

NEGOTIATING THE THIRTIES

Perceived changes to the game – a twenties perspective

Chapter nineteen discussed the state of the Colts at the outbreak of WWI. It is now an appropriate time to hear what a veteran of the golden era of Colts cricket, which had now come to an end, had to say about the changes to the game which had occurred since the war.

The Ceylon Green Book of 1932 carries an obituary of Michael Thomasz at the age of 67 years. He died at the General Hospital, Colombo, on the 1st of September 1931. It states that he was a member of the Colts Cricket Club, a prominent figure on the cricket field in the 'eighties and early 'nineties, who figured in the 'All-Ceylon' team against Lord Sheffield's team, which included Dr. W. G. Grace.

The centenary souvenir (1973: 89-90) carries an article by "Onlooker". The story is titled Prince of Points. Michael Thomasz of the Colts eleven. Played for Ceylon vs Lord Sheffield's XI – 1892¹. The article first appeared in the Sunday Observer of 15th September 1929 and was reproduced in the Ceylon Observer Sunday Illustrated of 6th September 1931 following Thomasz's death.

The "Onlooker" is either a pseudonym for either S.P. Foenander or A.W. Lorenz-Andree, probably the former. The interviewer states that he attended a game in 1892 when he would have been 9 years old. (Foenander was born in 1883.) Just as interesting as Thomasz's views are the interviewer's reminiscences –

Seeing Thomasz play and meeting him 33 years after

"Early in September two years ago I was privileged to have a chat at Lake House" with Michael Thomasz, "prince of points and the last of the famous Colts eleven of the eighties. ... As a boy I was one of those hero worshippers of the Colts cricket eleven that included Collie Kelaart, Michael and Paddy Thomasz, W. de Fransz, Lawrie Thomasz, Jackie and "C.O.W." Weinman and Eddie Ohlmus, all of whom have gone to their long rest. I saw all these players together with Allan Raffel, Tommy Kelaart and Don Robertson play against Lord Hawke's team on the Barrack Square in 1892. That was the first match I ever saw, and I have vivid recollections still of some notable incidents in that game in which F. Stanley Jackson, now Governor of Bengal and Col. C. Haseltine bowled with deadly effect for the touring team. When Lord Hawke visited Ceylon in 1925 and was entertained at a private party given in the Royal College Hall. One of the old cricketers he met and spoke to with much interest was Michael Thomasz, who had played against his team 33 years earlier."

¹ This is one of the many articles the chronicler dug up prior to leaving for Australia. He believes that this article was dug up from the archives of a colleague of his at the Times of Ceylon, Mr. Moldridge.

The interview of Thomasz

"A POPULAR PLAYER

.... Here is what I wrote about Michael Thomasz just two years ago: -

There are still happily amongst us a few veteran cricketers who keep in close touch with the game as it is played today and who while full of praise for the past are not slow to point out the improvements which have come about in recent years.

One of the 'old brigade' is Michael Thomasz, who belongs to a family of cricketers, the name of Thomasz like that of the Kelaarts, van Geyzels, de Sarams, Gunasekeras, Josephs and Weinmans, is one highly honoured in the annals of Ceylon cricket.

I first saw Michael Thomasz when he was at the Zenith of his fame, as a cricketer in 1892. He was one of a famous team of Colts cricketers who won their matches mainly by good fielding and excellent bowling.

THE INVINCIBLE COLTS

Michael Thomasz or "Mike", as he has been familiarly known, was one of the Colt's team that proved invincible in the eighties and early nineties. He had a brother named Paddy, who was a pocket Hercules. Paddy died a few years ago, to the great regret of all sportsmen who knew him as a keen cricketer and golfer and an ardent lover of bridge. There were other members of the family like Freddy and Bonny Thomasz, who passed away early after having made their mark as cricketers.

Only "Mike" survives and this hale and hearty veteran is still able to take a practical interest in cricket. Two Saturdays ago he acted as umpire when the Colts played the C.C.C.

"PRINCE OF POINTS"

Michael Thomasz's fame as a cricketer rests chiefly on his exploits as a fieldsman at point. He was marvel in that position. No man was more daring in his day. When T.J. Andrews the Australian fielded silly point in the tests of 1926 in England to Mailey and Grimmet I heard old cricketers say that he was courting death? But Andrews risked the danger and brought off more than one wonderful catch.

Michael Thomasz in his day was just as adventurous.

P.F. HADOW, the well known old Harrovian and Champion Tennis player of England, once paid a very high tribute to Thomasz, who caught him out twice in a match at point. It was Hadow who called him the "Prince of Points".

The bowler off whom "Mike" made his marvelous catches was Charlie Heyn.

In the interview Thomasz makes some interesting comments about the state of the game in 1929. He opines that interest in cricket is waning despite the improved facilities. He seems to imply that the cricketers of the day were too pampered and compares modern grounds with the bumpy wickets of Racquet Court, Galle Face or Barrack Square. He also says that except for cricketers like Dr. Gunasekera and E. Kelaart², fielders are too casual. A part of the malaise according to him was the competition cricket faced from sports such as hockey, soccer, tennis, golf, and racing. He notes the thinning of crowds at cricket games and the fewer cricketers who turn up for practice and the indifference they show. He compares this with the cricketers of his time who practiced twice a day. Finally, he claims that “prepared” pitches spoil the game.

Thomasz is clearly looking back to the times when the Colts versus NCC rivalry drew large crowds prior to WWI. But crowd interest in cricket has always been subject to downturns. This is the case even today despite huge participation rates and unprecedented public interest. And 93 years after he made those comments, in 2022, there are more sports played in Sri Lanka than ever before, and television and computers are added distractions.

Nostalgia for a golden past

In fact, every generation looks back on those that come after it, criticise their commitment and envy the rewards they receive from it and the constantly improving facilities. And few would have agreed, even in 1929, that the plain grass wickets of Racquet Court and other grounds was better for the game than properly prepared turf wickets and mat wickets.

And it is doubtful that the commitment of cricketers in 1929 was any less than that of cricketers of the late nineteenth century. F.C. de Saram was just completing his school cricket career and players of the calibre of Chippy Gunasekera, M.K. Albert and Sargo Jayawickrema had already made their mark. And when in retirement they are likely to have reechoed Thomasz’s remarks about the current crop of cricketers being less dedicated and more pampered than they were in their prime.

Every generation is uncomfortable with change and often perceives change as being detrimental. Nor can they anticipate the future which makes a mockery of their pessimism. For instance, the facilities and gear that school cricketers of today have access to today make what those who played in the sixties had to work with seem pretty basic in comparison. And during the sixties, with no television and electronic gadgetry to distract the chronicler, he thought nothing of spending entire weekends attending cricket matches (school or club) and catching up with likeminded friends. Today, school cricket struggles to pull in the same crowds. Yet, it would be false to assume that cricket is dying because ODI and T20 games attract decent crowds.

² He is likely to be referring to Edward, Colvin Kelaart’s son.

Changes are often unpredictable

During the early seventies, when cricket was still considered an elite sport associated for the most part with English speaking Christians and which led S.L.F.P. politicians to declare that cricket grounds were better off being converted to market gardens, who could have anticipated that cricket would become a Sinhalese Buddhist game and therefore the national game. To quote from an article of the chronicler which appeared in the 2014 Royal cricket souvenir -

“The inception of the Royal-Thomian one hundred and thirty-five years ago gave rise to the term “big match”, a term as unique to Sri Lanka, as ‘test’ is to Anglo-Australian cricketing rivalry. Amidst social change and upheaval, and ideological attacks on cricket as a colonial legacy, the game has shed its elitist image and become the national game. Correspondingly, the big-match concept has taken hold in all urban areas in a manner unmatched by any other cricket playing country. No cricketing concept in the world has refashioned something borrowed from England and made it its own, and then used it as a cultural unifier, to bring all language groups, religions, and ethnicities together. The “big match” is now a national phenomenon with an indigenous flavour, and no longer frowned upon as an elite event personifying the values of an English-speaking minority. The Royal - Thomian has a rich and all-encompassing heritage which enables a person like me to embrace it without apologies.”

Thomasz thought that the batting had improved because of the coaching they received in England. He says that only Greswell and Horan were the equal of the bowlers of the eighties and nineties. He names O. van Hoff, Rozayro, L.H. Gay and A.O. Whiting as the wicket keepers from his time who stood out and presumably were superior to those around in 1929.

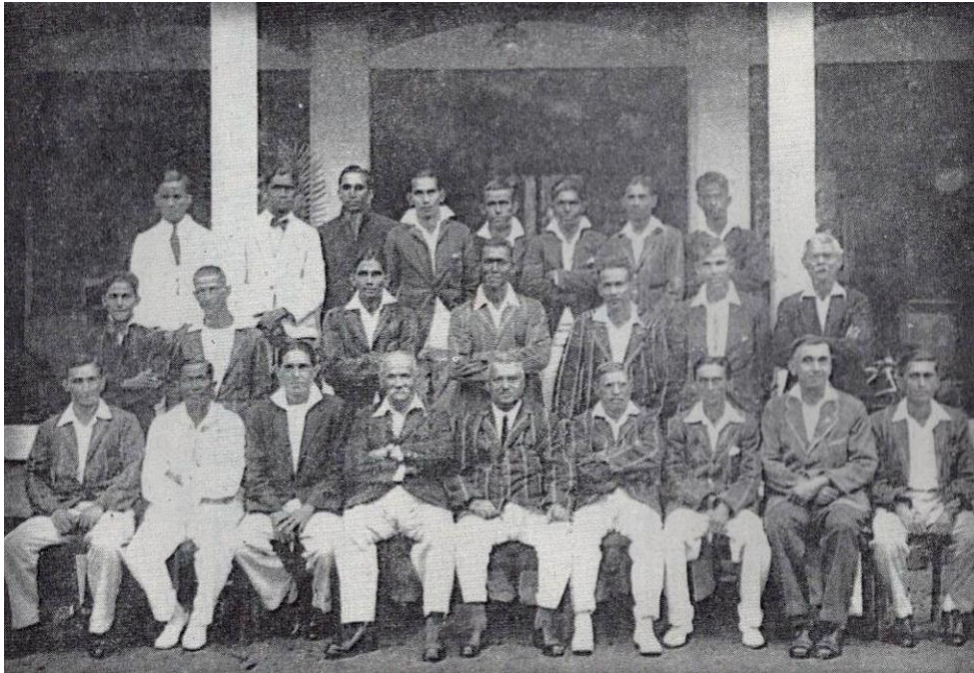
Thomasz makes an interesting reference to Greswell who was the best European cricketer to have played in Ceylon. (Refer appendix IV). He played county cricket intermittently between stints in Ceylon and if he had remained in England, he probably would have made the English team. Greswell learnt about the bowling feats of Tommy Kelaart from his father who played cricket in Ceylon in the 1880s. Greswell and Kelaart first met in 1910.

Finally, Thomasz makes an intriguing remark about a jealous feeling between club and players. Was he talking about the situation then prevailing at the Colts?

The Colts in the thirties

By the thirties the Colts had lost her grip on the national competition. It is not that she didn't have good cricketers but other clubs that came in her wake, notably the SSC and NCC were attracting the cream of the crop. The Burgher community were still producing good cricketers, but so were the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Anglicisation through cricket had cut across all communities.

THE SIXTIETH ANNIVERSARY, 1933



Seated (L to R): J.R. Murray, A.C. Amath, V.S. de Kretser, Dr. S.P. Joseph, Dr. Allan Raffel, A.T. Pollocks, C.W. Van Geyzel, S.P. Foenander, B. de Kretser
Standing (First Row): A.E. Assauw, A.M. Caldera, D.W.L. Lieversz, L.V. Jayaweera, E.H. Joseph, L.A. Joseph, S. Oorloff
Standing (2nd Row): H.L. de Kretser, A. Meadows, W. Aiyadurai, E.G.L. Lieversz, P.A. Swan, F. Melder, D.V.L. de Silva

The 1933 photograph of the club shows a mix of the old, notably Dr. Raffel, and the new. As many as six of the eleven outstanding Colts cricketers of the club's first hundred years, as listed in the centenary souvenir, are in the above photo. Their game has been described in detail in preceding chapters.

The front row has many players from the golden era, notably, Joseph, Raffel, Pollocks and Amath. The front row represents many of the old school, the standing rows their successors, and new blood, including the chronicler's uncle Douglas Lieversz and his father Eardley, and Carl van Geyzel. Eardley Lieversz Snr left for England and didn't return until after WWII, by which time his best years were behind him.

People like D.W.L. Lieversz, B. de Kretser, Carl van Geyzel and L.V. Jayaweera were ready to step up and take up the mantle. But how good was the second-generation talent around them?

At the time of the centenary in 1973 only Douglas and Eardley Lieversz Snr were alive from the persons in the photo. Douglas Lieversz knew what he was talking about when he had an input into finalising the key Colts cricketers over the years, because he had interacted with most of them. He may or may not have met Tommy Kelaart, but Kelaart's achievements were known to all.

Douglas Lieversz remarked that he had met stalwarts such as Dr. Allan Raffel, A.T. Pollocks, Carl van Geyzel, H.O.W. Mayo and his cousin A.E.S. "Prince" Schoorman, the first three mentioned being seated in the front row of the picture. Mayo is in the group photograph taken at the opening of the pavilion in 1924. Douglas attributes his loyalty to the club and love for the game to "Prince" who first took him to the club when he was 14 years old (in 1920). Prince kept wickets for the Colts and was an ex-Trinitian, not unlike his nephew, Bobby Schoorman. If this chronicle was commenced before 1996 Douglas Lieversz would have been of invaluable assistance.

A.C. Amath scored a century for the Malay C.C. against the Colts, the first Ceylonese to do so. V.S. de Kretser joined the Colts straight from Royal but remained there for a short while before moving to the BRC.

Bertram de Kretser and L.V. Jayaweera kept the Colts flag flying during the twenties when the SSC and the NCC were the dominant teams. Foenander (1941) says that when de Kretser and Jayaweera partnered each other they reminded old timers of the days when Kelaart and Raffel, had a deadly impact³. Jayaweera played for St. Anthony's in the early twenties and played for the Colts in the twenties and early thirties. Jayaweera had achieved nine separate bowling hat tricks during his career in cricket. In 1927 he replaced C. Horan in the national team.

³ Warwick de Kretser sent the chronicler a cutting of a Mercantile match between Brooke Bond and Bartleets. Bertram de Kretser and Edward Kelaart (son of Colvin) took five and four wickets respectively in dismissing Brooke Bond for 12 runs.

L.V. JAYAWEERA



Courtesy of Foenander
1941

Jayaweera was also renowned for his prowess as a boxer and schools compete against each other for the L.V. Jayaweera Memorial Cup trophy. St Anthony's and Wesley also play against each other in cricket for the L.V. Jayaweera trophy donated by Vivien Jayaweera, the son of L.V. Jayaweera. Writing in 1941 Foenander states that Jayaweera was much faster than the average left hander.

De Kretser, who captained the Colts from 1930 and 1933, and Jayaweera, represented the Colts in the 1924 game against the combined schools at the Havelock Park (Foenander 1941: 56-7). The combined colleges included L.D.S. Gunasekera, D.W.L. Lieversz , N.S. Joseph and H. Meendeniya from Royal. Chippy Gunasekera was a member of the S.S.C. teams of 1924 and 1925 who were club champions. The combined colleges also included N.M. Perera and V.S. Cooke (whose dancing school the chronicler attended in the late sixties).

Assauw was a right arm bowler while Caldera was famous for the hurricane hitting. E.H. Joseph is the nephew of S.P., E.A, and D. Joseph. J.W. Aiyadurai, an ex-captain of Trinity, was an all-rounder who once scored 81 against the Police in less than half an hour. P.A. Swan attended St. Benedicts and bowled left-handed.

The national cricket competition

It was only in 1937 when a structured inter-club first-class tournament came into being, known as the Daily News Trophy but changed to the P Saravanamuttu Trophy in 1950-51. The title subsequently changed its name four times. The winners in domestic cricket are summarised in espncriinfo.com (05/10/2006)

“Domestic cricket in Sri Lanka is played between clubs recognised by the Sri Lankan cricket board. First-class cricket in Ceylon, as it was known before 1972, was initially restricted to matches played by combined Ceylon teams overseas or against touring international sides. England and Australia would often stopover in Colombo en route to their respective destinations and play matches. The first such match dates back to 1882, against the touring England side. It was only in 1937 when a structured inter-club first-class tournament came into being, known as the Daily News Trophy. The title was changed to P Saravanamuttu Trophy in 1950-51 and then the sponsors came into the picture in 1985-86, and it was renamed the Lakspray Trophy, and was later renamed the Sara Trophy eight seasons later. The tournament changed its title again in 1998-99 to the Premier Trophy.”

The list of winners is presented in appendix V.

Sponsors came into the picture in 1985-86, and it was renamed the Lakspray Trophy, to be renamed the Sara Trophy eight seasons later. The tournament changed its title again in 1998-99 to the Premier Trophy. The Colts first won the main trophy in 1991-92 and followed this up with wins in 1999-00, 2001-02, 2008-09 and 2011-12. The Sinhalese Sports Club has won the tournament the most number of times, followed by the NCC, Bloomfield, the CCC and the Colts.

The chronicler remembers the Daily News trophy as the third-tier competition. And in his time the first-class competition was known as the Sara trophy.

Although prior to 1938 no trophy was awarded there was nonetheless a club championship because the Sinhalese Sports Club were declared club champions in 1914 and then again 1924 and 1925 (SSC 1993). The SSC first defeated the Colts in 1913, at the Racquet Court. It may be said that the Colts were the strongest club until the outbreak of WWI. But by the time she moved to Havelock Park the Colts had probably lost the dominance it had over her rivals. (This paralleled the decline in European cricket standards vis a vis the Ceylonese.) It was only in 1992, 119 years after it came into being, that the Colts first won a premier competition.

At the 60th anniversary of the club, with many players from the golden era actively involved in the club, no one could have anticipated that the following forty years would be marked by a premiership drought, with the club never being competitive except for the 1962-63 season. But one cannot anticipate social change, the movement of wealth and infrastructure development – all of which affected a club’s ability to attract the best talent and develop it. Reputation and nostalgia are insufficient to bolster competitiveness.

The SSC moved to its present location in 1952. It was previously the location of an aerodrome. If the SSC had remained at Vihara Maha Devi Park, it would have lacked the space to expand and utilize the funds available to it. When the SSC swimming pool was opened in the late fifties it was a clear indication that the SSC was developing an infrastructure that would attract the best players to it.

The Bloomfield began to enjoy great success as a club after moving to a location at the old Racecourse. The CCC inherited a modern infrastructure from its British builders and owners who modelled it along the lines of traditional sports grounds in England. And the CCC is now the third most successful club in Ceylon cricket, enjoying success after its Ceylonisation. Maybe they should hang a photo of ex-prime minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, their unsung heroine, on its walls.

The first time the Colts began to acquire a modern look was after Mathivanan got involved. Chapter 53 discusses in detail the process by which the architecture of the Colts began to change.

Both the SSC and the NCC have swimming pools. They both had space to expand. The SSC had an immense amount of frontage while the NCC had vacant space to one side.

Maybe the Colts erred in moving to its present location in 1924. It has always seemed a bit cramped for space.