

# School cricket season reaches its climax with Royal-Thomian

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The 2017/18 inter-school cricket season will reach its peak this weekend with the oldest uninterrupted inter-school match in world history. This season's school cricket will reach its climax with the 139th Battle of the Blues cricket encounter between Royal and S. Thomas' which begins at SSC grounds tomorrow (Friday).

Probably, this will be the first time since 1985 that the Battle of the Blues encounter starts on a Friday. The encounter which customary starts on Thursday of the second week in the month of March since it became a three-day affair from the centenary encounter in 1979, has been put off by a day due to the state funeral of Most Venerable Daranagama Kusabhadra thera, Chief incumbent of Sri Samboधि Viharaya, Colombo and founder of 'The Buddhist' television and radio channel, scheduled to be held on Thursday at the Independence Square. Incidentally, the most venerable thera is a distinguished old boy of Royal College.

The Royal-Thomian encounter, the last of the four main big matches, in Colombo will be followed by a few more big matches in the suburbs and outstations scheduled to be played before the end of this month.

Interestingly, history was created on Tuesday with Sri Lanka's first-ever girls school cricket big match in Nuwara Eliya - between Gammie National School and Our Ladies Upper School at the Race Course grounds. It is heartening to see the progress of girls' schools cricket in Sri Lanka under the directions of Chairperson of SLC's women's cricket Apsari Sinhabahu Tillakaratne, wife of former Sri Lanka Test captain Hashan Tillakaratne.

Sri Lanka's inter-school cricket structure is considered one of the best, if not the best and well-organised one in the world. Many school cricket officials and youth coaches world over have hailed Sri Lanka's well-knit school cricket structure which has five different age groups under three divisions in each age category. Over the years, it has been the feeder pool to



The big match fever spreads everywhere. Picture courtesy: The Papare.com

the national team. There has not been an organized inter-school cricket tournament for Under-19 until 90s, despite the island-wide participation. All what they had until then were friendly matches, some over a century old.

There was hardly any recognition for the milestone achievements of schoolboy cricketers. Lack of an organized inter-school tournament deprived young schoolboys of their due recognition. Even the Sri Lanka Schools Cricket Association (SLSCA) first had only a limited over knock out tournament at Under-19 level, on completion of the first XI matches and traditional big matches, that too from late 80s.

Sri Lanka's flagship English newspaper - the Sunday Observer, and its publisher Lake

House understood the need to recognize the talents of the country's schoolboy cricketers and inspiring them to continue their careers at club level.

It is with that vision in mind that the Sunday Observer commenced the Observer Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year contest way back in 1978/79. That proved to be a resounding success and the event ultimately turned out to be the most looked forward to event in school cricket calendar. Ever since the then Royal captain Ranjan Madugalle was adjudged the Observer Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year in 1979, Sri Lanka's first ever inter-school cricket awards show has produced many legendary cricketers who have played for Sri Lanka with distinction.

Playing its true corporate social responsibility

role as the country's premier English newspaper - the Sunday Observer gave birth to the country's first-ever Schools Cricket Awards ceremony four decades ago at Navaranghala, Colombo 7 in 1979. It was a fitting tribute to Madugalle who led the Reid Avenue boys in the centenary Battle of the Blues cricket encounter against S. Thomas' in the same year. Crowning Madugalle as the first-ever Observer Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year was a memorable and a great beginning not only to the prestigious contest but also for the first-ever recipient of the title who later went on to play for Sri Lanka and now the Chief Match Referee of the International Cricket Council.

During the four decades of its cherished history, the Mega Show has produced some of the legendary cricketers that Sri Lanka has ever produced, including the country's 1996 World Cup-winning captain turned minister Arjuna Ranatunga, world's highest wicket-taker in Test cricket Muttiah Muralitharan and the most valuable player of the 1996 World Cup tournament in which Sri Lanka emerged champions, Sanath Jayasuriya.

Besides these four recipients, the Observer Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year contest has baptized some of the most outstanding players to the big league - 1996 World Cup star Asanka Gurusinha, former captains Roshan Mahanama and Marvan Atapattu to name a few.

Winning the Observer-Mobitel Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year title has been the dream of every schoolboy cricketer as they generally believe that the prestigious title would take them closer to wear Sri Lanka 'cap'. Most past winners of the Observer Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year had made their Sri Lanka debut in next to no time, some of them just months after winning the 'Crown'. There are three past Observer-Mobitel Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year main award winners in the current Sri Lanka team - Dinesh Chandimal (2009), Niroshan Dickwella (2012) and Kusal Mendis (2013). The trio stepped into the Sri Lanka team just months after their crowning glory to become vital ingredients to the national team.

Sri Lanka Test captain Chandimal is the most experienced of the three, winning the prestigious Observer-Mobitel Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year title in 2009 when he was representing Amada College, Colombo. Former Trinity skipper, Dickwella won the Observer-Mobitel Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year title in 2012.

Kusal Mendis, who led Prince of Wales College, Moratuwa with distinction, was adjudged Observer-Mobitel Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year in 2013.

Former Nalanda captain and ex-ICC Match Referee Roshan Mahanama was the first to win the prestigious Observer Schoolboy

Cricketer of the Year on successive years - in 1983 and 1984.

A household name in school cricket during early 80s he first won the 'Observer Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year' title in 1983 with a rich harvest with the willow.

He continued to let his willow to do the talking in the following year too and his superb form won him the title for the second successive year in 1984.

Although former Amada captain Arjuna Ranatunga too had won the Observer Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year title twice prior to Mahanama, Ranatunga had not won the crown on successive years. Ranatunga first won the coveted title in 1980 after Ranjan Madugalle but failed to repeat the following year, finishing runner up to Rohan Bauljens of St. Peter's. However, in his final inter-school first XI season for Amada, Ranatunga was crowned Observer Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year once again in 1982.

Following Ranatunga and Mahanama to join the select band of schoolboy cricketers to win the Observer Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year title twice each were Thilan Samarawera (1994 and 1995), Lahiru Peiris (2004 and 2005), Bhanuka Rajapaksa (2010 and 2011) and Charith Asalanka (2015 and 2016).

Finding huge funding that is needed to host a great show of this magnitude is no easy task. Although the cost to host the show in the first couple of decades was marginally less, it was a commendable contribution by Haliborange which sponsored the inaugural show and the Bata Shoe Company which followed.

But the entry of Sri Lanka Telecom Mobitel as the sponsor added value to the Mega Show, improving the standard of the event to solid trophies and larger cash awards. The Observer-Mobitel partnership which celebrates its 11th successive year, has not only recognizes the achievements of schoolboy cricketers but also to reward their coaches and master-in-charges, who make a silent role in molding the next generation of champion cricketers.

SLT Mobitel, the national mobile service provider, continues to provide that 'smart connection' to the Observer Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year Contest. Under the directions of the Chairman of the Sri Lanka Telecom and SLT Mobitel P.G. Kumarasingha, the Chief Executive Officer of the SLT Mobitel's Nalin Perera has made a great contribution towards the success of the event during the past decade.

The Observer-Mobitel Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year continues to enjoy the longstanding association of the Sri Lanka Schools Cricket Association (SLSCA) and the Sri Lanka Cricket Umpires and Scorers Association under the blessings of Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC), headed by Deputy Speaker Thilanga Sumathipala.