

Mr Bertie Wijesinha was the Cricket Coach and served on the tutorial staff during Warden Canon De Saram's period. He was also House Master at Miller.

The precious legend...:

## Bertie Wijesinha 90 not out on May 24

by Rohan Wijesinghe

**CRICKET:** A slight frame is poised to blow out 90 candles on the 24th of May 2010. That's Reginald Bertram Wijesingha for you. The oldest living Sri Lankan cricketer. I found the legend, blessed with charm to spare, chilling it out in his sitting room, walls peppered with his family photograph.

Seldom has such versatility found residence in one human being. Cricketer, coach, commentator, curator, administrator, teacher besides being the "loveliest of dad". Truly awesome Beneath his gentle manner lurked infinite dignity, compassion and modesty. The man of many summers then shepherded me to his living room, at 180/1/A Watarappola Road, Mount Lavinia, his cabinets bursting with scrap books, 62 in all, borders of lovely stats to mull over, a feast of good reading for another day perhaps.

### Glory days at SSC

To open the salvo he spoke of the glory days when his beloved SSC made a serious assault on all the titles. No "may the best side win nonsense" with crusty 'FC' at the helm team saturated with a unique collection of exotics such as Sargo Jayawickreme, Fairlie Dalpethado, M. K. Albert, Hector Perera, Lucian de Zoysa and C.I. Gunasekera. Rushed interview in full swing, our genial legend never ever denigrated anyone of anything. Straddling the divide between past and present with such typically deep tact.

In fact it is with particular pleasure and interest that he watches the new crop on Telly. At sundown he relaxes, nose stuck in a book or his cars plugged to a stereo, heavy classical stuff running through his veins.

### Tiny tearaway pacie

Born in the then quiet little city of Kalutara, he was soon enrolled at S.Thomas' College in the year 1926 by his cricket-mad dad, reputed for his batting at Trinity, The little tearaway pacie soon blitzed his way into the Thomian under 9 team inspired, encouraged and coached by John Halangoda, and in the classrooms sang off the same hymn sheet as Pat Mearthy, Sathi Coomasamy, Donald Fairweather and Lucien de Zoysa.



Bertie Wijesinha - represented S. Thomas', SSC and Ceylon at cricket and was in Ceylon team in athletics in 1941.

I fast forward his “progress by the sea” to the year 1938 whence he captained the Thomian side which lost to Royal, Bertie resolved to make amends. Skippering the side for the second time, STC won all the matches leading upto the ‘Big Match’ before comprehensively hammering Royal in revenge for the year before. The skipper led the way with 63 and 70 topping it all with 4 for 56.

There was infinite promise in that analysis. Against the star studded Julian Cahn’s XI made up of Test stars born in the Commonwealth, the youngster slammed a lovely 62. The boy had arrived. That year the prodigy scored a thousand runs and took 19 wickets in just 7 school matches.

## **Tying knots**

Following excellent performances in club cricket besides anchoring Ceylon in the Gopalan Trophy matches against stiff South Indian opposition, Bertie was picked for Ceylon against Pakistan in 1949 and top scored with 29 in a total of 112 and topped it up with 5 for 99 with his medium pace. Bertie also represented Ceylon against Australia , West Indies and India .

At about this point of time he was pursuing lovely Dorothy Weerakoon, and top order batsmen, with equal passion, and had resounding success in both pursuits. In 1949 he inevitably tied the knot with Dorothy besides tying batsman in all sorts of knots. A time of blissful joy and happy perspiration! All this after he had represented the country in athletics in 1941, making him one of the four double internationals ever produced by this country. The others being C.T.A. Schafer, Ranil Abeynaike, and Dr. Buddy Reid rich company then.

## **Hat-tricks to begin and end**

Bowling was Bertie’s forte. In fact the shy teenager roused himself, with a hat-trick on debut against St.Benedict’s College in 1936, and retired his reputation also with a hat-trick in a club match at 63 years of age, plainly a triumph of the spirit. Bowling a lovely off stump line his bustling medium pace would swerve crisply to slip.

A whippet of a bowler, pounding in off a 15 yard run. His slight frame took on stature with the new ball in hand. With the shine on the cherry, the terrible threesome would polish off the top order, that triangle made up of Bertie, Fairlie Dalpethado and D.S. Jayasundera, the heart of the SSC attack. Bertie would go one better strangulating the batting in the middle overs with his flighty off spin, that would burst upon landing. So nimble in the field, Leslie Ames and George Duckworth, Captain and Manager of the visiting Commonwealth side both described Wijesinha as the best fielder they had seen on their entire tour of India , Pakistan and Ceylon .

## **Dorothy - the precious catch**

Most Guru’s are saturated with more theory than Darwin . Not so Bertie Sans coaching certificates to wave this way and that, his innate ability to point to the finer points of the game were obvious. In spite of which, gracious spouse Dorothy is delightfully ignorant as to the difference between a stump and a bat. This after 60 years of marriage to a legendary coach. She keeps a lovely house though, and her Spaghetti Bolognaisse is a major triumph. Coaching his

Alma Mater S.Thomas' to begin with he shifted tent to St.Benedict's College and thence to Trinity College .

His six years at St.Benedict's College were his sweetest, producing four champion schoolboy teams in the mid 60's. Whilst in the UK , he was invited to coach the Nottinghamshire Juveniles, many of his wards going on to play for the county.

He taught English and Latin in parallel to his cricket coaching adding heaps of value to those hallowed blackboards as well. Bertie's coaching was symbolised in Sidath Wettimuny's artistry, a technique that should have been carved in marble, eyes nailed to the seam, left elbow way up among the clouds, as the bat ran so sweetly through the ball, whilst Ian Botham ran out of expletives.

The hordes at Lord's rose in glorious appreciation for that big hundred. A huge portion of that ovation belonged to Bertie as well, is Sid's contention, entirely.

### **Farm and Milk the bowling**

With the willow he built a reputation for dour reliability, with his neat compact, crispy style.

A quick tumble of giant SSC wickets would bring the little right hander to the middle, to farm the strike and milk the bowling, besides ensuring that the tail did not lose its head.

### **Housewife's tweaking radio knobs**

If all that was not enough, the maestro took to commentating in harness with his team mate Lucien de Zoysa, enticing even housewife's and schoolgirls to tweak the radio knobs for commentaries on the Royal-Thomian, comprehensively elevating the stature of that particular "Big Match" lots of notches skywards for sure.

### **Proud dad**

In 1953 Bertie secured employment at Lake House in the capacity of the Sports Editor, crossing pens and sharing the canteen with the likes of Mervyn de Silva, Tarzie Witachchi, Denzil Peiris and H.D. Jansz among others. Runs and wickets don't pay your bills and feed your kids. With his brood growing like an accordian. Bertie took the passage to prosperity, securing employment at the Royal Military Supphes Department in Nottingham UK and enjoying every minute of the 20 years there.

The dimunitive legends is so utterly proud of his offspring Rohan, Nedra and Dameskh. The death of their daughter Maya, their precious, viva cious, eldest, was a particularly painful period for the Wijesinha's. No doubt their simple belief in the Christian faith strengthening their resolve to hang on to sanity.

## **Onwards to his 100**

We of the cricketing fraternity are indeed privileged to have shared the warmth of his friendship, sense of subtle humor, eloquence behind the mike, besides of course his ebullience on the cricket field. No more need be said as he marches towards his glorious 100 with the Blue Black and Blue fluttering so proudly and inseparably beside him, as always.