

By Nirmal Shekar

THE CHANGING FACE OF SPORTSWRITING

So near, yet so far

THE other day, driving along the Marina, on a whim I turned into Pyrcrofts road and parked in front of a cricket ground that was no longer a ground where any sane person would consider playing any sport.

A once-picturesque ground that is so much a part of the cricketering folklore of Madras — competitive cricket has seldom been played on the Marina since Madras was forced to rename itself Chennai — has become a stinking wasteland, home to vagrants, stray cows and nomads.

It was impossible not to get mistily sentimental as I stood there with a lump in my throat, recalling an unforgettable August day in 1980 when this writer, as a trainee sports reporter in *The Hindu*, got to watch and write about a cricket match for the first time. It is easy to recall that almost 1,000 people had watched an under-19 game on that day.

Today, in an era when any State association hosting a Ranji Trophy final will be thrilled to have that kind of audience in the stadium, the decay and death of a great Madras sporting landmark — the Marina ground — somehow seems to stand mute testimony to the passing of time.

The Marina. The old Nehru stadium behind the Ripon Building near the Central Station. The old Mayor Radhakrishnan stadium in Egmore. Not long after *The Hindu* marked its centenary, each was a home away from home to a young cub reporter and every one of them has changed almost beyond recognition in the years since, two of them for the better, to be sure.

Yet, 10 years ago, on my first visit to the new Nehru stadium, I was enveloped by a great sense of loss, almost as if someone had bulldozed my beautiful old house and rebuilt it to suit their convenience.

There I was, staring at the shining jewel in the crown of the city's sports infrastructure and dreaming not so much about the grand spectacle that an international football match would be at the state-of-the-art new stadium but, strangely enough, being swept back as if in a trance, on a time machine, into the past.

Where, for heaven's sake, was the patch of land along the sidelines of the western ground where I started my career in sports journalism, sitting on a rusty, ageing steel chair? Where, oh where, was that ancient scoreboard which was not



With megastars like David Beckham visiting their drawing rooms — via television — regularly, few sports fans care to attend local events.

so much a board that displayed scores as a monument in itself?

Where then, I thought, in all the concrete labyrinth, would I find Mani, the groundnut vendor who walked a considerable distance to the western end of the ground every evening (all the spectators were on the eastern side) just to keep a solitary customer happy?

Where, really where, was my friend and football connoisseur extraordinaire, the inimitable Rehman-bhai?

Was he lost in the bowels of the magnificent structure? Always in a white dhoti and a crisp khadi short-sleeved shirt, Rehman used to sit at the same spot day after day, whether it was a senior division league match or any other more important contest.

Nostalgia, they say, is a sure sign of old age. Nothing-is-what-it-used-to-be is a lament that you come up with when age catches up with you. It is even worse when you look at change, that inevitable agent of Time, with jaundiced eyes, particularly when the change is surely, immeasurably, for the better.

Surely, the old Nehru stadium wasn't Wembley and the old Mari-

na ground wasn't Lord's. Nor was the Mayor Radhakrishnan stadium, where much of the best of tennis was played in those days, Wimbledon.

But, then, looking back now, sometimes it was greater fun working at these places, watching whatever football or cricket or tennis that was being played with eyes shielded from the lazy evening sun, than trying to elbow your way through the throng on the All England Lawn Tennis Club walkways between courts with an impossible deadline doing little to normalise your blood pressure.

Then again, I am not at all sure if a young sports reporter doing today what I did almost a quarter of a century ago would endorse this view. For, most local events these days — whether it is in Madras or Bangalore or Hyderabad or wherever — are held in near empty stadiums.

While a Ranji Trophy match between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka would attract at least 2000 to 3000 spectators in the late 1970s and early 1980s, today, it would take you exactly two minutes to count the number of people in attendance at Chepauk when those two

teams play.

Indeed, over the last two decades, local sport in every big city has taken a big beating because of the television revolution. With Sachin Tendulkar, David Beckham, Shane Warne, Tiger Woods, Michael Schumacher, Ronaldo and Andre Agassi visiting their drawing rooms, so to say, week after week, fans are simply not interested in extending patronage to local events.

And much of the charm of watching sport and reporting it for a newspaper is lost when the action takes place in an empty or near-empty stadium. For sport without people is a body without soul.

Television may have turned modern day sports stars into multi-millionaires and readily recognisable celebrities but the flip side of this commercial revolution is the fact that it has also turned local, or third and fourth tier sport, into a sort of social outcast.

This apart, for a sportswriter, another great loss because of the television revolution is the fact that he does not get to know the sports heroes of his era as well as his predecessors in the 1950s and 1960s and even 1970s did theirs.

You'd perhaps think the opposite

was true; but not really. In the era when fans who worship cult icons such as Beckham and Anna Kournikova want to know everything, you'd think that all-seeing TV cameras and tabloid news hounds give them everything they want.

Of course they do. But, then, the more you think you know about the superstars, the less you actually do. Television has brought them closer to us but has taken them far away from us too. What it has brought closer is the image of the superstar, what it has removed from our grasp is the real person.

As professionals in the business, we may have met a Pete Sampras or a Steffi Graf or a David Beckham or a Sachin Tendulkar several times in the course of work.

But, at the end of the day, we will never perhaps know them — or perhaps be able to author a perfect personality profile of any of them — as well as sportswriters of the 1950s and 1960s knew the heroic performers of their era.

My predecessors would have been able — week after week — to join a Ken Rosewall or a Roy Emerson for a few beers in the pub after a long day at Wimbledon; they would have been able to go out to dinner now and again with the late M. L. Jaisimha or Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi and get to know them in bare flesh, so to say, stripped of all the attire forced on them by the image makers.

But, if, today, I tried to do that with a Beckham or a Kournikova or even a Tendulkar, I'd first have to get past the sort of security that George Bush would find suffocating and then lash out at the FBI for over-reacting to threats!

Even then, even if I did manage to pull off the impossible, it would still be tough to get under layers and layers of popular myth to try and get to know the person, warts and all, before setting out to tell the readers the truth, and nothing but the truth.

But what the hell, we have our icons, don't we? We know our icons, don't we?

Awesome Sachin. Sweet Sachin. Faultless Sachin. Beautiful Beckham. Brilliant Beckham. Ravishing Anna. Drop-dead-beautiful Anna.

Come to think of it, let's leave it at that, no matter that I'd right now give up my constant companion — a trustworthy IBM laptop computer — and all the other comforts brought in by modern technology and go right back to my old Olivetti portable typewriter if I could watch and report sport in the 1960s and 1970s.

Unfortunately, Time has no reverse gear.

Those magic moments

Excerpts from *The Hindu* reports of significant sports events.

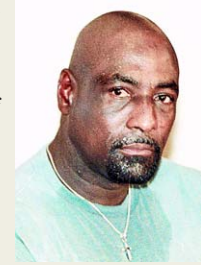
India beats England

MADRAS, Feb. 11 (1952)—Exactly at 3 p.m. yesterday on the hallowed and historic M.C.C. ground at Chepauk, India registered their first official Test victory when they defeated England by an innings and eight runs in the fifth and last match of the series and thus made honours even in the Rubber. Symbolically it was left to Gopinath, the youngest member of the team, to announce the great event to the world by taking a catch from Statham, one of England's last pair of batsmen. At once the great crowd rose to its feet and rent the air with long and tumultuous cheering. As if in tribute, the sun flooded the ground and made it golden. — S. K. Guruswami

Richards' maiden Test century

NEW DELHI, Dec. 12 (1974)—Exciting stroke play led by Richards and Lloyd on a slow turning pitch put the West Indies in a winning position on the second day of the second Test match. Unless the weather intervenes to wash out play, India has virtually no chance of saving this match.

It did not look one-sided at all by lunch time on a chilly day, when the West Indies was struggling with 89 for 3 against some accurate hitting by Clive Lloyd wrested the initiative from the Indian spinners and put the visitors completely on top. Vivian Richards, who did not offer a single chance to the bowlers, provided the 30,000-strong crowd with the finest display of driving on the off-side that we have seen so far on this tour.



There is a classical purity about the backlift and mode of defence of this right-handed batsman from Antigua. On his Test debut at Bangalored, he was surprised by the orthodox delivery and bounce of Chandrasekhar, but to-day he was a picture of assurance against the Indian spinners. — N. Ram

Vijay goes down fighting

LONDON, June 30 (1981)—Vijay Amritraj went down fighting to America's Jimmy Connors in a marathon five-set battle in the quarterfinals of the Wimbledon tennis championship here today. Third-seeded Connors, after losing the first two sets won 2-6, 5-7, 6-4, 6-3, 6-2 to enter the semi-finals.

It seemed obvious that Vijay had taken counsel from people who saw Connors beaten by Arthur Ashe in the 1975 final. He employed many of the same tactics, used by Ashe — short balls to Connors, forehand followed by a net attack and occasionally slowing down the rallies. — John Ballantine

India climbs to pinnacle of glory

LONDON, June 25 (1983)—This was the roseate day of the apotheosis of Indian cricket, the day on which the World Cup was won by a team which was until then as remote from the zenith of achievement in limited overs cricket as the traditional is from the modern.

In a match filled with dramatics that came in waves, created to a large extent by insipid batting from the challenger as well as the defending champion, India proved itself capable of keeping its nerves together and cash in on the openings that were first given and then seized. As fortunes fluctuated wildly on a bright but pleasantly cool day at Lord's, the West Indian batting led down by its specialists, who tossed too many wickets away, could not cope with efficient and accurate Indian bowling that made up for what the side itself had lost in batting. The principle of blending aggression and caution to suit the game plan of striking from a position of strength was forsaken by both teams in sudden and thoughtless assaults on bowling which picked up in efficiency levels on every gain. — R. Mohan

Bangkok again proves lucky

BANGKOK, Dec. 19 (1998)—That golden moment the nation's millions were yearning for dawned on a starry night here. And the man who gave back India its image, identity and the iridescence associated with it in the past was goalkeeper Ashish Ballal. In what could go into the annals of Asian Games hockey history as a contest that can be portrayed as a classic, dramatic and one that should be etched in the mind for years for the components of competition ingrained in it, India came back to level at 1-1, had a purple patch in the second and defended well in the extra-time. And when the tiebreaker came India found the hero — Ashish Ballal, lifting the whole aspect of it into a plane of plain fantasy, crystallising the hopes and aspirations of the hockey aficionados. — S. Thyagarajan

Pete Sampras scales game's Everest

LONDON, July 10 (2000)—At three minutes to nine on Sunday evening, as night was licking its lips in anticipation before eating up what was left of the day for a sumptuous supper in silver grey rather than golden twilight, one of the truly extraordinary sportsmen of this or any era raised his arms skyward in a familiar gesture on the centrecourt at Wimbledon.

Mark that moment — 8.57 p.m. to be exact, three minutes before 1-30 a.m. on Monday morning in India — for you'd find few like it in the entire history of organised sport. And, those of us privileged enough to have been a part of it on tennis' greatest stage, will perhaps find nothing to match it the rest of our lives. It was a historic moment when all arguments ceased, a moment that answered one big question and many small questions, a moment that put an



end to all comparisons. Step forward, Mr. Pete Sampras, wet eyes notwithstanding ... the greatest of 'em all! Argue if it pleases you, but the moment Pat Rafter failed to direct a Sampras serve back into the court in the men's singles final of the millennium championship in gathering gloom, arguments and comparisons became meaningless.

A magnificent seven it was for Sampras at Wimbledon and it saw him leave Roy Emerson behind and move into an orbit of his own as the most successful Grand Slam singles champion in history with 13 titles in 11 years. — Nirmal Shekar

No climax, only penalty kicks

LOS ANGELES, July 18 (1994)—Well, I suppose it had to happen some time. The shame, the disgrace, the absurd paradox of a World Cup final won, if that be the word, on penalty kicks! Why bother to play the World Cup at all, you ask yourself, if you haven't the time to finish it properly? If you cannot make time at least to replay the final!

Brazil probably just about deserved to win this largely dull and disappointing game. It was particular irony that two Italian players so disputably chosen by the ever controversial Italian coach, Arrigo Sacchi, Franco Baresi and Roberto Baggio, should both miss penalties. Divine justice? — Brian Glanville

Big Ben in a mammoth scandal

SEOUL, Sept. 27 (1988)—The image of a hulking man with a weighty chip on his shoulder and feet like greased lightning, a finger in the air and a ferocious smile on his face winning the Olympic 100 metres in a stunning world record 9.79 seconds... well, the image that was flashed to billions across the world took a shattering blow this morning.

Ben Johnson was stripped of his gold medal as he tested positive for stanozolol, an anabolic steroid similar to the male hormone testosterone. And according to medical circles here in Seoul, the drug can cause psychological damage, destroy internal organs and cause early death. And in the International Olympic Committee's list of doping classes and methods, stanozolol is a performance-enhancing derivative.

The Canadian took an hour and 12 minutes last Saturday to produce a urine sample and he gave a thumbs up sign as he emerged from Dope Control to talk to the world media. And early this morning, he and his coach Charlie Francis left Seoul under a cloud of shame. It spelt utter disaster for Canada and the Canadians back home who had celebrated into the wee hours the gold-winning feat. — K. N. Anand

WHAT THEY SAY

"For me when I travel out of Chennai, my interest is to know of the sports activities happening back home. Ideally I look for *The Hindu* in the bunch of morning papers whether I am in Delhi or elsewhere and I am sure I will find everything there."

Sivanthi Adityan

"My day never starts without *The Hindu*. While I appreciate your paper giving three full pages for sports, I think it would have been wonderful if every sport had a fair share in the coverage."

M. A. M. Ramaswamy

"I have been a reader of *The Hindu* close to 60 years now and the reason is obvious: It is the best English daily in the country. As regards the sports news, it was always well presented, the reports are balanced, instructive to many young sportsmen. They could read and know what went wrong."

K. Thimmapaiah

"I am 97 now, but hardly a day goes by without me reading *The Hindu*. I find the sports coverage unbiased and interesting. All the games are given adequate coverage, and I am sure a lot of young sportspersons must have benefited. *The Hindu* has a rich tradition and has so much credibility. It has maintained its standard over the years."

M. J. Gopalan

"*The Hindu* has been dependable and reliable. I mean, you can quote from the newspaper without any fear. Some other newspapers might go in for gossip, but *The Hindu* does not indulge in sensationalism. It just states facts. This is what both players and the lovers of sports would prefer...but I suppose a little bit of spice is necessary at times."

Balu Alagunan

"As a sportsman, I have followed *The Hindu* reports for nearly 55 years. My father had saved paper cuttings on tennis matches since the '30s, which I have read. *The Hindu's* coverage too changed over the years. Those days, it was pure reporting of the event with the stress being more on the match — the breakpoints, the backhands and forehands. That trend is gone. Today it is more professional and glamorous. The accent is more on the psychological and technical aspects of the game."

Ramanathan Krishnan

"To the Indian chess community, *The Hindu* is its official newspaper. The wide coverage of all our nationals, numbering 40 in all, with pictorial support given by *The Hindu* over the years, is one of the key reasons for the popularity that chess enjoys."

P. T. Ummer Koya

"As a regular reader of *The Hindu* over the last two decades, I have always been enamoured by the deep commitment shown by *The Hindu* to promote the cause of Indian sport. The care taken by the newspaper in providing adequate coverage of Indian athletics, over the years, has been exemplary."

P. T. Usha

"I just love the sports pages of *The Hindu* for the newspaper's content, presentation, depth, and analysis of all sports. The coverage has been widespread. I do feel that a day is not complete unless I read *The Hindu*. As a youngster I used to follow three sports, cricket, tennis and hockey. And I had a collection of cuttings of the Test matches, Wimbledon and the Olympics from *The Hindu* and its sister publication *Sport & Pastime*."

S. Venkatraghavan.

"With the readership growing in variety and numbers, *The Hindu* now caters to the need of one and all, from children to grown ups. What I like most about *The Hindu* is that while the paper has kept in tune with the changing times, it still retains that element of conservativeness in reportage which is probably the reason why people of the old school like me will always continue to be ardent readers of *The Hindu*."

P. R. Man Singh.

The first ever Tied Test — Fingleton reports

The late Jack Fingleton was one of the most widely admired contributors to the sports pages of *The Hindu* for three decades. During the first England-Australia series immediately after the end of the Second World War, Fingleton contacted Sir Raghunath Paranjpye, then the Indian High Commissioner in Canberra, and enquired if *The Hindu* would be interested in carrying his reports of the Tests. The Editor of the paper immediately cabled Fingleton to say yes. And there began a long association. The following are excerpts from Fingleton's report of the first ever Tied Test in Brisbane in December 1960.

BRISBANE, Dec. 14. In the greatest Test match in the history of cricket, Australia and West Indies today drew the first Test — 737 runs in all. Never have such fantastic scenes been witnessed as here in the last over by Hall when three Australian wickets fell. At ten minutes to 6, with nine runs wanted by Australia for victory and with four wickets left, Davidson, hero with Benaud of a remarkable fight-back against the clock, was thrown out by Solomon.

Grout met Davidson half-way to the wicket. The clock showed six minutes to 6. Grout went helter-skelter for a run on the seventh ball from Sobers and made it amid pandemonium. Sobers gave his last ball against Benaud everything he had. He literally pelted it into the pitch to keep Benaud at the other end so that Hall could bowl the last over against Grout. And Benaud, avid to get a single to keep the strike, could do nothing about it.

Hall the magnificent fast bowler, who had bowled his heart out in one morning to give the West Indians their great chance, slowly

rolled up his sleeves and prepared to give the last over everything he had. He roared it in at Grout who could not get his bat to it. The ball hit him in the mid-riff and he doubled up, but Benaud had sprinted off. Grout recovered with the West Indians dazed and they got a single with the ball almost in the block hole. But the very next ball, Benaud was caught behind by Alexander.

Hall had six balls to go. Meckiff hit the next in the middle of the bat. The next one he missed, and the ball went through to the wicket-keeper.

Grout called and they ran the cheekiest of singles. Alexander pounced on the ball, threw it at the stumps to Meckiff's end and missed. Meckiff would have been out by yards.

Australia needed four runs with four balls to go. Then happened something almost unbelievable.

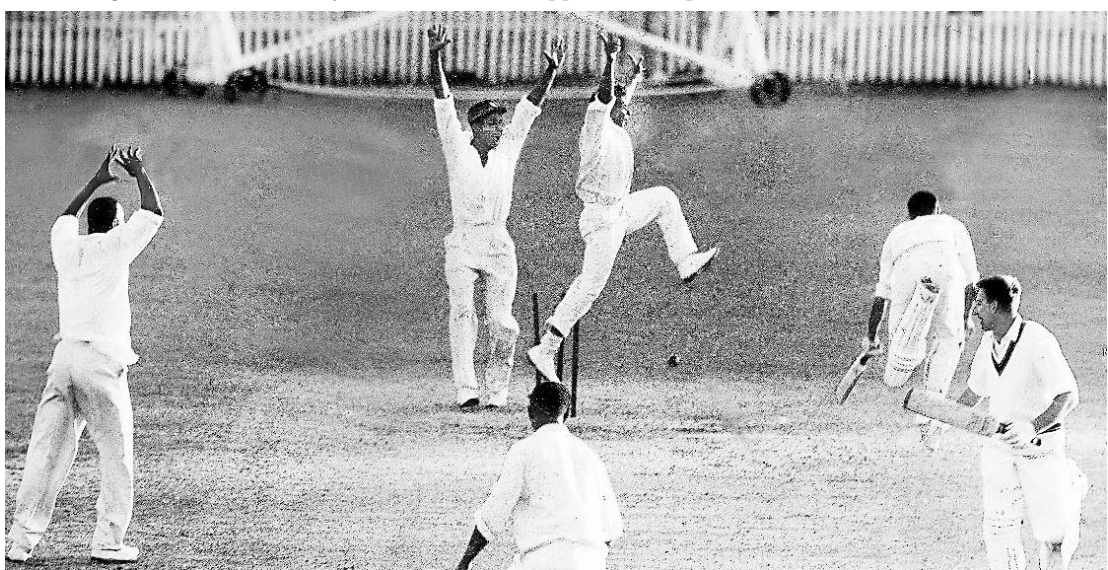
Grout spooned Hall's next ball high to the leg. The West Indians ran at the catch from all directions but Kanhai positioned himself perfectly under it. And then came Hall to take the catch over Kanhai's head — and dropped it! The poor

West Indians stood dumbfounded. The Australians got one run and needed three to win. Meckiff made a desperate swish off the next ball and connected.

The ball flew to the leg-boundary and the crowd roared Australia had won! But the lithe Hunte chased the ball like an Olympic sprinter, stopped it on the fence and with a miraculous throw from 120 yards away had it back like a bullet to Alexander.

Alexander took it and threw himself at the stumps. The batsmen were running for three — the winning run. Grout dived at the crease but Alexander beat him. Up went the umpire's finger. Out went Grout, covered in dust, and in came Kline who had been abed with tonsillitis. The clock showed three minutes after 6.

Two balls were left. Kline pushed his first ball to the mid-wicket and he and Meckiff scampered off madly. Solomon dashed in, picked up cleanly and threw down the stumps and the game was over — the greatest Test ever surely and the first in history to finish (and I quote Wisden's) in a tie.



While the West Indian skipper Frank Worrell surveys the scene from one end, Conrad Hunte and Rohan Kanhai jump for joy at the other after Joe Solomon's throw from the on side hits the stumps to leave the Australian Ian Meckiff yards out. This dismissal saw the Brisbane Test ending in a tie.