

A General Election starts in Sri Lanka as the Forty Club go on their third tour - 2004

by Brian Scovell

"The News of the World" once had a masthead saying "All Human Life is Here." Well, when you are in Sri Lanka there is all human life and a lot more as forty six members and wives went on the Club's third tour of the island in February last year.

Unlike previous tours, there was no rain, not surprising because it was the dry period; England went before Christmas in the monsoon which explains why their tour ended in misery! We discovered that Sri Lanka has changed little. The people haven't grown ruder which is good because they are among the nicest and friendliest in the world.

When we went a General Election had been called with the President and the Prime Minister were at war. It is a terrible irony that Serendipity, the original name of the country meaning "producing happiness", gave birth to one of the bloodiest civil wars of recent years. Since 1972 more than 64,000 people have been killed after Tamil Tigers rebelled in the north. The first suicide bomber came from Sri Lanka. Although the fragile peace was holding, police officers were still manning checkpoints all over the island and the killings were just starting.

One memory I will always remember was the day when I went walking the beach near the Royal Palm Hotel in Kalutara. Some children were playing near a fishing boat and wanted to talk. They couldn't speak too much English. They weren't wanting money, only friendship. One, aged ten, said "Do you want to come to our home?" Suddenly around twenty people gathered, including the father, a fisherman. His English was slightly better. He introduced me to the rest of the children, and their aunts and uncles. One girl was the prettiest and she had the brightest smile.

On closer inspection, I noticed that her skin was covered with burns. She lifted her skirt to show the gruesome marks which covered her body, her arms and her legs "She was in a fire:" her father explained. "She will always have these marks but she is happy as you can see." It was an experience which few people have encountered, especially those who live in the so-called richer countries in the Western world with its materialism.

Those who have visited the sub Continent regularly and love it will know what they mean. Happiness doesn't lead to wealth and never will. At Matale, where the club is short of everything including a proper pitch, even grass in the outfield, a score board, proper water supply and many other filings, I went to have a knock up with the boys who were practising. They were happy and laughing. They didn't want money or my cricket bat or ball. Kevin Smither, youngest member of the XL party, aged forty one, said "To me this shows what the Forty Club means, taking cricket to kids like that."

There were 54,000 road accidents in Sri Lanka last year in a country with a population of 13.8m. It seemed more. The roads were more crowded than ever, buses bullying tuc tucs, lorries pouring out black smoke and the odd cow and dog joining in the confusion. On one coach trip in Colombo everyone was flung forward in their seats as the driver braked sharply to avoid a tuc tuc which came straight across our path. Norman Jones, not the lightest of the heavyweights in the group, was flung down the aisle, finishing on the floor. As he was helped up, he pulled up his shirt to reveal bruises to his arms, his shoulders and thighs. He laughed it off and was fit to continue playing. Later, he recorded the astonishing figures of 5-40. Most of the other bowlers struggled to take as many as that in their six or seven matches, often costing six or more runs an over.

Norman Gray had been the leading wicket taker in New Zealand the previous year and this time he was the leading wicket taker again, with fourteen. Taking the pace off the ball, as the commentators keep mentioning, does work in these beautiful batting conditions. The lob bowler is better than quicks because their deliveries do not go so fast to the boundary... sometimes!

Organiser Ron Hart and Tony Opatha had worked out a schedule of thirteen matches and we managed to bowl only eleven maidens out of 400 overs. Eleven matches were lost and it was surprising that we'd won two. There must have been some collusion. Most of our opponents used all ten bowlers and batsmen regularly retired on fifty. It's a batsman's game and our top men all scored heavily – Neil Blackey 275 from seven appearances, Andy Meads 264 (8), Robbie Barker 226 including the only century, 101 (7), Roly Walton 208 (8) and Ron Helyar 242 (7).

After arriving at our favourite colonial hotel, the Mount Lavinia (named after the wife of a former Governor, an Englishman), we went straight into action the next day, losing heavily to the Nondescripts, a club which boasts a number of Sri Lanka's 92 Test players since the country was admitted to full membership. Your editor had the pleasure to sweep a couple of boundaries off the bowling of Asoka de Silva, the ICC Test umpire who was about to be dropped off the Elite List. The personable Asoka played 10 Tests between 1985-9 and at forty-eight he is still a high-class leg spinner. SAR.de Silva also played against us, 61 off 38 balls, and he scored 102 against England at Lord's in 1984. In the early matches we were facing ex-Test players who were around twenty years younger! Apparently they were under the impression that we were former county cricketers. There must have been a communications breakdown.

There was little rest. Without acclimatisation, we played four games in the opening four days. The next game was played at the Moratuwa which later staged a warm up for the touring Australians.

February 10 - It looked like one of those old Mike Tyson fights – XL all out 113 (slogger Smither 38), Moratuwa 116-0 in an hour. Tony Opatha invited us to his opulent home to meet his new bride Sandy and our cricketing worries soon disappeared.

11 - Out for 156, the Police 159-3 with one of our wags saying "We should be arrested for impersonating cricketers."

12 - A controversy! "Professor" Keith Crabtree does a WG! David Spyer raises the finger after an appeal against him for a catch and he insists "I didn't hit it." After consultations with the "Prof" and the wicketkeeper, David changes his mind. In the ODI match between Sri Lanka and Australia a few days later Andrew Symonds is given out lbw but Adan Gilchrist shouts "He hit it" and umpire Peter Manuel changes his mind. It is reassuring that the world champions are now following the lead of the Forty Club! Gilchrist, about the only player to walk in world cricket, was docked half his match fee for dissent. Golden Oldies 242-8, XI 180-9.

13 - Rest from cricket as we go to Dambulla half way up the island, stopping off at the Pinnaweele Elephant Orphanage. Introduced to a forty-year-old elephant who is blind, Barry Hunter says "Well, he should fit in well in our team." He is fined of course.

14 - We must be slacking. No cricket and instead we go sightseeing, climbing hundreds of steps up to the Golden Temples which date back to the first century. The Sri Lanka team will soon be staying in our hotel, the Culture Club, which lies next to a man-made lake constructed by ancient Kings. It is a beautiful spot and the Sri Lanka team share it. Your editor had several interesting chats with John Dyson, the Australian coach of the Sri Lankans. "English cricket is too defensive," he kept saying. He's right. Most of the other countries have left us behind.

15 - The opposition was billed as Jurunegala Over40s but the current Sri Lanka A opening bowler aged 25, who pros for a club in Northern Ireland, opens and quickly reduces to half pace and appeals are banned, allowing us to reach 175. A 38-year-old left arm spinner – twice swept for boundaries by the Editor - says that he has recently taken his 1,600th wicket in Division One cricket in Sri Lanka, leaving behind Murali, a record.

16 - More rock climbing, 1,200 steps up and down to the Sigiriya Rock Fortress. Eight members, including some of the wives, completed the feat. Well done!

17 - South to the rural area in Matale, population 600,000, and a mat was put on rolled sandstone to allow some cricket out in the middle of a football ground. Football pads would have been an asset. Once again the well-trying formula of batting first and fielding less than thirty overs worked satisfactorily in this heat - 221 against 223-5 off 24 overs.

18 - Relocating in Kandy, famed for producing Murali. We stopped at a Spice Garden to sniff scents and flavours and also visited a Batik factory. Batik is the ancient art of painting cloth and today Sri Lanka's work ranks among the best in the world.

19 - A win at last! Kandy Over 40s 176-6 (Gray3-23), XL 179-2 (Helyar 66, Walton 65 not out) at the Asgiriya Test ground. No investigation from the Anti Corruption Unit was mounted, well not yet.

20 - The conditions are rudimentary at the University ground. Bernard Perrera's XI 284-9 (Jones5-40). XI 156-6 (Meads 59 not out).

21 - Sightseeing in Kandy, including the world famed Botanical Gardens .

22 - A nother win. XL 218 (Mike Plumridge 42, Walton 41), Suisse Mercantile 150. More controversy. The captain is given out stumped off the bowling of John A Williams, off a double bouncer. Duco Ohm, all six feet and seven inches, towering over everyone, stayed firm and the unhappy skipper had to leave. No ICC penalty yet.

23 - Six hour slog down to Kalutara. What a relief to have air conditioning in the two coaches.

24 - A hastily rearranged game at the Transport Board Club and it turns out to be the most enjoyable, a true competitive game with no one retiring and neither captain putting on make up bowlers. XL 188-8 (Blackey70), the Bus Drivers 190-8 (Gray4-45).

25 - Not many U17s in Moratuwa U17XI and odd people kept coming out and taking over. Fifteen were counted when they lined up at the end to shake hands with our gladiators. Ron Helyar was almost still out on his feet when the final over started, needing six for his hundred, but ran himself out. XL 236-6 (Meads 50 not out before going off with the shivers), U17s 240-8.

26 - The encounter against the Mount Lavinia staff was described as "a narrow thrashing" - XL 197-8 (Meads recovering to score 90), Hotel Staff 199-6.

27 - No disgrace to lose the final game, a return against the Police. Robbie Barker had been the most elegant of our players and deserved his 101 out of 247-4. Police 248-6, winning with three overs left. The Police entertained us at their mess and it was a delightful evening. If only we had such good relations with our police force back home!

28 - Day of rest before gearing Ourselves for the final dinner and speeches. Your editor conducted a rather lengthy fines session and after some discussion about where the cash should go, it was decided to split it for the Denis Compton fund for inner city cricket (in sterling) and the Matale CC (rupees). He told the room "I had no interest in cricket when I was a young boy until I spent a long time in hospital and reading about Compo's exploits, including his sweep shot, he became a hero for me so it is very appropriate." After fining myself for dropping names, I went on to say that I knew him well and looked on him as a friend. Actually I spoke to him three weeks before he died.

"He'd lost the will to live and wanted to end it," I said. "His knee had gone, his hip had gone and with no golf to occupy his time he was ready to go. It's hard to cheer anyone up in these circumstances but after bringing up several subjects he started becoming more animated. Helmets, for example. And off he went. And illegal immigrants!"

We managed to raise £250 for Matale CC and £175 for the Denis Compton Fund, a total of £425, or almost £10 a person, a very fine response. But £127 came from two contributors with one, David Spyer, giving half the proceeds from the team's competition. One table raised just £20. But in the end we got there. We upheld the Henry Grierson credo, that we should take the game to young people and give something back.

On the **29th** we flew home, except some of us noticed that the plane had turned round as we were passing Baghdad. Was it weapons of mass destruction about to hurtle into the stratosphere? Almost an hour later the captain announced that a man in business class, not Ron Hart, had a heart problem and had to be taken to hospital in Dubai. It added three hours to the flight taking it up to fifteen. But everyone was happy. It had been another resounding success with most of the credit to the chairman of the Overseas Committee and his cohorts.

Bravo!



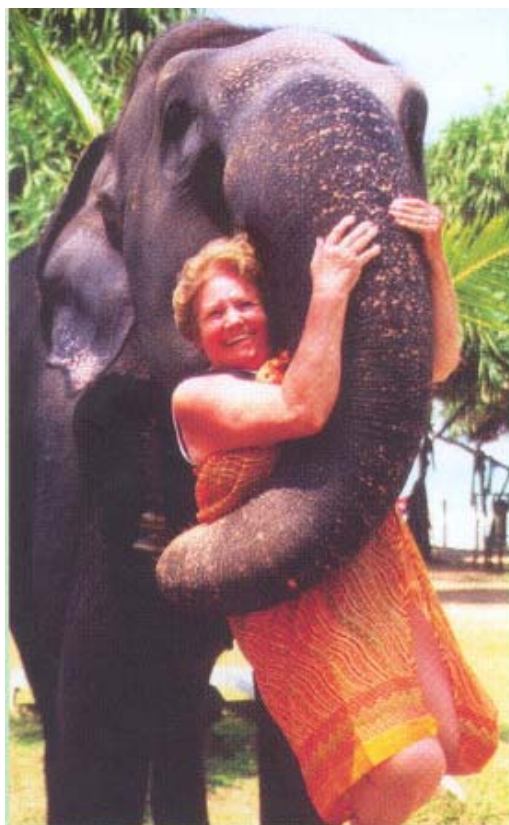
The Australians had just played here!



Brian Scovell, 'Professor' Keith Crabtree, Ron Hart, Ron Helyar and Mike Foster at Sri Lanka's new Test Ground at Dambulla



Andy Meads revives himself after losing a stone



Shirley Kensett wife of umpire Claude,
takes to the air!



That's what happened to the Routemaster!



Most of them were able to touch the ground



Robbie Barker and Neil Blackley enter the fancy dress competition



Our athletes parade for the National Anthem at Matale's bare pitch