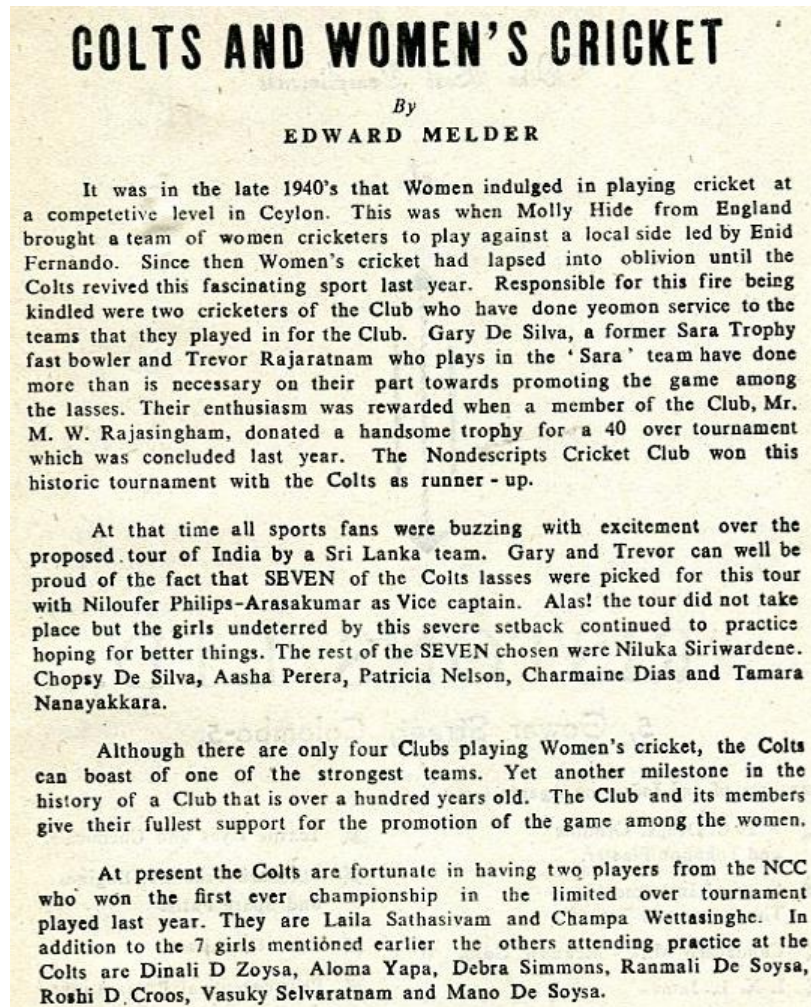


THE BIRTH OF WOMEN'S CRICKET

Just as much as the Colts was the first Ceylonese male cricket team, it also formed one of the first female cricket teams in the island. The following article by Eddie Melder explains how this came about.

Another first for the Colts



In 1977, in conjunction with a proposed tour of India by a Sri Lankan women's team the first ever ladies cricket team in Sri Lanka was formed. The Colts woman's cricket team was captained by Niloufer Philips-Arasakumar and was coached by Gary de Silva and Trevor Rajaratnam.

NILOUFER PHILIPS — ARASAKUMAR

COLTS WOMEN'S CRICKET CAPTAIN

by Tyrone Candappa



To be appointed captain is a clear recognition of ability. To add to this when the oldest Ceylonese Cricket playing club makes that appointment it must be a double endorsement.

Eighteen year old Niloufer Philips-Arasakumar is the captain of the Colombo Colts Cricket Club Women's team.

She has been at the helm since introduction of the game at the feminine level and has continued, to be privileged to lead the Colts against the "Women Cricket Ambassadors" from across the "Palk Strait".

Hailing from a family of sportsmen Niloufer is herself a no mean 'sportsman' In fact an obvious pride to them.

In the absence of cricket at school level, the game of the day now, thanks to the efforts of the Colombo Colts Cricket Club, she excelled with her representation. She vice captained her school at Hockey, Netball and Tennis and added Swimming and Athletics, heaving no less than the putt shot. Her prowess brought colours in Hockey and Netball, capping it with representative honours against the Angels Hockey XI from Britain, and the Sri Lanka Women's President's team Mini Asian Tournament.

As a cricketer she is a steady reliable right hand batswoman with an array of pleasing strokes. Bowling is no weak point. She is a keen and dependable fielder with the crowning talent of leadership, knowing the game, to rise to any occasion.

It is no surprise that Niloufer took to cricket at an age as young as seven when her father, popularly known as "Kumar" having represented, in order, St. Thomas' College, The University of Ceylon and Tamil Union. In addition her uncle Shanthi Kumar captained St. Thomas', while her father and two uncles played in the University team together. Niloufer takes all strides in the field of sport with the ungrudging support from both mum and dad and her brother and sister.

Niloufer passed away on the 22nd of October 2023 at the age of 63. She attended Ladies College in Colombo, graduating in 1976. She was the Sri Lanka squash national champion for six years: 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1989, and 1990. As such she represented Sri Lanka in squash all over the world. She was the pioneer of women's cricket in Sri Lanka and was a top-class all-rounder, performing well with both the bat and ball. She promoted the idea of women in cricket at a time when the idea of women playing competitive cricket in Sri Lanka was yet to catch on and not considered feasible.

Niloufer began her professional career at the Dutch Embassy in Colombo. This diplomatic beginning paved the way for her ultimate journey to the United States where she was employed at the United Nations for 18 years. She retired in 2020.

The first tourney

An advertisement was placed the papers by Gerry Gunasekera sounding out interest on the part of women to play leather ball cricket. The Colts, NCC, BRC and Nomads were invited for discussions. It appears that the Colts were the most enthusiastic about the idea.

In 1977, the Colts were runners up to the NCC in a forty over women's cricket tournament. They played for a trophy donated by a member of the Colts.

The fact of a tournament suggests that the Colts did not necessarily produce the first women's team in Sri Lanka. But it is possible that about 1976 the Colts came up with the prototype of a women's cricket team and that the other three clubs that participated in the tournament followed suit. But it is certain that the first ever ladies cricket match with a foreign team was held at the Colts grounds in 1978 with the Colts playing the Tamil Nadu Women's Cricket Association.

The fact is that seven of the players chosen for the national women's team in 1977 were from the Colts. This makes one wonder how the Colts lost to the NCC?

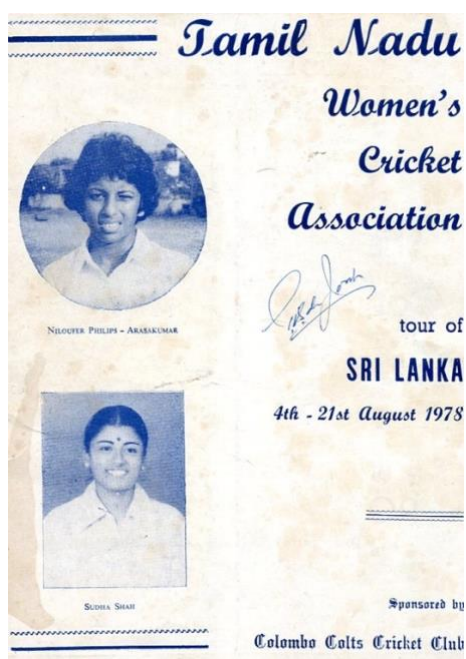
The Colts captain Niloufer Phillips – Arasakumar was vice-captain and the rest of the Colts contingent were – Niluka Siriwardene, Chopsy de Silva, Asha Perera, Patricia Nelson, Charmaine Dias and Tamara Nanayakara.

Chopsy de Silva was Brian de Silva's sister. Another sister called Pam was also involved.

Did the Colts lend players to the NCC? And did these players enable the NCC to trump the Colts? Colts was playing itself which probably explains why women's cricket in Sri Lanka did not take off for another eighteen years even although the club was flying the banner for women's cricket.

Tamil Nadu tours Sri Lanka

In 1978 the Colts sponsored the first ever visit of a women's cricket team from India. The Colts were truly doing the running in creating the momentum for women's cricket in Sri Lanka to take off.



The majority of games played by the visitors were against the Colts: two two-day games and a single one-day game. There was also an inaugural women's double wicket tournament.

It appears that the Colts team doubled up as the Sri Lanka team. However, the Colts Presidents XI may have included women from other clubs.

<i>Tamil Nadu Women's Cricket Association Tour of Sri Lanka</i>	
AUGUST, 1978	ITINERARY
Friday 4th (morning)	Arrival at Colombo Fort.
(evening)	Meet the Colts Women Cricketers
Saturday/Sunday 5th/6th	- 2 day game vs. Colts Cricket Club at Havelock Park
Sunday 6th	- Dinner by Mr. M. W. Rajasingham
Monday 7th	- Rest
Tuesday 8th	- One day game vs. B. R. C. at Havelock Park
Wednesday, 9th	- Rest
Thursday 10th	- One day game vs. Colts at Colts Grounds, Havelock Park
Thursday 10th	- Dinner by Mr. Hugh Gunasekera
Friday 11th	- Rest
Saturday/Sunday 12th/13th	- 2 day game vs. Colts President's XI at Colts Grounds, Havelock Park
Sunday 13th	- Dinner by the President of Colts Cricket Club
Monday 14th	- Rest
Tuesday 15th	- One day game vs. Nomads S.C. at Vihara Maha Devi Park
Wed./Thu. 16th/17th	- 2 day game vs. Colts Cricket Club at Havelock Park
Wednesday 16th	- Official Dinner by Colts Cricket Club
Friday 18th	- Rest
Saturday 19th	- Double Wicket Tournament - Colts Grounds, at Havelock Park
Sunday 20th	- One day game vs. Colts Taverners - Colts Grounds, Havelock Park
Monday 21st	- Return to India.

The Colts women's cricket squad had Arasakumar as captain with Niluka Siriwardene as her deputy. It included the other five players chosen to tour India as well as Laila Sathasivam and Champa Wettasinghe who moved from the NCC. The other members of the 15 person Colts squad were – Aloma Yapa, Ranmali de Soysa, Vasuki Selvaratnam, Dinali de Soysa, Sairi Gooneratne and Debra Simmons.


Other names mentioned were Rosanne Flamer-Caldera, Sweenatha Ponnambalam and the Thatil sisters, Clare and Elsie. These names came up in a conversation had in 2016.

There may be a photo of the squad hanging on the walls of the clubhouse. But the chronicler hasn't a photo to include in the chapter.

However, the souvenir that commemorates the tour includes photos of the visitors from Tamil Nadu. It is included because once the complete Colts narrative is entrenched in the web and fully indexed, there is a chance that the links maybe picked up by someone from Tamil Nadu with records and photos relating to the tour. At present match scores and averages are unavailable.

The purpose of this chapter, as in indeed all of the chapters in this the latest draft of the Colts story, is to trigger actions that will extract extant information from a variety of resting places. The Colts story is intended to be inclusive and to be of interest to people with interest in cricket and social history and create stakeholders out of people with limited or no knowledge of the Colts cricket club.

The Tamil Nadu Women's Cricket Association Touring Team



MISS SUDHA SHAH


Age 20. B. A. (History)

Applied for Law, Captain Tamil Nadu Team since 1973, Captain South Zone team in 1974, 1975, 76, 77. Captain Madras University Team, 1975. Scored a century in Inter University tournaments in 1975, Captain Indian Test team against Australia at Delhi 1976. Played for India against Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain and West Indies in India and against New Zealand in New Zealand. Represented Combined University. Right hand forceful batswoman, good fielder at close in positions.


Hobbies: Sports & Music.

Age 20.

Final year B. A. Represented Tamil Nadu since 1973, South Zone since 1974, India against Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain and West Indies in India, against New Zealand in New Zealand. First Wicket Keeper and opening batswoman for Tamil Nadu, Madras University South Zone and India. Winner of National best wicket keeper award. Represented combined universities.



MISS FOWZIEH KHALEELI



MISS SUSAN ITTICHRIA

Age 20. B. A. (History)

Medium pace right arm opening bowler, good fielder, hard hitting middle order batswoman. State Sprinter before taking up cricket. Represented Tamil Nadu since 1973, South Zone since 1974, Madras University since 1975. Captain in 1975. Hit up a century at Barcilly in 1977 in Inter University Tournaments. Represented combined universities in International ties - Represented India against Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain and West Indies, in India, against Australia and New Zealand in those countries.

Age 22.

M. A. On English Literature, Certificate in Journalism. Right arm leg spinner, useful fielder. Represented Tamil Nadu since 1973, South Zone in 1974 and 1975, Madras University in 1973 and 76. Free lance journalist. Qualified umpire.



MISS UMA SUBRAMANIAM



MISS PRIITI DALAL

Age 21.

Final year B. A. Psychology. Medium pace bowler, middle order hard hitting batswoman. Represented Tamil Nadu since 1973, South Zone since 1974, University since 1975. Career Best O - 7, M - 0, R - 9, W - 7 against Bombay University in inter-university ties at Calicut in 1976.

Age 21.

B. A. 2nd year law Student Good batswomen and fielder, off spinner, qualified umpire. Represented Tamil Nadu since 1975, South Zone in 1976, Stella Maris College and Madras University in 1975, 76 and 77. Career Best: Maximum catches in inter-university tie in 1976.

Hobbies : Coaching School children playing basket ball and Badminton.



MISS SUMATHI IYER



MISS SHOBHA KRISHNASWAMI

Age 20.

Final year B. A. Represented Tamil Nadu since 1973, South Zone since 1974, Stella Maris College and Madras University since 1975. All rounder, off spin bowler, good slip fielder and at close in position. Career Best: 58 against Ranchi University and 3 wickets for no runs against Indore University.

Hobbies: Painting, reading, vintage cars.



MISS LATA SWAMINATHAN

Age 16.

Pre University Student at Stella Maris College. Represented Tamil Nadu since 1974. Captained the Tamil Nadu junior team in the first Junior Nationals. Promising allrounder.

Hobbies: Reading, Music, Sports.



MISS C. T. M. SUGUNA

Age 20.

B. A. History, applied for M. A. Good Middle order batswoman. Alert fielder. Represented Tamil Nadu since 1973, South Zone since 1975. Stella Maris College and Madras University since 1975. Member of President's XI in World cup series.

Hobbies: Reading, music, sports, bird watching.



MISS RATHIKA SUBRAMANIAM

Age 19.

III B.Sc. Chem. New Cap. Represented Stella Maris and Madras University since 1976. University and College Wicket Keeper,

Hobbies: Reading.



MISS MEENA SHAH

Age 21.

B. A. Economics. Medium pace bowler, right hand batswoman. Represented Tamil Nadu since 1973, South Zone since 1974, Ethiraj College and Madras University since 1975. Played for combined universities in international ties.



MISS V. VIJAYALAKSHMI

Age 23.

Right hand opening batswoman, Reserve wicket keeper, represented Tamil Nadu since 1973, South Zone since 1974, Ethiraj College and Madras University in 1975 and 76. Employed in Indian Overseas Bank, Qualified Umpire.



MISS KANCHANA VEMPATI

Age 20.

Final year B. A. Medium pace bowler. Represented Tamil Nadu since 1973, South Zone in 1974, 75, Ethiraj College, and Madras University since 1975.



MISS SUJATA SRIDHAR

Age 16.

Pre University. Represented Tamil Nadu in Junior Nationals. Represented Tamil Nadu in 1977. Plays for Ethiraj College. Promising youngster.



MISS VIBHA MATHUR

Age 19.

111rd B. A. Sociology. Represented Tamil Nadu, Stella Maris College and Madras University. Left arm offspinner.



MRS. PRABHA RAMAKRISHNA

Age 27.

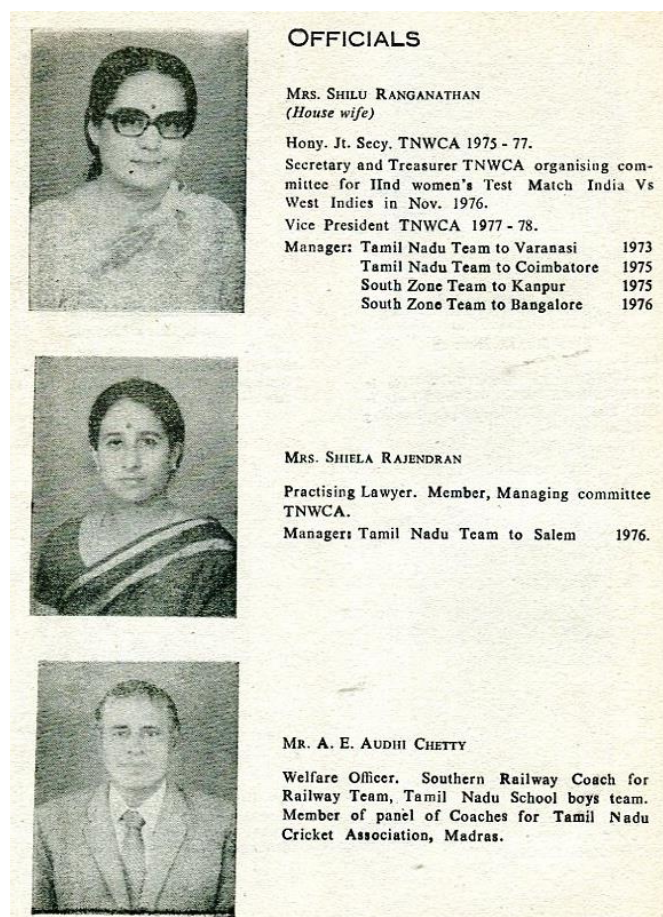
B. A. House wife. Represented Tamil Nadu since 1973, South Zone since 1974. Opening bowler and two down batswoman.



MISS MADHU AHIYA

Age 18.

Good batswoman. Represented Ethiraj College, Madras University and Tamil Nadu. Career Best: Century for Ethiraj College.



Nothing would be lost in forwarding this chapter to the Tamil Nadu Cricket Association to find out whether records of this tour are available, officially or in someone's private possession. Most of the players shown above would be in their sixties, at a time when nostalgia sets in and evokes memories of youthful sporting endeavour. To realise that someone is interested in long forgotten news clippings may trigger a response. Most of the players in the touring team were university students and it is highly probable that many of them kept records pertaining to the tour.

A different tour?

An informant advised the chronicler in 2016 that a squad of fifteen was sent to Lucknow with nine players from the Colts, including the national captain. When they reached Jaffna, the tour was cancelled. He must be referring to the 1977 tour except that Phillips-Arasakumar was vice-captain and seven players from the Colts were in the team.

The date given for the Indian tour was 1980 although the tour did take place in 1978. Apparently, the Colts reciprocated in 1981 although there is no talk of the Colts team ever visiting India any time after 1978.

A new beginning

The Indian tour didn't provide the anticipated filip for women's cricket in Sri Lanka. In 1996 another tournament, again organised by the Colts, created great interest, and proved to be a turning point. In 2001 an informative article appeared in CricInfo titled Women's cricket in Sri Lanka. The author was one S. de S. Wijeyeratne who is very likely the Susilough de Silva Wijeyeratne who played for the Colts and served as general secretary. His article is worth reproducing because it succinctly summarises the lengthy process for women's cricket to establish a firm footing.

"Women's Cricket in Sri Lanka started in 1978 when four leading Colombo clubs - Colts Cricket Club, Burgher Recreation Club, Nondescripts Cricket Club and Nomads Cricket Club - met in the first ever tournament for the Rajasingham Trophy, which was won by NCC led by Champa Wettasinghe, who beat Colts, the favourites, in the final.

Unfortunately, after that tournament in 1978, women's cricket failed to establish itself and only Colts and Nomads continued to play. In fact, eighteen years passed before the next tournament.

Finally, in 1996, Colombo Colts Cricket Club organised a 30-over tournament called the Pepsi Trophy between Colts, Nomads, Colombo Ladies and Shakthi Sports Club from Anuradhapura, who incidentally became the first outstation team to play leather ball Cricket. The tournament was won by Colombo Ladies - led by Vajira Premaratne, who was also a National Champion in both tennis and table Tennis - who defeated Colts in the final.

After this tournament the women's game started to become popular and the first ever association to run women's cricket was formed in January 1997 at the premises of Board of Control for Cricket in Sri Lanka (BCCSL).

Gwen Herat became the first President of the Women's Cricket Association of Sri Lanka (WCASL) and with other teams joining, the WCASL organised an inaugural 50 over Cricket tournament, which was won by Colts Cricket Club.

The first task of the Association was to give as many opportunities as possible to the girls and in this regard, they were lucky that Japan pulled out of the 1997 World Cup in India and that Sri Lanka was offered their place.

The first international game played by the Sri Lanka's women was against the Netherlands at the SSC grounds on the 28th of November 1997, which Sri Lanka lost but made amends by winning one match in the three-match series. The first Captain of the Sri Lanka women's team was Vanessa Bowen.

Sri Lanka's next assignment was the 1997 World Cup in India and the first match was against the West Indies. They started with a convincing victory over them and with a no result possible in their game against India they qualified for the quarterfinal and a tough encounter against England. They lost but had guaranteed themselves a place in the 2000 CricInfo Women's World Cup and left with their heads held high.

Since then, they have had further success. They defeated teams from Pakistan, West Indies, Netherlands and Ireland and in the 2000 CricInfo Women's World Cup in New Zealand the side, captained by Rasanjali Silva, narrowly failed to qualify for the semi-finals when they lost to South Africa by just 16 runs.

The next assignment will be the tour of West Indies to Sri Lanka in December 2001. A pool of players will be picked from the annual tournament, which is currently being played at the Colombo Colts Cricket Club."

Clearly, without the Colts, women's cricket would have struggled to take off. The club maintained a cricket team at a time when other clubs showed little interest.

Although started by burghers the Colts never discriminated on the grounds of race. Likewise, it was the first club to give women cricketers a break.

Vanessa Bowen

Vanessa Bowen is the most famous name in Colts women's cricket. At 21 years of age she joined the Colts to pursue a cricketing career and ended up captaining the Colts women's team and going on to be the first to captain a Sri Lankan women's cricket team.

VANESSA BOWEN



Courtesy of the Colts
150th anniversary souvenir

In 2013 the Daily Mirror featured an article on her. It illustrates her journey to the top of women's cricket in Sri Lanka and the part played by the Colts in her success.

Today women's cricket is big in Sri Lanka and the women cricketers of Colts have thrived in the domestic competition. The group photos which hang on the walls of the club are testimony to the competitiveness of the women cricketers at the Colts.

“Having earned a celebrated status as Sri Lanka's first women's cricket captain, Vanessa De Silva has gone on to become a pioneer of women's cricket in Sri Lanka, after a short but successful cricketing career. She is now the Manager/ Coordinator of Sri Lanka Women's Cricket. Vanessa is working hard to promote and organize women's cricket around the island, and with the support of Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC), she hopes that one day our girls will bring home the World Cup Trophy.

Her own sporting career began not in cricket, but in softball. As captain of the women's national softball team, she toured with the team to India in 1995; it was after she returned that she made the decision to focus on her 'passion' and joined the Colts Cricket Club that same year.

While she knew she was talented in the sport, Vanessa says she never expected to be made captain at just age 22, "It was a great achievement for me to be the first women's cricket captain. I was selected by Gwen Herath, the former President of the Women's Cricket Association of Sri Lanka (WCASL) to captain the side for the 1997 Women's World Cup in India, and I have to say she really inspired all of us back then. If it wasn't for her, we might not have played cricket at all."

While there weren't many tours at the time, the team made maximum use of the games they had. Vanessa captained the winning team that took part in the 98' inaugural test match between Sri Lanka and Pakistan, the only test match the Sri Lanka women's team have played to date.

One of the reason talented players like her retired early was the fact that women's cricket was not a paid profession during her time. With family commitments and careers to focus on, most players gave up the sport early in their careers.

"My only regret would be that I gave up my international career too soon. I could have played for another 3 more years I think but, my family was more important to me." Thankfully, things have changed since then, as Vanessa explains, now that the women's side are professionally paid, more and more girls are playing for longer in the current squad, with most of them continuing for up to 6 to 7 years.

"The SLC are working hard to promote the women's game by taking it to the grassroots level. Women's cricket does not bring in funds like the men's, so I'm very grateful for work and exposure the SLC is giving the women. I think the popularity of the game has risen here after the last World Cup in India was telecast live and our team did very well in that. Parents should encourage their daughters if they want to take up cricket as there are also now employment opportunities within the sector." she explained.

After her marriage in 1999, Vanessa played for 3 more years before retiring to focus on her family and career in the travel industry. In 2008, she was selected to represent the Sri Lanka women's team at the Asian Cricket Council and between 2008 to 09' she was a selector for the national squad.

Around 09' she took over her current position at the SLC. Speaking about her change in role from player to administrator, she says the switch was made easy given the fact that after having played at the highest level, she can understand both the players and SLC's point of view. "I'm proud and happy to be part of women's cricket in Sri Lanka. I look after everything here so I'm quite happy to be doing something for my country."

While Vanessa does love her work, she is also a mother to 2 little boys, which means every day is a struggle to balance both her professional and personal lives. "My oldest son is 9 and my youngest is 1 year and 6 months. I make sure to dedicate my weekends to spending time with them. My oldest loves cricket and even plays at his school." When queried if she'd like to have a cricket loving daughter someday, Vanessa laughingly answered with a definite no, adding, that having 2 children was already a handful.

Right now, Vanessa is determined to continue the hard work that's being done to promote women's cricket in Sri Lanka and lift up the women's team to the No.1 side in the world - hopefully, a world cup winning side at that!

In March 2016 the chronicler took in the photos hanging on the walls of the Colts Cricket Club. He took a photo of the following framed group photograph taking the view that it must have been an important win for the club to have it hanging on the wall. It features a Colts women cricket team that took out a Women's Cricket Association trophy in 2003.



Courtesy of the Colts Cricket Club

Greater clarity required

This chapter needs to be further developed with up-to-date photos and a detailed history. For a start, a list of cricket captains of the women's team needs to be listed. In addition, the notable women cricketers the club has produced since Vanessa Bowen should be mentioned.

Greater clarification is required of the major cricket tournaments for women in Sri Lanka and how many of them have been taken out by the Colts. Clearly, women's cricket is far more competitive today compared to when the Colts and the Nomads were the only clubs fielding women's cricket teams.

This chapter will benefit from more specific information regarding the status of women's cricket at the Colts at present. And the extent to which the club stages women's first division and national cricket matches. Clearly, the club continues to promote women's cricket in a big way, and it is important that recent developments are captured.