

Presidency - Sports Culture

ANIMESH SEN

Although football was the leader in sports in West Bengal, closely followed by cricket, other sports like hockey, badminton, table tennis, volleyball, basket ball, kabadi, tennis (to a restrictive extent) were played all over the state. All school going children from the age of 6 years had their session during the afternoon between the school and home study hours. Those were the days when participation in sporting activities was considered the major form of recreation.

As an encouragement to budding sportsmen, there were a number of tournaments organized by various Sports Bodies. The system produced outstanding sportspersons who in the subsequent days went on to play for various Clubs in different divisions. There were four divisions, both in football and cricket, comprising of 15/20 teams in each division, and they participated in round robin league and knock out tournaments. The system of promotion and relegation used to make the local league a very interesting one.

In the pyramidal system, promising players after their school days and subsequent enrolment into college were keen to make their entry into the college team which used to participate in the inter College League and knock out tournaments for further upward selection into University team. The inter University tournaments produced a number

of prominent players who ultimately made it to the Indian team colour and these were keenly followed and observed by the National Selectors. Just to name a few, Samar (Badr) Banerjee, Chuni Goswami and Sukumar Samajpati represented University of Calcutta and continued to represent India in football while Ajit Wadekar, Sunil Gavaskar, Ashok Mankad represented Bombay University and later India in cricket. All participants in the University team were called University Blue. Among the other prominent Universities which excelled in sports, Osmania and Allahabad Universities should have a special mention.

It is sad that the system has become moribund and hardly produces any local talent these days.

With some exceptions, Presidency College during my student days in mid/late fifties was usually (if not only) linked with outstanding contribution in academics, breeding ground of Research Scholars, future Academicians and Bureaucrats. Proficiency in Sports was always a back bencher.

In a lighter mood, I am tempted to narrate an incident depicting the extraordinary humour of one of my contemporaries Ashoke Chatterjee (a year senior to me) – of course a brilliant student, subsequently to become a very successful bureaucrat. It was a football match between Presidency College and Charuchandra College which boasted the presence of a number of

First Division players of the Calcutta Football League. Understandably, the result was a disaster (Charuchandra College-9, Presidency College-0). At the University ground tent while dejected Presidencians were changing, a remark was aired from Charuchandra quarter – *they lose all matches, why do they play?* Spot came the reply from Ashoke Chatterjee – *they fail in all examinations, why do they go to college and appear in examinations?*

However, jokes apart, Presidency College, alongside academic excellence, have produced many outstanding sportspersons, in multiple fields. It produced some eminent Sportspersons having represented University of Calcutta in the fields of Cricket, Football and Hockey. While they excelled in the Sports arena during their playing days, most of them were successful in their professional fields also.

There were silver linings too. The popular football tournament of the Colleges under University of Calcutta was Elliot Shield, played on knockout system in the mode of IFA Shield. Presidency College had the distinction of winning the Elliot Shield on 10 (ten) occasions. The first victory was in the year 1914 and the last was in 1939. In 1939 the college won the final against formidable Vidyasagar College which had 6 (six) regular First Division players including the goalkeeper Nirmal Deb Roy who was a member of IFA Shield-winning Aryans Club in 1940 (Aryans defeated Mohun Bagan 4-1 in the final). It is just coincidental that first Elliot Shield winning Presidency College was led by Sudhir Ray in 1914 and the last one in 1939 was led by his son Siddhartha Shankar Ray (former Chief Minister).

An attraction was the Annual Cricket Match between Presidency College and St. Xaviers College at Baker Laboratory ground which was a great crowd puller. Also the PAST vs. PRESENT cricket match during the Founders Day celebration was a great treat.

Eminent Sports Personalities of Presidency

While churning the memory, the first name which strikes is that of Nirmal Chatterjee. The other luminaries were Siddhartha Sankar Ray and Dhruba Das. All three of them were contemporaries in the 1930's and played at various levels. While Nirmal Chatterjee excelled in most of the playing arenas – cricket, football, hockey, tennis, table tennis- Siddhartha Sankar Ray and Dhruba Das concentrated mainly on cricket. While all of them represented University of Calcutta and became University Blues, Nirmal Chatterjee went on to become an outstanding sportsperson in All India level, particularly cricket and also football. Dhruba Das also represented Bengal in Ranji Trophy.

Sri Nirmal Chatterjee certainly made a mark in Indian Sports, particularly cricket and football, when he represented Bengal both in Ranji Trophy (Cricket) and Santosh Trophy (Football). Bengal reached the final of Ranji Trophy under the captaincy of Nirmal Chatterjee only to be defeated at Indore by Holkar (a princely state of Madhya Pradesh) led by the illustrious Col. C. K. Naydu. The final unfortunately ended in a defeat, largely attributed to partial umpiring. Nirmal Chatterjee with his flamboyant sporting character, in a true manner of Presidency College upbringing, minced no words speaking against partial umpiring and terming the Final as 'Demolition of Character of Sports'. I was also fortunate to witness an exhibition Table Tennis match at Dakshin Kalikata Sansad when he defeated the then India No. 1 Sri Kalyan Jayant.

While reminiscing about the subsequent era, the names that strike are Sri Pradip Gangopadhyay and Aniruddha Roy. Apart from being brilliant academically, Pradip Gangopadhyay represented the University both in cricket and hockey as University Blue. Aniruddha Roy was a pillar of the College Cricket Team. Mention must be made of Atish Chandra Sinha, a very attractive batsman in the college level.

I have tremendous respect for Partha Sarathi Ghosh – a talent virtually in all spheres, be it academics, music or sports. Partha was a very talented fast bowler who had the potential to play at the India level.

It was a great pleasure watching a very recent **PAST vs. PRESENT** football match at Town Club ground when two Olympians –Samar (Badru) Banerjee and Arun Ghosh were felicitated. Hopefully, Presidency University

will be a prominent contributor to Sports which is a medium of character building and if facilitator in academics for which Presidency College was so well regarded.

In the process of recapitulating, I might have missed many other Sports personalities to whom I extend my profound apology. Any rejoinder/addendum will only enrich my knowledge.

