

VINTAGE CRICKET IN THE HILLS BY PAST CHAMPIONS

By Mahinda Wijesinghe

It was originally billed as a game of cricket between the Baldies and the Oldies. No doubt, most were Oldies but Baldies seemed in short supply. Eventually, it became a friendly match between Chandra Schaffter's XI and Michael Tissera's XI, and the occasions was the; opening of the new turf wicket at S. Thomas' College; Gurutalawa. A few boys from the College XI were slotted into make up the numbers to perform the all-important job of running around on the field. Frisking lambs amongst aged sheep, as it were. Believe me, there were a few amongst the lambs who will one day make the highest grade. As an old Royalist, I will not identify them until after the Royal-Thominas! You never can tell with these Thomians...!

Baron Munchhausen Meet His Maker?

What an occasion it was. When I received the invitation to play in the match, I had not bargained to be associated with such an unforgettable event. To persuade people - Oldies, Baldies and whom you will - from different walks of life to spend three days, away from home, is not an easy task. Not only was that done to a nicety, but also, their comforts and needs attended to ----- to the point of almost embarrassment. The man mainly responsible for this happy state of affairs, from the inside, was their Manager, Gerald de Alwis, Genial should have been his name. Only, why was he a Thomian? Almost every where at the same time, inquiring about this or that, and yet unruffled. Like a proud mother hen strutting amongst her chicks. And, never without that charming smile always quivering in his lips, ready to break into an effervescent laugh. Especially, when that inimitable raconteur par excellence, Ismeth Cassim, a former student of Gerald's at Gurutalawa, would regale all of us with his fund of 'true' stories. Baron Munchhausen would have thought he met his Maker, if he met our Ismeth. In fact, former Ceylon paceman Sylvester Dias, no mean story-teller himself, conceded centre stage to the old Thomian and, quite contentedly, took back seat. After all, it was Ismeth's patch as well. As much as Gerald was the man from the inside, from my observations, it seemed that Ismeth

was the man from the outside who made all of this happen. And, what a school! In an almost idyllic setting. S. Thomas' Gurutalawa serves as a shining example of a college that gives an all-round education to a young mind. Observing the shining faces of the school boys brought back memories of the old saying mens sana in corpore sano- a healthy mind in a healthy body. No doubt, testimony of the prevalent discipline. A Short salubrious stroll from the college brought us to the grounds. There was feverish activity going on. The curator, Marion Cooray, had been struggling gamely to bring the outfield and the turf strip to a proper condition, though hampered due to the lack of rains in the area. Of course, we oldies and the Baldies soon put it right by bringing a few welcome showers ----- from where I am not allowed to divulge ----- which delayed the game as well. Hopefully, the rains will continue.

Jealous pump, o jealous pumps are beating.....

The match began with all pomp and pageantry. There were the drummers, dancers, a minipandal, lighting of the traditional oil lamp and a guard of honour, all provided by the students themselves. A perfect setting for a politician, and would you believe it, there weren't any. What a relief! Not even when the students put together an excellent cultural show in the evening. It was so healthy. All the honours were done by an old Royalist, the Bishop of Colombo, Rev, Kenneth Fernando, who also happens to be their Chairman Board of Governors. These Thomians cannot do much without us Royalists. His Lordship, I am sure, enjoyed that occasion when he graced an informal evening with the boys, and Ismeth - valiantly doing his damnecest not to commit any sacrilege lest he shock the good Bishop kept all of us in stitches during tele-a-teles we had in the evenings. No doubt, His Lordship will remember, inter alia, Ismeth's rendition of Jealous pump, O jealous pumps are beating....'

'If you miss, I hit'

Coming to the match proper, Yes, one side must have won, after all, it was a limited-over affair. But nobody cared. However, there were a couple of dazzling cameo performances which brought back nostalgic memories to some of us, and must have given a glimpse to others what these champions were like in their youth. Firstly,

there was our skipper Chandra Schaffter, having almost completed his Biblical span, yet bowling in the manner of his salad days. It was unbelievable. None else deserved the Best Bowler's award. A pace bowler who firmly believed in bowling at the batsman, based on the principle that if you miss, I hit. Schaffter is saddened at modern pacemen who spray the ball all over. Then, there was Man of the Match Michael Tissera, elegant as ever, stroking a masterful half-century, and along with Sheran Wickramasekara, the old Thurstanie, gave the crowd a batting display to remember. The icing on the cake however was the batting of Anura Tennakoon, who despite a strained arm, showed why he was considered such an accomplished batsman and was deservedly awarded the Best Batsman's prize. Old Josephian, Rohan de S. Wijeratne, bowled his left-arm, leg-spinners with a fluid rhythm that would have been the envy of younger members of his tribe. And, there was our youthful wicket-keeper, borrowed from the college team, who stumped the first three wickets to fall on the new wicket.

An award for an avoid

Adjudicators Bradman Weerakoon picked me as the Best Fielder; mentioning amidst peels at laughter that he had hardly seen how to avoid a catch. For Bradman's elucidation and to others whose told laughter spoke their vacant minds. I will relate a similar experience by a member of my own species, a left-arm leg-spinner, Malcom Hilton. He played 4 Tests for England in the early 1950's, but, owes his claims for a share fleeting fame, when as a 19 years old and playing in only his third match for his county Lancashire, he dismissed the great Don Bradman in each innings during their clash against the touring Australians in 1948. Here it is in Hilton's own words, and Bradman (that is too, his version), please note that Hilton was not wearing bifocals.

'I'd been running like a stag for two whole minutes and she's still going up and up and then she starts drifting the other way. So I set off back and soon I'm running round in circles thinking booger yer. And then she starts dropping with ice all around it and I'm still trying to get under and I'm shouting all the time. 'She's mine,

she's mine' to get others out of the way. And then she drops and I dive for her. The next thing I know I've knocked down the wicket keeper; two men in the leg trap and one set of the stumps and the bloody ball drops ten feet away missing square-leg stump by a whisker. And I'm laying there with all this debris around me and I look up and there's skipper looking down at me and he bellows; What other tricks does thou know Hilton?'

Admittedly, I couldn't achieve a quarter of what Hilton did, but the point is, any one can drop a catch in this silly game. And yet receive an award for having done so.....Ah, that only a Royalist can do!

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