

THE FIFTIES – CRISIS AND TRAGEDY

Absorbing the smells of cricket

Thanks to his Dad the chronicler spent more time at the NCC in the fifties. It was there that he was introduced to the smells of cricket - chunam, linseed oil and freshly mown grass. His father had felt unappreciated at the Colts and threw his lot in with the NCC. So, the chronicler got to know persons like Jimmy Vanderkone, the Obeyesekera twins and grounds man Junaid before he became familiar with Colts figures.

The chronicler's Dad claimed to be cricket or ground secretary at the N.C.C. He used to relate a story of how, on one occasion, four teams turned up at the grounds on the same day. But the chronicler can verify know that there was constant flow of used cricket balls, some with a reasonable shine on one side, into the house.

Memories of the fifties

The chronicler's earliest contacts with the Colts ground were when his Dad played in a cricket match, which was the only time he saw him bat, and when he twice attended a wrestling show with Primo Carnera (1906-1967) as the main attraction. And it was on one of those nights that he first heard "In a little Spanish town", played over the loudspeaker system.

But the chronicler's most compelling memories are that of dad using his wrists, not to stroke the ball, but to scratch his fellow Colts. The chronicler's Dad joined the NCC because he felt that the club did not give him his due. But while he thought he was a better cricketer than his elder brother he nonetheless defended his brother from slurs. Therefore, even before he rejoined the Colts in the early sixties, he was wont to get into fights with those he felt was disparaging the chronicler's uncle. The chronicler once witnessed his father and a maternal relative of the latter, Bobby Schoorman, exchange blows on the rolled mat in the front of the Colts pavilion in the fifties. (Much later, in the late sixties, he came home with scrapes after attending a general meeting and it was later revealed that he had taken on Tita Nathanielsz at the bar after the latter had criticised his brother's failure to maintain order at a meeting.) But, according to a former Colts captain now domiciled in Australia, the chronicler's Dad and Tita had scrapes even the fifties. He referred to the chronicler's Dad as a "Gini pook" (hot tempered) but whose actions were well within reason because there were characters in the Colts who were difficult to deal with. The source defended the chronicler's Dad as someone who called a spade a spade.

To the chronicler Colts in the fifties was wrestling town: his dad versus Bobby Schoorman, and Primo Carnera versus a tiny Dara Singh, whom he was nervous for. Italian born Primo Carnera was heavyweight boxing champion of the world from June 29, 1933, when he knocked out Jack Sharkey in six rounds in New York City, until June 14, 1934, when he was knocked out by Max Baer in 11 rounds, also in New York City.

Sources of cricketers

A.V. Fernando coached Wesley in the early fifties and as a result many ex-Wesleyites joined the Colts. The most notable were Abu Fuard, Samsudeen, Norman de La Harpe, D.B.C. Mack and Brian, Herman and Radley Claessen. St. Peter's was another source of young Colts cricketers at this time (Warwick de Kretser, pers com.)

As young kids

Darrell and Brian Lieversz shared some of their memories of the Colts in the fifties with the chronicler. Their recollection of some of the entertainment which took place on the club grounds overlaps with that of the chronicler. To quote Darrell –

“My father played for the Colts Cricket Club and I often used to accompany him for training at the nets just to watch him practice. I was very young then, maybe about nine or ten years old, and I used to field the balls that were hit to the outfield. Occasionally I was allowed to bowl to him towards the end of the practice sessions. All I did was bowl as fast as I could with a run up that was longer than everyone else's, including Norman de La Harpe, thinking that a longer run up would generate more speed. It was here that a good friend of my father, A.V.Fernando (a sports journalist) showed me how to hold the ball with the seam upright. One day at the end of play in a game that my father had participated in, he took me to the centre wicket, replanted one stump, and pulled out a brand-new cricket ball from his pocket. He gave it to me and said, “If you can knock that stump in one over (6 balls) you can have the ball”. It was the first new ball I had ever handled, and it must have been sheer luck because I knocked it over with my first ball and I took the ball home with me. I still have the ball with me.

THE FIRST NEW BALL OF A TEN YEAR OLD



Courtesy of Darrell Lieversz

It was my father who inspired me to play cricket. While he was the President of the Colt's Cricket Club, he was also Chairman of the Selection Committee of the Board of Control for Cricket in Ceylon for many years. However, he dutifully resigned from the committee as soon as I (his son) approached the cricket scene.

The Havelock Rugby Club had a small cabin like structure located at the corner of Havelock Park. It was used as a pavilion during the rugby season until much later when a proper building was built and the club flourished to become a leading Rugby Club. This area and part of the Colts cricket field was frequently used for carnivals promoted by the famous Mr. Donovan Andre. These carnivals regularly included many foreign attractions. Using my father's influence, I had access to ring side seats at the many wrestling contests that featured world famous wrestlers such as Dara Singh, King Kong, Primo Carnera, Wong Bok Lee to name a few. One year Mr. Andre presented "Holiday on Ice" where an actual ice rink was built with a refrigeration system that maintained the ice surface for several days. Again, due to my father's connections with the Colts, my sister Valerie was invited to present a bouquet of flowers to the star of the show at the opening ceremony.

As a child I remember the wonderful Children's Christmas parties that were held each year. Thanks to donations from some very wealthy members, no expenses were spared where entertainment, refreshments and gifts were concerned. One year Santa arrived in a helicopter which thrilled everyone young and old.

I learnt to ride my first two wheeled bicycle on the Colts ground and remember how my father gave me an initial push to start me off and away I went, but I did not know how to stop. I was forced to keep on going in never ending circles using much of the cricket outfield until my father was able to catch up and bring me safely to a standstill.

I remember Finlay Ingleton and other daredevil members around the bar challenging each other at motorcycle races around Havelock Park. Very often the bikes used to get bogged down in sand at the far end of the ground where the tennis courts used to be."

Brian summarized his experiences in the following manner –

"We've had association with the club since childhood, thanks to our wonderful parents. I remember the Tombola nights they arranged where we met up with the families of other devoted members.... we just 'mucked' around till we were of age to actually join in the rounds of Tombola...good fun nevertheless.

I remember the big-time wrestling show that was organised on the Club grounds, where we became familiar with the likes of Primo Carnera, and the popular Dara Singh. There was also the Skating show 'Holiday on Ice'...I think it was titled. That was probably the first time I'd seen Skating on Ice ... it was an amazing experience.

Then there were the nights of hanging around our parents while they sat out on the grounds in a circle of chairs ... indulging in a lot of alcohol consumption!! and talk.

I remember one night I noticed one of the cars had a light on...it seemed strange to me as it seemed to be in the engine. I tried to tell Dad or anybody !!!...but I guess the topic of discussion was too interesting that I was completely ignored ...till the 'glow' in the car engine increased to a greater proportion that it got everybody's attention... the car was on fire! This resulted in frantic efforts by everyone there to control it and finally put it out. I cannot remember whose car it was."

The Colts divided

A lack of proper facilities, particularly in relation to practice, a problem which persisted into the seventies, was what held the club back. But what set the club back in the early fifties was a split in the cricket team which led to the departure of key players. The events were recalled to the chronicler by Trevor Jansz and Norman de la Harpe.

In 1951 Tita Nathanielsz challenged Willie Jayatileke for the captaincy. As a result the latter resigned and left for the N.C.C. Hugh and Fred Aldons, and Stanley Oorloff, left for the B.R.C. followed later by Bobby Schoorman who was with the Colts until at least the end of the 1954-55 season.

At this point the minnows of the club, Trevor Jansz and Owen Kreltszheim, took over as secretaries and held the club together until 1962. With support from Douglas Lieversz, Clarence Schoorman, H.R.V. Elders and A.V. Fernando, they set about rebuilding the club. The last named, who was coaching Wesley, played a key role in bringing Wesley cricketers over to the club. In particular, the Claessen brothers Radley, Brian and Herman)¹, Samsudeen and Musafer. The Wesley of the early fifties was a formidable cricket side.

¹ Radley Lorenz (b. 15.11.1931), Elton Brian (b. 27.07.1934) and Herman Granville (b. 24.9.1937) were the youngest children in a family of five boys and one girl who died at three years of age. There were two elder siblings, Douglas Julian (24.06.1925) and Hector Andrew (30.11.1926) who do not seem to have made their mark in cricket. Their father Julian Granville, an engineer, married at the Wolvendaal Church on 24th April 1922.

WESLEY COLLEGE 1ST XI, 1952-3



L-R Standing: Patrick Shockman, T. Alalasunderam, Arthlow Chapman, Abu Fuard, Bryan Perera, Lou Adihetty, Neil Gallagher
L-R Seated: Musaffer (Wicket Keeper), A.V. Fernando (Coach) Radley Claessen (Captain), C.J. Oorloff (Principal), Mr JLF de Mel (Games Master), Bryan Claessen, Ansar Fuard.
(Samsudeen – he and Bryan Claessen played for Sri Lanka while in College – is missing from this photo)
Courtesy of Wesley Old Boys website

Three persons in the above photo turned out for the Colts, namely, Abu Fuard, Radley and Brian Claessen. Samsudeen, who is not in the picture, was playing for the Colts in the early sixties. Norman de la Harpe was another Wesleyite who represented the Colts in the fifties.

Radley Claessen was at Wesley until 1952 and played for the Colts until October 1958, when he, his wife and infant daughter left for Australia. Bryan and Radley played for the Club for many years whilst still in school which makes it likely that they played for the Colts in the late forties before the split. They played along with players such as Willy Jayatileka, Bobby Schoorman, Tita Nathanielsz and the Aldons brothers. Radley and Bryan captained Wesley, in 1952 and 1953, respectively. Radley took over from Derrick Mack (who also played for the Colts and was living in Sydney in 2014). Bryan captained Wesley the following year.

Nathanielsz was out of the game due to injury in 1952 and Trevor Jansz captained the side in his absence and continued the rebuilding process. Nathanielsz did much for Colts cricket as captain (1951, 1953-56) and later in the seventies as President, and as a patron until he passed away.

Nathanielsz and Jansz both became honorary life members. Nathanielsz remained an active Colt until he died in 2009, aged 89 years. Jansz passed away in Australia 2022.

However, by the late fifties, the Wesley contingent, except for Abu Fuard and Samsudeen, were no longer with the Colts, most of them having emigrated to Australia. The Claessen brothers, Norman de la Harpe, de Kretser and Lorenz Ebert, all Wesleyites, had left the island. Mack played cricket for the Ceylon navy before he left for Australia in 1970 and played some cricket in the Royal Australian navy.

Tragedy strikes

On 2nd June 1956 a drunken driver crashed onto the motor bike ridden by Bryan Claessen with Herman as the pillion rider on Galle Road. Herman had treated Bryan with his first pay packet from Collettes Limited, Borella. The accident killed Herman who was 18 years and 8 months of age (born 24th September 1937)².

Bryan was also seriously injured in the accident. He recovered but didn't play for the Colts again. He migrated to Australia in 1957 and recommenced his cricket career by playing for South Perth cricket club. He subsequently moved to South Australia and played for the Sturt and Prospect cricket clubs.

A Thomian friend of the chronicler, Ganesh Bala, recalls accompanying the chronicler's father to emergency. They were met by a nurse who exclaimed in Sinhalese that the victim was gone.

Herman was a clever left-arm spinner and was tagged the Ernie Toshack. His brother Radley describes him as follows –

'Over 6 foot tall He had an impeccable high arm action and was able to successfully "swing" with the new ball as well bowl spinners with the old ball as a left arm bowler. Although he was an indifferent batsman and fielder, his prowess with the ball was considered an asset to any side and he was an automatic choice in many instances at the Selection Table'

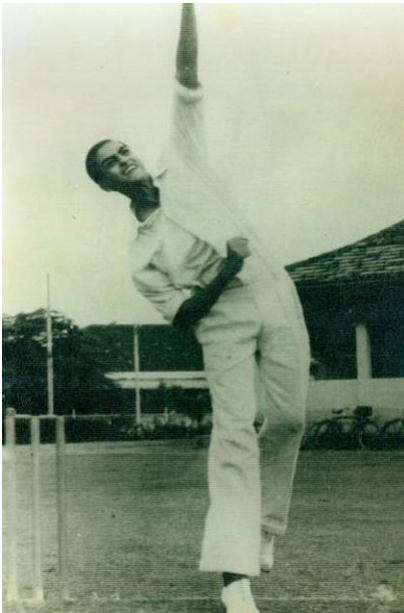
² Both Bryan and Herman were seriously injured although Herman lost his life. Herman was operated on at the general hospital after sustaining a head injury. Bryan ended up at the Sulaiman private hospital with all expenses covered by his employer, Bosanquet & Skrine. The orthopedic surgeon Mr Muller even contemplated amputating his leg.

Warwick de Kretser has in his possession a copy of the photograph which was unveiled at the Colts pavilion in 1956. The chronicler received a copy of the copy for inclusion in this document.

The photo was unveiled by Mr A.E. Christoffelsz, the club president. Amongst those present at the unveiling ceremony were Herman's father and mother (Julian and Mabel), his brothers (Douglas, Hector, Radley and Bryan), A.V. Fernando, Doughie Lieversz, Tita Nathanielsz, and many others (R Claessen pers com). It is believed that Herman Claessen was the youngest member of the Colts (or of any other club for that matter) to be honoured in this way.

During this time Mr Ariaratnam (or Ariam as he was known) was the secretary/treasurer of the club. Somapala was the affable barman at the time.

HERMAN CLAESSEN



Courtesy of Warwick de Kretser

HERMAN CLAESSEN, AT REST, KANATTE CEMETERY



Courtesy of Eardley Lieversz

The photo used to hang in the boardroom which overlooked the road which connected different parts of Havelock Park. Every institution has a poignant aspect to it and this picture was one which never failed to affect the chronicler emotionally. His eyes used to set on this photo every time he was at the board room. It embodied a life cut short tragically and to this day he is moved whenever he recalls that photo. It was the sort of image one normally associates with the homes of those affected by war. But to see such an image in peace time made one feel vulnerable.

The picture was taken by Mervyn Fernando, a Times of Ceylon photographer, who did work for the Colts. Smaller copies of the photograph were distributed amongst players close to the deceased, one of whom was Warwick de Kretser.

Sadly, the chronicler couldn't locate the picture when he attended the club in March 2014. It was there in 1973 and still extant in 1980-81 when the chronicler paid a few visits to the club. Eyewitnesses attest to the photo hanging on the walls as late as 2000. One can hope that the current officialdom will endeavor to make amends. (Claessen's photo is not the only one to go missing. The same fate seems to have befallen the life size photo of Tommy Kelaart.)

The chronicler stumbled upon the grave of Herman Claessen on 2nd March 2024. A picture of his face is attached to the cross which stands on the memorial and is in fairly good condition.

Radley also provided me with an intriguing group photo of a Wesley junior team and its opponents, the Hills School, Nuwara Eliya, which mainly catered to the children of British expatriates. Herman Claessen was a diminutive nine years of age which means that the game took place in 1947. Bryan Claessen captained the side, and the two Claessens between them trounced the elite English side. Bryan scored the bulk of the runs while Herman took the wickets. Radley Claessen was the scorer.

WESLEY VERSUS THE HILLS SCHOOL, NUWARA ELIYA



Middle row extreme right – Herman Claessen, Seated third from right – Bryan Claessen
Courtesy of Radley Claessen

The photograph is autographed on the back by the Reverend James Cartman (the Wesley Principal) with the words 'With many thanks for your help with our Wesley boys'. It was addressed to Radley Claessen.

The mystery shield

While going through his picture files Trute's son in law came across a photo of the shield below. It sits on a chair, the seat of which is made of rattan as was the custom in Sri Lanka until at least the seventies. This points to the picture being taken in Sri Lanka.

THE VANDERWERT SHIELD



Courtesy of Laurie and Gail Robson

The shield is referred to as the Vanderwert Shield which is presented by Doughie and Trute to the cricketer of the year. When one zooms in it possible to discern the Colombo Colts Cricket Club etched on the top panel.

Everything points to this being a shield donated to the Colts Cricket Club in the fifties by the two brothers. Douglas Vanderwert was the honorary treasurer of the club from 1953 to 1956 before he migrated to Australia in the fifties.

One is curious as to the fate of this shield. Is it still awarded? Was it ever awarded? Is it still in existence?

Trute Vanderwert left Sri Lanka in 1966. It is probable that he would have superintended the award of this shield until he left.

Again, this gesture is another example of the devotion to the club on the part of individuals who neither qualify as either icons or stalwarts. Trute Vanderwert passed away in 2012 and the chronicler wasn't inclined to discuss Colts matters with him when he was alive.

Box plans

During his club career and his five years playing cricket for "The Times of Ceylon", Radley Claessen used the abdominal guard ("Box") worn by Douglas Lieversz when he represented All Ceylon. It bore the words "With love – Dougie" and according to the new owner brought him a lot of luck. It was donated to his brother Bryan together with his College blazer when the latter moved to Tailem Bend, where he planned to establish a Wesley-Colts cricketing museum, but he sadly passed away in 2010 before he could accomplish his objective.

The matter was brought up with Doughie's sons stating that if he had donated his box to them, they might have turned into better batsmen. It was learnt that Darrell inherited the last "box" his father wore. It was a pink Litespace box made from plastic that required a special Litespace jock strap. The jock strap had a little pouch to accommodate the box, which was slipped into whenever required. He used it regularly until another wearer of the pink box (Siri Jayaratne the Royal wicket keeper) was hit by a "thunder bolt" from Josephian fast bowler Bryan Perumal. The box cracked and failed to perform the job it was designed for, namely, to protect the sensitive area. Douglas Lieversz immediately replaced it with a new "normal" box made from metal. Not unlike the Litespace box it had no straps and could be used as a slip-in type using the same Litespace jockstrap.

Darrell's younger brother never inherited a box but was taken to Chands, Fort, to purchase his first box. Douglas Lieversz told the girl who served them that he wanted to buy an abdominal guard which confused her. But when he explained that it was for cricket, the penny dropped and she replied with an obvious sense of relief 'Oh, you mean a ball guard!!!'

Leaving the fifties behind

When the fifties came to a close the chronicler had very little to show by way of cricket achievements. In his only game for Bradby House (Royal primary) he gave away 16 to 17 byes and scored a duck, being caught at slip off a leg spinner. His Dad's campaign to overcome his son's timidity by inviting outgoing classmates with cricketing skills and *elan* such as Ranjit Gunasekera, Glen van Langenberg and C.J. van Twest home to "spend the day", had proved to be a miserable failure.

But the chronicler had come to love cricket and books on cricket. His first serious reading was the cricket books Dad brought home. Len Hutton's Just my story and Alan Fairfax's The science of cricket were two books he browsed through frequently. And during the 1958-59 ashes series he became an Australian cricket supporter and have remained one ever since. And most importantly, he was chosen to enter Royal College. His greatest fear was therefore overcome.

In the chronicler's mind he had been too naughty to enter heaven. Although these remarks will no doubt appear frivolous and tongue-in-cheek, the chronicler honestly believed that he had overstepped the line, even if this was based on merely being pulled up by his mother and not attending church on a regular basis. As punishment for his sins, he feared that God would consign him to the wilderness of Thurstan, Carey or Greenlands, and deny him entry to the school of his father, uncle and paternal cousins. Redemption through penance came in the form of a burst appendix which was removed by Dr. Drogo Austin in Operating Theatre C of General Hospital, Colombo. He recuperated for a week in the same room at the Merchant's ward in which, about a fortnight earlier, on September 26th, the Prime Minister of Ceylon had succumbed to his bullet wounds and had been left vacant because of superstition on the part of subsequent patients. After his near-death experience and dodging the ghosts of Banders, he felt that he had cleansed himself of his sins and earned the moral right to enter Royal College. However, his pain was in vain for divine intervention wasn't necessary. Quite a few students rode on the back of Anura Banders, for whose benefit, it is rumoured, the entry criteria were lowered.

SWRD's assassination and the chronicler's operation aside, 1959 was a good year. The M.C.C. lost four tests to Australia and Benaud became the chronicler's alter ego, thanks to his flamboyant captaincy and mastery of the difficult art of leg-spin. However, nothing caused the chronicler more excitement than the rugby final between CR & FC and Dimbulla when a late try by either Kavan Rambukwella or ex-Royalist Lionel Almeida, in the dying moments enabled CR to tie the game, much to the delight of Winston Serasinghe and Percy Silva (legal draftsman), the club's cheer leaders, who roared in approval. Much too much for hooker F. Omar's father who suffered a heart attack. Ranjit Gunasekera, the chronicler's classmate, and captain to be in Royal cricket, despite being a cricketing savant, was nonetheless inspired to pen poems in honour of the CR players which the chronicler handed over to Almeida.