

## **Oh! Bailas, verses, and boundary line heroes -sent by Jayantha Kudahetty**

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(Dedicated to David, Royal's respected ground boy of yore; Noor, his onetime able assistant, who later took over from him; the legendary 'Kadalay', who was eternally flitting about the Royal Boundary Line like a benevolent spirit and the many others, who have so ungrudgingly served the cause of Royal Cricket from the Boundary Line)

From the boundary we always cheered our heroes. (Pic by Saman Kariyawasam)

That joy and glory has been most heart-warming for us, watching cricket, especially Royal cricket, from the boundary line.

Apart from pretending to wield the willow and polish the cherry, once in a while, in the dim, distant past, our life, had been well spent, we should say, indulging in that pleasant pastime of watching Royal cricket for well over 50 years-watching not only the Royal-Thomian but the other games as well played by the Royal First eleven.

Indeed, if colours were to be awarded for watching -consistency, then quite a few of us like Devaka Rodrigo, Rohan Hapugalle, Ranjit Jayasekera, Chrysantha Perera, Jeiya Ranasinghe, R.J.(one time known as Rakshana Janashakthi) de Silva, Dr. J.C. Fernando, Nimal Dias Jayasinghe, to name a few, along with yours truly, would surely be deserving contenders!

Those days the Royal Primary School (RPS), now known as the Royal Junior, though very much Royal in spirit, was a separate entity ably led by that great Headmaster, A. F. de Saa Bandaranayake. RPS was never given the Friday half-holiday enjoyed by the students of the College proper, whenever matches were played at Reid Avenue. Both entities were in double session during our time.

Consequently, we, at RPS, had to adopt surreptitious means to sneak through the RPS Tuck Shop, situated then adjoining the old, College Hostel, during the afternoon 2.10 interval, highly motivated as we were to get a glimpse of our cricketing heroes. (They were our only heroes then!)- the Van Twest brothers Desmond and Brian, looking crisp-white and elegant; Nirmalalingam, the immaculately stylish opening batsmen, the diminutive Lalith Hewavitarane; 'Frecko' Kreltsheim, with his magical wicket-keeping gloves; Ubhaya and Ranjit de Silva, two fine allrounders; Turnour Wickremasinghe, the left arm spin artist, perhaps so named at birth by his progenitor, sensing a future spinning prospect; the wily Wignarajah, another left arm spinner, quite elastic just before and at the point of delivery; the two Seneviratnes, mysteriously (for us) known as 'Ata Gemba' and 'Gadaya'. 'Ata Gemba', in particular, will be well remembered for his peculiar stance at the crease, which both interested the observer and confused the bowler. He gave the impression of a rather tallish soldier, crouching in question mark fashion, marching on the same spot, in this instance the batting crease, waiting to hammer the enemy out of sight! It was a peculiar form of footwork which began even before the bowler commenced his runup. Little as we were, it was not difficult to recognize him not only because of his idiosyncratic stance but also because the enterprising cheering squads announced his arrival with well-orchestrated strains of "Ata Gemba'..... croak, croak!"

### **Regular rejoicing**

Apart from the cricket at the centre, one couldn't help being moved by the regular rejoicing on the boundary-line, mostly with innovative 'Bailas' (each season churning out a new one) sung by the many Royalists, senior and junior, who thronged the boundary, push bikes, flags and all, to hail their cricketing heroes, with the juniors proudly joining in chorus (quite unlike the dull

mortuary lull one experiences at Reid Avenue these days - hardly a bike, a flag or any cheering – only vacant spaces policed by College prefects in tie!)

Among those innovative, enterprising groups were the “Buccaneers”, a rollicking cluster of Royalists, living up to their self-proclaimed label, one of whose gang was one time a prominent and industrious member of the Sri Lankan Cabinet. He may or may not have had a premonition then of things to come, when he lustily joined the rest to sing about –

“Lakmavage ekama putha,  
Kothalawala mahatha....”

along with, Summa Amarasinghe (father of the 1983 winning Royal captain and later Royal coach), ‘Honker Nana, Jehan Raheem, Ponnasamy, Jayantha Jayaratne, ‘Kapoor’, Magha-lingam, ‘Pibba’ Perera, Abey-singho to name a few, intermittently asking the inviting question,

“Oh, what will you give me....if I show...you the....?”  
or the more serious one ,

“How are you Baldsing dear, how are you.....?”  
or the unmistakable assertion,

“We are boys of Royal College, Kollupitiya South,.....”

followed by an important and rhyming bit of information,

"Have you heard of Bundi Belleth, fat, short and stout" rather accurately describing one of our dear, respected masters of yore; or the ‘Abeyratne Anthem’, so fondly dedicated to the female cadres of the ‘domestics’ fraternity,

“Abeyratne kivvama than kauda nodanne,  
Visheshayen ilandari soyala balanne.....”

None of these bailas was ever written down as such. It was simply the oral tradition – or better still an oral-aural-oral tradition. And it was very much on the job training: standing, listening, imbibing (ever so readily!), singing. We also knew that sooner or later we had to be very much a part of that tradition and contribute our share, which we did more surely no sooner than we hit the Third Form at College.

A quick, string hopper, ‘pol sambol’ and beef curry lunch, all for Rs1/25, a la Saranapala, at the Tuck Shop, situated then next to the Old Lab and off we crossed to the happy plains of Reid Avenue. We used to occupy one of the wings of the Old Pavilion – that magnificent edifice of character, sadly no more, demolished by insensitivity and insensibility. We had our place reserved there every Friday and Saturday, whenever Royal played at Reid Avenue - Kalu and the Merry Band – (so the papers of the day reported it), with Anura Rajapakse and self on button accordions, the late Anwer Thassim (‘Thassa’) on bongos, Thosai Para (now known as Dr Waran), Gane Weeravagu, the two Fernandos, ‘Ura’ and ‘MRS’, ‘Chester’ Ratnatunge, ‘Gमित’ Ameresekere, P.B. Madurapperuma, (Madhu), the late ‘Rana Betta’ (B.N. Ranasinghe), Rudolph ‘Rowdy’ Williams, ‘Ombi’ Sivalingam, ‘Mahasona’ de Silva, O.K. (Omar Khayyam) Raheem, to name a few, all joining in unison in between overs and muting their efforts before each delivery, so as not to disturb any batsman of either team. Omar and ‘Rowdy’ in particular were real assets, well -versed in the oral tradition handed down by their elder brothers Jehan and ‘Alfy’ respectively. It was from them that we really got the yen and feel for the seniors. Omar, in particular, was a real treat. At times he led the way and reproduced in his own inimitable style what he had picked up aurally from his elder brother!

So for Omar it was,

“Hona iting (for Onna Ithing)  
Pata...gatha (for Patang gaththa)  
Bahila selema (for baila sellama!)”  
or “kusi hama Sehera (for you know what!)  
Such perennial favourites as ‘Thanakola Peththo’, with the intriguing prologue,  
“.....Pasyale cadju kalaa,  
Beire wewe wathura beela,  
Wheel-barrow eken yanawa vel balanta....” or “..Kalamediriyo –o, mokoda kapothi...” were very  
much up in our list.

We had our own share of innovations as well, such as, “....Aney ‘Navva’ mehata warenko, Mage  
langing waadi weyanko...” sung to the tune of a famous Hindi favourite of the day ‘Le Mama le  
Manamali’, ‘Navva’ being a tender reference to a dear class-mate of ours.

At that time, watching our cricketing heroes, little did we realize that our own classmates  
would in turn take on that mantle. In fact, seven of the RC ‘54 Group went onto play in the  
Royal-Thomian between 1961 and 1963 and win their cricket colours, to wit, Darrel Lieversz  
and late S.S. Kumar, who captained in 1962 and 1963 respectively, S. Thyagarajah, Padde  
Withane, ‘Kota’ Jayaratne (who still holds the Royal-Thomian wicket-keeping record for most  
number of dismissals in an innings ), Neil Crozier and ‘Cuckoo’ Rajaratnam, the latter being the  
progeny of one our respected masters, who himself played for Royal in his time and continued  
the good work while on the staff by assisting Royal cricket on the field ,and ‘thrashing’  
resounding ‘sixers’ off it, as any of his students would readily assert. ‘Kota’ and Kumar were  
almost inseparable on and off the field. When at the wicket the two were an absolute delight to  
watch: polish and perfect understanding.

But there were others in our time, also classmates, who should have played for Royal, if not for  
unfortunate circumstances. Of these the late Sarath Kodagoda and Geoffry Assauw were  
notable certainties. Sarath, that scion of a famous catering clan, who, but for a nasty injury  
sustained in the revived Royal-Zahira rugby encounter of 1959 (a fearful suicide expedition  
from Zahira’s perspective) would most certainly have adorned any Royal side. In fact, Sarath  
was a brilliant cricketer, a batting marvel moulded in the shadow of such cricketing greats as  
Mahesa Rodrigo (literally and figuratively in the shadow, so to speak, for they were neighbours  
then). Sarath was cited by a former Royal College master, with cricketing insight, Elmo de  
Bruin, “as an outstanding example of a complete cricketer.” Sarath lived, thought and loved his  
cricket.

### **Real treat**

Watching from the boundary line it was a real treat to listen to Sarath regaling us with a ball by  
ball ‘Test’ commentary, very much in the manner of a Rex Alston and then giving us a resume of  
the day’s play with the crisp likeness of a Johnny Moyes. One had only to close one’s eyes to be  
immediately transported to the ‘Test’ atmosphere at Lords or the ‘MCG’. Sarath captained every  
Royal team at every age group and was well on his way.....until that unfortunate injury which  
put paid to what would surely have been a rewarding career for him and for us.

Geoffry Assauw, a brilliant batsman in the classical mould also would have adorned the Royal  
team if indiscretions had not got the better of him, which placed him at cross purposes with the  
establishment! Reliable information has it that later on he had been selected to play in a trial  
for Victoria and thence, perhaps, to achieve greater glory, but for his own carelessness. Geoff  
never turned up for that trial for Victoria for reasons best known to him!

Watching Royal cricket may or may not have made us as fanatical as that electrician, who, when asked what 'DC' stands for at an interview for promotion to the position of Foreman, promptly, confidently and loyally responded that 'DC' stands for Denis Compton, of course!

### **Joy and pleasure**

At least as far as he was concerned he had not got his circuits crossed! Yet, it was from the Royal boundary line that we derived so much joy and pleasure-the type of pleasure only a series of scintillating centuries and a 99 in the '56 season from the enchanting willow of wicket-keeper batsman Selvi Perimpanayagam could provide;

or

the sheer joy only the crafty fingers of an artiste like 'Mynah' Wijesinghe could offer.

Who could forget that memorable effort, when the artiste grabbed four wickets in four balls, (in rapid succession, of course!) in the Royal-Ananda game of 1957 at Campbell Place, thereby earning for himself a warm niche in our hearts, (which has not lost its warmth to this day) and a cricketing memento from that great scribe S.P. Foenander- a gift of a set of books on cricket presented by Foenander himself at the College General Assembly amidst resounding cheers. Who knows the donor may have intended the young recipient to join his tribe in time to come!

Who could forget the instance, also at Campbell Place, in 1959, against Nalanda, when Daya Sahabandu, sent in as the night-watchman ducked, on sweet advice proffered by skipper Sarath Samarasinghe, batting at the other end, that the next ball was going to be a bouncer, only to be hit on his neck and thereabouts by a pretty ordinary delivery, nearly getting himself declared neck b.w!

Who could forget 'Kota' Jayaratne being carried away, horizontal, with his private parts in total disarray, after being hit by a snorter from Brian Perumal at Reid Avenue in the 1961 Josephian game. This was reminiscent of the Wesley game at Campbell Park in 1954, when A. Rabindran had to be carried off after getting his nose cracked trying to hook a bouncer off Adihetty.

Who could forget the many refreshing innings played by Jagath Fernando (the one at Campbell Park in 1969, being particularly so,) culminating in that devastatingly delightful century in the 1971 Royal-Thomian, which broke Ronnie Reid's series record for the highest score or the polished elegance of Sumithra Warnakulasuriya, who, after many a hundred for Royal, lived up to his promise in the Royal-Thomian of 1980 by scoring the highest in the series -197 runs so immaculately compiled. Decisions based on personal acrimony rather than merit prevented a promising star from representing his country with distinction. From the boundary line one could recall at random other memorable performances by Royalists - performances that spelt character, courage and assertiveness.

For instance, in the 1963 Royal-Thomian, Vijaya Malalasekera sent us literally reeling with joy on the Oval Green with a crackerjack innings of 112 not out, his hundred coming off a power-packed drive, so powerful that it deflected off the hand of a writhing Roger D' Silva to the boundary (As a former sub-continental commentator might have said: the ball went scoo-rr-sching mothe-rrr ea-rrr-th to the rr-a-a-a-ps!). It seems that Malale was seeing the red cherry like a football after lunch. **What he did at lunch to improve his vision is anybody's**

**guess!** He literally pulverized that ball and was rumoured to have been admonished by his ascetic father, a respected and avid proponent of 'ahimsa', for causing undue harm to both the ball and to 'outstation' sensibilities!

### **Indelible mark**

More recently in the 1992 Royal-Thomian, Gamini Perera made an indelible mark with a remarkably brilliant, match-saving hundred. Given the circumstances, it was sweeter and far more rewarding than winning any match. By that innings, not only did Gamini bring honour upon his school, his team and himself, he also prevented a unique bit of history from being made. For, had the Thomians under Suresh Gunasekera, won that year, (which they most surely would have, if not for that century, Harin Samarasekera's breath-taking half-century and Nalliah Rajan's dogged innings), it would have been the first time (perhaps the only time ever) in the series, when a father and son would have led either side to victory, Suresh's father the late Premalal having led the Thomian's to victory in 1964. The wonder of Gamini's memorable innings was that the night before, when it was all panic in the Royal Camp, he had promised his coach that he would get a century!

### **Whirlwind partnership**

What of Jothilingam's hundred in the 1956 Royal-Thomian under high-fever conditions or Royal skipper Michael Wille's identical score of 121 in 1957.

What of Skipper Nirmalalingam's scintillating sixty-nine runs in the 1954 Royal -Thomian, who, but for an unfortunate run out, would surely have got a brilliant hundred.

What of the whirlwind partnership of 106 in 40 minutes by tail-enders Vidda (Vidanage) and Harsha (Samarajeewa), better known for their bowling prowess (the latter affectionately identified by a similar sounding nomme de plume then) in the Peterite game of 1960 at Reid Avenue, mostly against the attack of the firey Anton Perera and the wily Le Mercier;

or

Darrell Lieversz's and R.C. de Silva's glorious effort in routing the Peterites, comprising, inter alia, the famous Heyn brothers, Richard and David, at Reid Avenue in 1962. The two panthers, Darrell and 'CD', the one breathing fire and the other smoke, shared between them the twenty wickets, 12 and 8 respectively, running through the Peterites by early Saturday, thereby enabling us to make it to the matinee show quite comfortably;

or

Ajit Devasurendra's patient hundred against the Peterites also at Reid Avenue in 1980, in a valiant, yet futile, bid to save the game for Royal;

or

Ranjith De Silva's mighty six in 1954 over covers at Campbell Park onto the 'Mara' tree, which was on a higher elevation on the main road, a truly 'Mara' six, so to speak;

or

Sarath Samarasinghe, irrepressibly and dangerously slashing outside the off-stump to send the

ball sizzling to the boundary; or his acrobatic wicket-keeping accompanied by that resounding 'howzaaat!' with or without the ball in hand;

or

young Chandana Jayakody's back to the wall innings (thank Heaven that his back was to the wall!!!) with eleven hungry Thomians literally breathing down his neck and legs, to save Royal from certain defeat in the Royal-Thomian of 1984;

or

Thotuwilage's two delightful innings (95 and 108) at the Royal-Thomian of 2001, where he missed creating a record of scoring twin hundreds

– these were only a part of the salacious menu dished out over the years for us on the boundary line.

Hovering patiently on the Royal Boundary Line all these years has been a very pleasant and rewarding experience, indeed!