to be discouraged by the 'eve-teasing'.

They were referring to the male spectators' desire to taunt them unmercifully whenever the women came into their vicinity. However, attempts to overcome such ungentlemanly behaviour were emphasised in the match programme produced by St. Thomas by stating rather nobly, 'Ladies, we Thomians appreciate your presence as you add colour to the game and it should be known that the Thomians deserve your cheering since it was our effort that disproved the Royalists' statement "Cricket should be an all male affair".

My sentiments exactly.

Even the most prestigious gathering of the Sri Lankan elite (MPs, company directors, lawyers and what were considered to be 'respectable professionals') revealed their true souls to be nothing more than that of a rumbustious schoolboys. There was a constant background of music coming from small brass bands playing funky tunes that got everyone on their feet. Most of the chairs were discarded as people danced in the aisles, swigging out of bottles and spilling food down their shirts as the sweat poured down their faces. The people I felt the most sympathy for were the food and drink sellers, who, in spite of the congestion of the stands, had to spend the entire day winding their way through the throng, precariously balancing crates of soft-drinks bottles on their heads, or trays of sandwiches and snacks. It was not a job I would have undertaken.

And the match? There was indeed a cricket match going 'on for three days which actually received some attention and appreciation for the players' sporting abilities. In fact the players on the pitch were probably the only sober people in the ground, and took the game seriously.

Many international players started their cricket careers from this match, and the schoolboys knew that it could be their chance of glory in front of the biggest sporting crowd in the country. However, looking at the results over the last few decades, most of the games have ended in a draw. This may be because of the higher level of the game, or else because each side is being more defensive, playing to avoid losing rather than to win. It was surprising to see people fiercely defending the honour of their old schools, even after leaving some ten, twenty or fifty years earlier. The fans were actually segregated, although this was not so much to prevent trouble as to give a little more unity to the supporting groups. The strong sentiments behind the theory of the 'old school tie', that most English of concepts, were expressed with relish, and allegiances still remained loyal and true. The stadium-which was filled with an amazing 15,000 people on the final day-was awash with flags of blue and gold for Royal College, and blue and black for St Thomas'. giving the other known name for the encounter, 'Battle of the Blues').

I wandered around the boundary and sampled the music being played by the bands. The best way of enjoying that was undoubtedly to join the assembled ranks on chairs, on benches and on walls-

and dance. Discarding the camera bag in a safe place, I joined the revellers and we partied continuously, which of course delighted everyone since I was entering into the swing of things. I had to reluctantly avoid the plentiful and insistent offers of vodka, arrack, and in fact most varieties of alcohol that came from all directions. It was tempting to accept, but there was no way I would be able to focus the camera adequately after a few drinks, especially in such overbearing heat. Still, as the adage goes, you don't need alcohol to have a good time-and I was certainly enjoying every second.

A cricketing fiesta such as this is my idea of nirvana, and it seems to me that the Sri Lankans have combined play with pleasure to perfection. For that they have my deepest respect. I just wish that they could teach the 'old dog' a trick or two and bring a little more partying into the staid English scene.

I joined the prestigious and exclusive Mustangs tent, which is a members-only club consisting of the higher echelons of Sri Lankan society. It is a traditional male-only enclave, and special permission had to be obtained from the Tent Secretary. That decision received some highly disapproving looks, and remarks such as 'If we let her come in, they'll all want to'. The members were as bucolic as the rest of the crowd. I danced with a distinguished company director to a Latin American tune, and my sobriety was definitely more conducive to keeping my feet than his swaying efforts to remain vertical. He confided that he had given his 16-year-old son, a pupil of Royal College, strict instructions to 'get drunk, tease the girls and behave badly'. "Why do you encourage your son to do that?" I asked with surprise as he attempted to swing me round. He gave a long and hearty chuckle. "Because I did when I was his age!" he replied. (Although not much had changed as far as his behaviour was concerned.) It seemed that fathers passed on more by way of tradition than simply sending sons to their old schools-and the bad behaviour was a compulsory custom!

The national press reported the match with relish and every newspaper devoted its back pages to it, usually demoting an international match to the inside pages. The Press Box was filled with most of Colombo's sporting journalists, and they followed every ball closer than anyone in the stadium. One of the journalists told me that no ex-pupil from either college is allowed to report on the match for his paper, in case emotions run too high and the match account becomes too biased.