

Sports

They proved that Thomian grit was not a myth

By Sri Sangabo Corea

Even after the applause has ceased and the dust at the Sinhalese Sports Club has settled down the spectators who witnessed the 130th Battle of the Blues will give anything to relive the minutes and hours that ticked to make the 130th Royal – Thomian Cricket Match what it turned out to be.



Faahim Saleem

Raveenthiraraj
Nirrushan

Sachin Peiris

After 130 years of hard fought battles the Royal – Thomian Cricket Match is by far one of the most eagerly awaited sporting and social events in the Sri Lankan calendar. There is a popular saying that if a visitor to Sri Lanka has not witnessed the Kandy Perahera and the Royal – Thomian Cricket Match that visitor has not seen Sri Lanka! If a female of the species in her teens has not been seen at the big match it is said that she has fallen short of being in the high profile social circuit!

Whilst Royal had a formidable team of nine coloursmen with Captain Yasitha Abeykoon, his deputy, Kusal Perera and Janith Perera being 4th year coloursmen and Haroon Mowjood, a 5th year coloursmen, S. Thomas' on the other hand had only three coloursmen namely Skipper R. Nirrushan, deputy D. Walpita and Faahim Saleem.

With the usual excitement that was to be expected in the print media the headline on one newspaper read: Royal out for the kill whilst another newspaper headline read: Will it be Royal power or Thomian grit? The Royal supporters were of the opinion that the Royalists will make mincemeat out of the Thomians!

Recently, I had pleasure of having a friendly chat first with the 18 year old Man of the Match –Faahim Saleem whose father, Rizmi Saleem and grandfather Rifath Saleem are both Old Thomians.

Faahim, who opened batting for S. Thomas' came into the 130th Battle of the Blues with an impressive record having scored over 1000 runs during the season and proving to be a

useful right arm leg spinner as well. Both sides knew that STC will depend heavily on Faahim understandably since he had been in batting form in the matches preceding the big match.

In Faahim's words, "The atmosphere at home on the day of the match was somewhat tense my parents and close relatives wondering whether I would strike form in the big match or whether I would lose my patience, play a rash shot and fail to live up to expectations. I prayed before I left home that morning that I will be blessed with power and determination to live up to the expectations predicted in the press and that my individual performance will in no small way help the College that means so much to me." "When I stepped out of the pavilion with my partner to open the Thomian first innings I was hoping I will be able as the senior partner to settle down and set an example to Anuja Fernando so that together we could give our side a good start. The next thing I knew was that I ruled out LBW for nought in the last ball of the first over and our team was bundled out for a mere 99 runs."

"In the second innings we had to have a positive approach and between Anuja and I we decided that with the wicket being tailor-made for batting we had to play our shots straight without taking any risks. I got off the mark with 2 runs and followed it up with a straight drive for four. With that I was quite sure that I was going to stay and fight for the College.

Luck, however was not on our side with Anuja getting out for 4 and Ashen two overs later for 11." "When Nirrushan walked up to the wicket he looked worried and said, 'We have to make it. 'Let's play shots straight without crossing, okay?' he said and 'okay' I replied determined to fight back. At lunch, we were 39 for 2 with still a long way to go to wipe out a deficit of 214 runs."

Royal flags were fluttering in the breeze and all we heard was deafening R-O-Y-A-L.... Royal! At lunch time, there was a sudden influx of Royal supporters rushing in to the SSC. Not wanting to miss out on witnessing a right royal victory!

My mind went back to centenary match when as Treasurer of the match I was told to call President J.R. Jayewardene at his residence and ask H.E. to quickly come over since the last Thomian pair, Halangoda and Richards were at the wicket and with the fall of a wicket H.E. will have to be in readiness to make the presentations to the Reid Avenue team. When I met the President at the entrance and he inquired what the situation was I said, "Very Bad" He smiled and said "That's for you" obviously in the mood to take a potshot at any Thomian! In the pavilion he was amongst a whole lot of his old school supporters, biting their fingernails and waiting for that big moment which never came!

Faahim, continuing said, "When Nirushan joined me I knew that between the two of us we could make things happen if we put our heads down and batted sensibly. In a flash our 200 run partnership against St. Sebastian's, Moratuwa came to my mind."

Raveenthara Raja Nirrushan hails from a Jaffna Tamil conservative home where education took pride of place and not sports. Even in his childhood days when Nirrushan was grooming himself to be like his hero, Sachin Tendulkar it was his one and only sister who continued to be his greatest fan keeping a close tab on his scores. My father never was interested in cricket and even if I scored 20, he would say – 'Good!'

Just one week before big match Nirrushan and Faahim figured in a 200 run partnership in the match against St. Sebastian's College, Moratuwa and although Royal was a better team on paper Nirrushan and the boys still thought they were good enough to give the Royalists a hard time.

"Although I won the toss I put in the Royalists to bat as I saw the SSC wicket as being conducive to fast bowlers in the first session of play. I banked on Dinesh Walpita and Chamod Pathirana to get the top order of the Royalists out. In the first hour the Royalists were 35 for 2 but my expectations did not materialize after that and Royal went on to make 313 for 9 with Kusal Perera and Bhanuka Rajapakse scoring 142 and 87 respectively."

The performance of the Thomians in the first innings was a total disaster with Faahim back in the pavilion with no score. The first innings ended in 13.5 overs with the Thomians bundled out for 99 runs. Royal supporters saw a right Royal victory in sight while Thomian spirits though down were not out! Nirrushan continued: "With the start of the second innings both Faahim and Anuja walked out of the pavilion, determined to stay at the wicket and fight back but we were in trouble with Anuja out for four and Ashen out for 11."

"As soon as I walked in to partner Faahim, I had a quick chat and we told each other that it was NOW or NEVER. After every over we met half way down the wicket to plan out what we should be doing in the next over.

Things were looking up and at tea we were 148 for 2 and soon after tea we got our hundreds. The Royal skipper Yasitha tried nine bowlers but with no success. Faahim and I went on and ended the second day with the score at 225 for 2; Faahim, unbeaten on 100 and I, unbeaten on 103.

When the question was asked whether it occurred to the pair that they should go for a record, Nirrushan's answer was this: "The idea of creating records never entered our minds. Our one and only target was to get STC out of the woods and force the Royalists to fight back! For both Faahim and me the College came first and nothing else mattered!"

What is so commendable about Nirrushan is that with all the time he spent on polishing up his Cricket and his Tennis as the Captain of both teams he made sure not to neglect his studies and obtained 8 A's in the O/Levels and is now preparing himself to qualify further in the United Kingdom.

The third hero of the 130th Royal-Thomian with whom I had a chat last was 16 year old

Sachin Peiris whose father Suren Peiris, an Old Thomian was a wicket keeper in the 2nd XI team.

After young Sachin's performance batting at No. 11 in the Thomian first innings and scoring 12 not out he was propelled to go 7 down in the 2nd innings. He walked out to the middle promising not to return unless he got a 50.

Once he took his guard he hit out courageously knocking up a breezy 59. Sachin was batting so confidently that the Royalists saw him as a severe threat and they must have been very much relieved when he was finally run out at 59. At 16 years he is also a smart wicket keeper and with many years in front of him he is certainly going to be a force to reckon with in next year's Thomian XI.

Sachin's hero is Sachin Tendulkar. He keeps grooming himself to be like Tendulkar and by next year he will certainly be the player to watch in the Thomian side. With his parents and his brother supporting him unreservedly he sure will be in the spotlight in the coming year – for his batting and his wicket keeping. All three expressed their overwhelming pride at being Thomians.

"Even though we belong to 3 different religions S. Thomas' has taught us to respect each other and be united as one family there is no racial discrimination either and we are proud to be Thomians they said. Asked whether they believed in Thomian Grit they all exclaimed in one voice "Yes we do and we proved beyond doubt that we Thomians have it!"