

## CRICKETING FEATS OF SRI LANKA

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SL overall test record  
Played 165  
Won 46  
Lost 62  
Drawn 57  
Since Jan 1<sup>st</sup> 1996  
Played 100  
Won 39  
Lost 32  
Drawn 29

The recent, astonishing win by Sri Lanka against England at Trent Bridge, and the prodigious record stand put together by Sangakkara and Jayawardene against South Africa at the SCC grounds in Colombo in late July 2006, have coincided a tragic, de facto termination of the ceasefire in the conflict between the Tamil Tigers in the north-east and the state. The coincidence of these events encourages a reflection on the unique cricketing achievements of this beautiful country.

How can it happen that a nation that is one-fifth the size of India has produced the greatest bowler in the history of the game – for Muralitharan has taken five wickets in a Test innings on 54 occasions, which leaves the knight, Sir Richard Hadlee, next in line at 36 times, far behind? How has it happened that Sri Lanka has also achieved the two highest partnerships in the 130 years of Test cricket?

### Lack of appreciation

It also bears consideration that in the mere 25 years since Sri Lanka gained Test status it has won 46 matches out of a total of 165 played with 62 lost. Indeed, since 1996 the record reads 39 won and 32 lost of the 100 Tests played. More critically, the Sri Lankans secured their first victory as early as 1985 four years being initiated to the highest level. By comparison India took 20 years, South Africa 18 years, and New Zealand 26 years before they made the initial breakthrough. Sri Lanka's achievements have not,

unfortunately, been fully appreciated by the ICC, which has never allotted a five-Test (or for that matter even a four-Test) series to the island country!

The cricket literature of Sri Lanka is rather sparse. Only two attempts at a comprehensive history have been published, the first by SP Foenander in 1924; the second by SS Perera in 1996. Neither is free from flaws and neither is up-to-date.

Michael Roberts has not merely rectified this lacuna. He has gone further than either previous writer in analyzing the socio-political and cultural factors that have shaped modern Sri Lankan cricket. Accordingly, his booklet can confidently qualify as the most profound analysis of Sri Lankan history written thus far.

Roberts is well qualified to write dispassionately and unequivocally about both historical and current trends. A historian by training with long exposure to teaching and research within a Department of Anthropology, his long tenure at Adelaide University enables him to perceive both the triumphs and ruptures that have eventuated in his native country. Roberts minces no words in his criticisms of the administration of the game. “[The voting system] has favoured the election of wheeler-dealers and populist politicians rather than patricians notables ready to dig into their pockets.” The retrenchment of successful coaches has not been uncommon. Sri Lanka has had five different coaches over the last nine years. Dav Whatmore was one of the victims on two different occasions despite his patriotically-motivated success rate. Indeed, Roberts remarks that it is a wonder that Sri Lankan cricket has continued to be successful in spite of the ructions in the system of governance.

Even for those who profess knowledge and appreciation of Sri Lanka's cricket scene derived from having visited the island during several Test series, there is in this book so much original and, in some cases, unforeseen information, that it can be said that he who has not read it has only a fraction of

the knowledge essential for a comprehension of the nuances of the cricketing world of Sri Lanka. It is perhaps not widely known that Murali is one of the very few Tamils to have played first class cricket during the last 2-3 decades. But (and again this may not be well-known) his Tamil origin is quite different from that of the Tamils of the north and east of the island, many of whom - Roberts tells - will barrack for India against Sri Lanka. Muralitharan is Malaiyaha Tamil, a descendant of migrants from southern India to the island from the middle decades of the nineteenth century to the 1920s who were induced to move in order to toil as plantation labourers for the most part. His father was from the ranks of kanganies (jobber, foremen) who moved into small scale manufacture. He was able to educate his son at St. Anthony's, an elite school in Kandy (the former capital of Sri Lanka). In contrast, the Tamils of the north and east of the country, are of different pedigree insofar as their ancestors have been present for over seven centuries. Despite these roots they felt marginalized when Sinhala was made the official language of administration after a populist electoral overturn in 1956 fuelled by linguistic nationalism of a sectional kind - eight years after independence was secured. Thus began the tale of their confrontation with the majority Sinhalese people.

Not merely are there ethnic divisions. Cricket has, till recently, been an elitist pursuit, dominated in considerable part by the products of two English-speaking Colombo schools, Royal College and St Thomas' College, the former government sponsored and the latter Anglican. It is these two schools in particular who took up the baton of cricket in the 19<sup>th</sup> century after it was introduced by the British ruling class. What is perhaps less well-known is that initially the game was taken up mostly by lads and men from the Burgher community, descendants of the various European peoples who had controlled territories in the island, that is, the Portuguese and Dutch with a more recent British admixture. Though pilloried at times as "half-caste," their prowess at cricket enabled them to mount challenges to notions of White European superiority. These "Test matches" of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were apparently treated with the same intensity as the formal Test matches that we observe nowadays. Paradoxically, however, the advent of self-rule and the triumph of a Sinhala-Only programme in the 1950s, induced many of these mestizo people to emigrate to UK, Canada and Australia from the 1950s onwards.

The manner in which racial, religious and educational differences have plagued Sri Lanka cricket over the last fifty years is a surprise that Roberts has elicited. It surfaced

powerfully in the 1960s when the Royal-Thomian network was challenged in an unfortunate manner through a conspiratorial effort that displaced the captain Michael Tissera (a Thomian), albeit in ways that were ultra vires and more to the point, in ways that set Sri Lankan cricket's international advance back by a decade. However, the very fact that such an effort was mounted indicated the intrusions of political and class overtones, especially the divide between fluent English-speakers and bilingual Sinhala-speakers. Moreover, such challenge marked the presence of good players from outside the magic circle of leading Christian denominational schools plus Royal College. These new men of skill came from what are known as "Buddhist schools," that is, schools that were initiated way back in the 1890s as one facet of the movement of Buddhist revitalization in opposition to the dominance of Christianity in the colonial firmament.

### Democratization

Two of these schools, Ananda and Nalanda, were at the leading edge of this movement both in the political sense and in the manner in which they had, by the 1960s nourished good cricketers and developed a "big-match" against each other that rivaled that between Royal and St. Thomas'. By the 1980s the captains of Sri Lanka were being drawn from these two schools rather than royal or St. Thomas'. The Wettimuny brothers and the Ranatunga brothers all emerged from Ananda, while Bandula Warnapura, Sir Lanka's first captain when they secured ICC test status in 1981, was from Nalanda.

While highlighting these tensions, Roberts also outlines the processes which encouraged the democratization of opportunity in the field of cricket and the emergence of brilliant players from beyond Colombo - from what are known as "outstation" schools. This analysis deciphers the expansion in popularity of the colonial game to the point where it is now the national pastime, one that enjoys popularity and interest. But Roberts' masterly treatise ends on a pessimistic note; "Instability, alas, has been a feature permeating the cricketing scene as well as the political scene for many a year." And "the silver lining arising from the ceasefire of the past [two] years has dark clouds threatening it (p.38)" Judging from the performances against England and South Africa in 2006, however, I venture to think that cricket will win out over political turmoil. ■

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