

The last XL tour of the 20th Century

by John R. Williams

Tuesday February 9. The first snow of the winter lay on the ground as nineteen players, four umpires and three scorers struggled through traffic jams to Terminal Four to check in for the flight to Colombo. Three more couples planned to meet up in Sri Lanka.

One of the last of the stragglers was tour manager Roger Bassett who had our tickets. Fortunately Air Lanka had courteously checked us in on the strength of our tour ties.

Our pleasure in greeting old friends and making new ones was sadly diminished by the news that our skipper Gordon Potter, the man who had done all the preparatory work, was obliged to stay at home to care for his sick wife Carol. The tour brochure contained lively portraits of players and officials and significantly, were handed out too late for members to call their lawyers.

Wednesday February 10. As is the custom in Sri Lanka we were garlanded with flowers when we arrived at 3.15 am local time and it was repeated when we eventually reached the Mount Lavinia Hotel. We watched dawn break as we enjoyed a champagne breakfast. Chris Mayne somehow allowed his baggage to be deposited in the room shared by Mike Perkins and John R. Williams, who each assumed it belonged to the other. This resulted in most members having their jet lagged siestas disturbed by a call from reception. Tour leader Tony Opatha, the former Sri Lankan Test player, warned about the dangers of over exposure to the sun and Roger Bassett announced that Charles Anderson, due to arrive after the first two games, would take over from Gordon as captain with Peter French as his vice captain.

Thursday February 11. In action straight away against the veterans of the Association of Cricket Umpires at the Lord's of Sri Lanka, the Singhalese Sports Club which was celebrating its centenary. The pavilion was what one would expect of a Test ground and we noticed that the home dressing room had more pegs than the visitors'. In his 200th game for the club, Ron Hart retired very hot after reaching 50 and our 170-5 was not quite enough, a majestic 50 from Tony Opatha seeing the umpires home with six wickets in hand in a 40 over game. Nigel Walker took a wicket with his third ball on his debut for the Club. Afterwards we watched some of Sri Lanka's Test players show how it should be done.

Friday February 12. A social day at the Mount Lavinia, a fine, old colonial hotel built in 1877 with a reception at the British High Commission in the evening. On the way we had our first glimpse of how "the troubles" are affecting the country, the police refusing to let our coach drive along the main road to the Commission building. Our leaders managed to persuade them to let us through.

Tuesday February 16. A long drive through the rice fields and plantations of coconuts, rubber, bananas and pineapples took us to the elephant orphanage at Pinnewala where some of the braver members rode elephants. On arrival at the Le Kandyan hotel, opened in 1997, we were relieved that the altitude, 1500 feet, meant it was much cooler and far less humid than in Colombo.

Wednesday February 17. An exciting game between the showers at St. Anthony's College, Kandy against their Under 17s. Charles Anderson's brave decision to field was working out at 63-4 but with 108 coming from the last 11 overs the school declared at 212-6. More rain forced a switch to a matting wicket and belligerent knocks of 53 by Robbie Barker, 48 from Mike Plumridge and 52 by Charles Anderson took us to within seven runs of the school total at 205-6.

Thursday February 18. Sri Lanka v Kenya in the 1996 World Cup produced a record number of runs at the Asgiriya International Stadium, Kandy, but our match against the Kandy Regional Board U17 XI produced far fewer in cloudy, damp conditions. Once again Charles Anderson opted to field and the boys were all out after 35 overs for 162. Rain put us out of our misery at 70-4 in 30 overs. Top scorer was extras, 25.

Friday February 19. We were woken at 7.30 am by what sounded like machine gun fire which set off a valley full of barking dogs in the mists below us. Are the Tamils coming, we wondered? The security guards were unperturbed. It was remarkable how few signs there were of the civil war being waged in the north of the island. Half the group went off to play golf and the other half visited the Temple of the Sacred Tooth which a year or two before had been

attacked by Tamils. An early evening bus took most of us to see a display of traditional dances climaxing with fire eaters and fire walkers walking over red hot coals.

Good practice, we thought, for running between the wickets. Arjuna Ranatunga, the former Sri Lankan captain, arrived at our hotel for dinner with his family and one of our number qualified for a fine by promising him a copy of our brochure and the prospect of a drink or two when he arrived in England for the World Cup two months hence.

Saturday February 20. We descended the zigzag road from the hotel for the last time, stopping off at the Royal Botanical Gardens of Peradeniya before going on to the St. Andrew's Hotel in Nuwaya-Eliya. The St. Andrew's Hotel is like a Scottish hunting lodge with home comforts like fireplaces and hot water bottles in the bedrooms.

Sunday February 21. We set off through the rain for Dimbula Athletic and Cricket Club at Radella and arrived to find a beautiful ground surrounded by tea covered hills. New Zealand played Zimbabwe there in the World Cup and it is soon to be developed into a major stadium. We felt privileged to see it as it was, virtually unchanged since it was founded by tea planters in 1956, apart from the scoreboard which flattered us by displaying our names. A Scotsman started the tea industry in 1856 in Sri Lanka and his name is still revered there.

Thursday February 25. The start of five matches in six days in the Colombo area. Today we played Wesley College, proudly celebrating its 125th anniversary. The College declared at 200-6 after 32 overs and a 4th wicket stand of 91 between Charles Anderson, 71, and Ron Hart, 19, took us to 161-4. At a perilous 188-9, Mike Perkins calmly played out the final four balls. At the after match presentation the Headmaster called Tony Opatha a legend and a new nickname was born.

Friday February 26. This time it was the British High Commission at the Nondescripts ground next to the Sinhalese SC where Sri Lanka were playing a Test match against India. Two of our number sneaked under the wire to watch the Test perhaps not realising that admission through the gate cost the equivalent of 1 p. Peter French's 41 was the feature of our 163-9 in 40 overs and early rain brought a premature end with the Commission on 106-7. Mike Perkins bowled his way into history by beating Carl Openshaw's record of 14 wickets on an XL tour, helped by two LBWs in consecutive balls. The champagne moment was when a big hitting Australian ringer hit a skier to mid wicket and Roger Bassett's face changed colour three times and his quivering fingers whirred like a mosquito in full flight before he managed to hold on to a stunning catch.

Saturday February 27. Rest day. Some went up river on small boats and others splashed out £1 on a seat at the Test to see Jayawardene score 242 out of Sri Lanka's 485 in reply to India's 518-7.

Sunday February 28. Victory against St. Anthony's College at the Premadasa Stadium where Jayasuria, 340, and Mahanama, 225, compiled a stand of 576 against India. Our game was not quite so prolific. A 14.1 over spell of 6-63 by Gordon Watts, the longest of the tour, saw the boys dismissed for 153 and Colin Anderson's 59 not out which included eight fours in 20 balls saw us home in the last over with one wicket left.

Monday March 1. Tony Opatha proudly led us against his old school, St. Peter's College. He lived up to his legend status by taking a hat trick. He started by bowling the opener for 91 and following up with two LBWs. The College declared at 186-9 and our batting failure was only partially redeemed by the 8th wicket pair batting out the final 16 overs to finish on 89-7.

Tuesday March 2. A 40 over match against a Colombo Colts Veterans XI (sic) resulted in the heaviest loss of the tour. Our meagre 115-8 was passed for the loss of one wicket in an embarrassing 13.5 overs with a 43 year old ex Test player H. Devappriya hitting 72 (12 fours and 3 sixes) out of 90 for the first wicket in 9 overs. The early finish gave us more time to prepare for the tour dinner at the Eden Hotel.

The formal part of the evening began with a tour review from Charles Anderson, read by Peter French, which reviewed the highlights, the opportunity to play on three Test grounds and three club records, the best results on an XL winter tour (won 3, drawn 4, lost 4), the highest number of wickets, Mike Perkins's 16 in 50 overs at 14.86 and Tony Opatha's hat trick. Roger Bassett seconded Charles's thanks to all who had contributed to the success of the tour and welcomed a special guest, Tito Nathanielsz, the only XL member residing in Sri Lanka whose election had been proposed by Henry Grierson and seconded by Sir Alec Bedser.

Tony Opatha then presented his own personal awards, to Mike Perkins (best bowler), Denham Earl (best batsman), Simon Klimche (most cheerful tourist), Charles Anderson (man of the tour), and Ken Medlock (charmer). Ken showed

his claim to the award was a justified one by extracting some £250 from us through fines and other tricks, a sum which was duly presented to under privileged schools to buy kit. The more humiliating fines included those on Ron Hart for complaining about the light while wearing sunglasses in the rain, on your diarist for calling for a runner and being bowled next ball and on Ron Helyar for smuggling 150 tea bags into the country.

Wednesday March 3. By the pool readying ourselves for a late evening departure.

Thursday March 4. A rival at Heathrow. The snow had cleared. Only 44 days to the next XL fixture.



The Tour Brochure proves popular



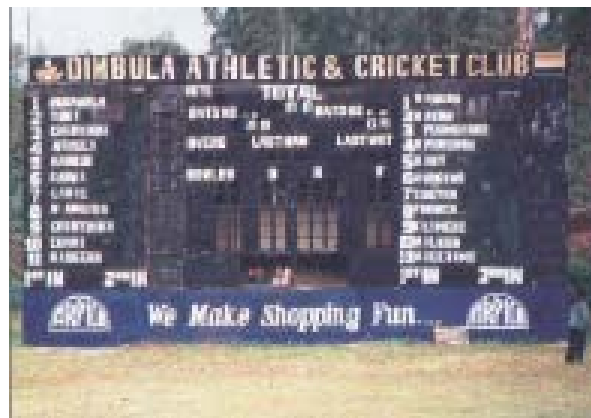
Rolling the pitch at Kandy's Test ground



Carl Openshaw lunching at Prince of Wales College. The custom in Sri Lanka is to use the hands



Happy faces at the Tour dinner. Organiser Tony Opatha is bottom right



The scoreboard at Dimbula



The XL 12 that faced the Prince of Wales College



Skipper Peter French in his David Graveney role with Roger Bassett and Charles Anderson



Time for a break at Badella