

THOMIAN RUGBY.... It hurts too much to sit back and watch

Written by Shanaka Amarasinghe

"All that is necessary for the triumph of evil, is for good men to do nothing" – Edmund Burke

When I joined S. Thomas' College in 1995 from S. Thomas' Preparatory School in Kollupitiya, I literally felt as if I was walking into a limitless world of opportunity. Coming from the sheltered, academic, disciplined grounding of Prep, with its sandpit of a play ground, 'College' as we called it, was the ultimate destination.



When I had my entrance interview with the then Warden, the late Mr. Neville De Alwis, I felt honoured to be accepted within its portals.

Rugby at S. Thomas' has been its lifeblood. When I walked into the College Form B Arts class I couldn't help but meet my namesake Shanaka 'Jakka' Jayawardena, who – when we became friends after some opening sparring – told me captaining the 1st XV was the only thing he had

wanted to do since he was 13. Jakka was capable of that and much more, but he single mindedly stuck to his focus, and braved a near career ending knee injury to have a storming 1997 season and captain in 1998. The fulfillment of his childhood dream.

Neither he nor his teammates lived in the gym. They did however, live and breathe rugby. When he wasn't slugging me off for being a geek it was all Jakka and I spoke of in class. Those boys didn't miss practice, they didn't have pretty little girls in short shorts to distract them, and they certainly wouldn't have let Facebook or their mobile phones take precedence over achieving that coloursmen's crest on their shorts.

I do realize however, that Facebook and mobiles and the girls are here to stay. To fight them would be an anachronistic, futile exercise. However, is it too much to expect that Thomian spirit to remain. The sense of camaraderie and brotherhood that was forged on the field to be as important as any teenybopper party? When I meet fellow Thomians from the 90's and early 2000's I don't fail to notice that they move around, not only with their classmates, but with their 1st XV buddies. Such is the bond. It was that spirit that didn't let Thomian teams be disgraced.

Since 1995, STC have won three Guneratne trophies in 16 attempts, under Hans Billimoria (1995), Gavin Jayasekera (2000) and Namal Rajapakse (2005). This year was supposed to be the fruition of the five year cycle. But the 38-12 reversal at the hands of a fresher laden

Royal side was hopefully the wake up call STC needed. Even in the years previously mentioned, Royal – despite being underdogs – put up a magnificent performance and were never outclassed. Even Gavin's marauding team of 2000 won by one score. STC should have won in 1996 but were beaten by Rukmal Gunathilaka's average Royal team. But that team too didn't get thrashed. In fact, not even Jivan Goonetillake's unexpected mauling at the hands of probably one of the best Royal sides ever in 2001, brought about the despondence I felt last Saturday. There is no shame in losing a luckless battle to the likes of Mohamed, Athukorale, Lewke, Hameed, Kaluaratchi, Jayasundera, Wijewardena and Dissanayake. With all due respect to this current crop of Royalists the teams of 2001/2 did not embarrass STC with their superlative displays. Even though they played their best match of the season, this Royal side embarrassed STC and of that they can be proud.

It was however, a bitter pill to swallow. Yet, it was one I was half expecting. At the beginning of the season I told last year's Royal coach Bilal Yusuf that I had a strong feeling Royal would win this year. This was at the height of the Thomian hype. Sadly, my hunch proved correct. I met Thomian captain Rajinda Gunasekera – an intelligent lad by all accounts – about 6 weeks ago, and told him if they continue to train the way they are training they will burn out by the end of the season. He would have none of it. And they burned out. There was no other way to describe the magnitude of the performance on Saturday. A leaden footed defence watched while captain in waiting 'Lema' Pathirana ran 60m to fashion breakaway tries for his team. The hustle and directness that was shown against St. Peter's was missing from the Kingswood game, as it was in the Royal game. The Thoras could barely win a scrum or a line out.

Why is this? Why are we 13-3 in the last decade and a half?

Firstly, let's take nothing away from Royal. They have produced outstanding rugby teams in 1998-9, 2001-2 and 2009. It is unfair to expect to have won those encounters. Funnily, though STC posted its highest score and came closest to winning in 2009 under Kapuwatte, against Dhason's Royalists. However, the other years have been 50/50 at worst on paper.

When someone beats you so comprehensively in any given time period, it is important that you look at your opponent and ask yourself what they are doing that you are not. I know for a fact that in the lead up to those amazing Royal teams of 2001-2, the very same 1st XV dons were coached at u 13 and 15 by Old Royalists who knew the fundamentals of the game, the traditions of the school and importance of adopting a long term view. The likes of Fazly Razik, Abdellah Yusuf and Rukmal Gunathilake to mention but a few, fashioned skilful players equipped with good basics, for the benefit of the senior coaches.

To say that STC has neglected its junior set up is to be charitable. Coaches are picked haphazardly, and are generally not much older than the teenagers they coach. It is time that proper, qualified old Thomians were allowed to coach at junior level with emphasis on playing more games, but not win at all costs. It must be a long term plan with none of this short term plastering over of cracks.

At 1st XV level STC need to find dedicated professionals with tenure of office. The coaches need to be told to produce the best they can while giving the students an education. Unfortunately, STC has succumbed to mercenary, greedy coaches who want to extend their life span and pay packet by trying to win at all costs. What is most unfortunate is that some old boys seem to have endorsed this view. Rugby coaching has suddenly become extremely lucrative and more and more mediocre apples are trying to fight their way into the basket. STC have suffered in the last two years with rumours about the team taking dodgy supplements. Be those rumours as they are, the facts are that supplements that were allowed last year was not 'recommended' by the powers that be this year. STC halted the official supply of the contentious supplements midway through the season. That the tail end of the Thomian season spiraled downward may be merely a coincidence. However, those who are responsible for procuring the professionals would do well to remember that 'when you sleep with dogs, you wake up with ticks'.

The manner in which Jivan Goonetillake and Viraj Prasantha – last year's knockout winning coaches – left much to be desired in terms of common courtesy. Not even a phone call to one of Thomian rugby's highest achievers of recent times, to say 'thanks for the trophy mate, but we've replaced you with a fitness trainer'. This leads me to question the bona fides of those in charge. Why is an old Thomian, winning coach not entitled to an extension, or at the very least a decent termination? Is it because he would not brook any interference? Is it because he didn't play the not so famous sons of famous fathers? I guess we'll never know.

The Thomians are also the only team to parachute a coach in mid season apart from erratic Wesley. After the Guneratne Massacre he questioned his own existence, as he is undermined by his own colleagues.

Also – in Thomian rugby – who is accountable for cock ups? Who is responsible for the very strong rumour going around that STC had lifted heavy weights the day prior to the Royal game? What sort of moron does that? And why would he be a rugby coach in those circumstances? Why is S. Thomas' one of the most intimidatory teams of this season? Why are they encouraged to mouth off at their opponents? Why, with more than ten colourmen from last year's knockout winning team, could we not mirror the same performance? Why were white flags hung in the away dressing for the match against Isipatana?

I have the questions – who from the College will answer them?

Warden Puddefoot is nary a year in the job. This is his first full rugby season – a game he knows a bit about. He described rugby at STC to me as a 'multi headed hydra'. In keeping with the mythological theme I would liken it also to the Aegean Stables. Warden Puddefoot's new broom must surely sweep these stables clean and employ those without vested interests, but interests instead in the boys and the game of rugby.

Defeat is a part of life, and it must be accepted graciously. But being the best we can be is

also an aspiration which we must teach our kids. Not to be winners at all costs. But to be the best within the traditions and values that Bishop Chapman would have expected of Thomians. All I want is a Thomian team that will make me proud like in 2001 and 2009 despite losing. A team that doesn't have ugly rumours hanging over its head. A team that is associated with able mentors. A team that can hold its head up proudly regardless of results and release into society 22 fully fledged Thomians, that their young schoolmates can aspire to and emulate.

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