

# Taking the baton to twenty-five

By S.R. PATHIRAVITHANA

I took the baton for my lap of the race to twenty-five in October 2003 and it was my second coming into the world of journalism after a nine-year run in marketing.

Prior to my joining the Sunday Times, Rangī Akbar who was Deputy Editor for Sports at the Sunday Times and the Daily Mirror had explained that we needed to pick up the content as the desk had run without proper guidance for about two years – since the last Sports Editor Annesley Ferreira had fallen ill and was out of circulation.

The Sunday Times main section at that time comprised twenty pages and the Sports was allocated three of them.

The main section cricket at that juncture was handled by Marlon Fernandopulle, a freelancer with over a decade of journalism behind him, though being a fully-fledged corporate sector manager with a degree in agriculture. Yet his stint as a cricketer at St. Benedict's had induced him to try his fist as a journalist too.

My role as a senior journalist guiding the sports desk and not really running it had its own intricacies, but, when the first controversy came at the

Sunday Times Sports I was not directly a part of it.

It was late 2003 and the second Test between England and Sri Lanka was on at the Asgiriya Stadium when English player Nasser Hussain had been hauled up before match referee Clive Lloyd for calling the Lankan spin ace Muttiah Muralitharan '...ing cheat and a ...ing chucker'. Yet what transpired in the aftermath of the inquiry did not go well with Marlon and he along with the then Times Cartoonist Wasantha

Siriwardena gave a piece of their minds on the event, as Hussain had almost gone scot-free in spite of the misdemeanor.

Following that Lloyd filed action in a British court against us. We challenged the jurisdiction of a British court to hear a case of an incident that happened in Sri Lanka. Yet an ex-parte judgment was given in favour of Lloyd in Britain. But when he came to Sri Lanka to enforce the order the SL courts dismissed the case.

We hear later, Nasser Hussein in his autobiography referred to this incident and he wilfully denied making those disparaging remarks in front of the match referee Lloyd.

Shortly afterwards, Marlon's roll call in office demanded more of him and I took over the international arm of cricket at the Sunday Times while Shamil Amit took over the local arm.

As time rolled by, full charge of the Sports Desk was handed over to me and by then we clicked as a team and every member knew his part and the focus was on. Shamseer Jaleel seriously took over the rugby with Bernie Wijesekera and Harry Jayachandra while Haren Wijeratne and Rangī handled the subbing and the pages.

Now deceased Ranil Abeynaike had his cricket column while the legendary multi-sportsman Tita Nathanielsz had his own brand of golf column with a huge following. The Sunday Musings came in as the third column only at this stage.

Though as the local accent on the main stage was taken by cricket, yet, our team was encouraged to keep a tag on every other sport and also the out-of-the-box stories.

The Sunday Times sports pages live with their ears to the ground and have not been afraid of innovations. Once when the Lankan cricketers were losing miserably to India the Sports Page had its headline "Rock Bottom" at the bottom of the page and when the Australian Cricket authorities imposed a restriction on wire services coverage the Sunday Times main picture was a dark silhouette of a cricketer. This innovation even received

international comment.

Our reports have sparked off matters for top sports officials who were unreasonable and stubborn to be sacked while some of the cricketers have got a new lease of life after our debates.

Even the recent exposure on Sri Lankan fast bowler Lasith Malinga refusing to sign the central contract with Sri Lanka Cricket was made by us while the first news on the SLPL becoming a reality was also revealed by us.

We feel that during the past few years the Sunday Times Sports has grown in stature. The biggest example is the corporate recognition. It made us proud when five years ago international conglomerate the Bata Shoe Company gave up an association with another group that had a history of over a quarter century to join us and conduct the Bata-the Sunday Times Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year Show.

Yet in my stint at the Sunday Times, April 28, 2007 will remain as the most memorable day. It was the day that Sri Lanka was taking on Australia in the 2007 Cricket World Cup final. It was a Saturday and the final was being played at the Kensington Oval at Barbados in the Caribbean.

The time difference between the two countries is almost half a day. Yet, we decided that we were going to stay awake and get the full report into the Sunday paper even though the match was scheduled to end as late as by 2.45 a.m.

Halfway through the match when the Australian opening batsman Adam Gilchrist was hammering the Lankan bowlers with a squash ball hidden in his glove (which helped him hit the ball further) the Tamil Tigers at this end decided it was a good day to catch the rest of the country with their eyes on the screen and chose to bomb the city of Colombo.

We watched the mosquitoes fly by with gun fire, shell fire like sparklers following them. We saw the Gilchrist sixes disappear over the ropes at the same time. We also watched the umpires making a hash of the cricket rules between rain, bad light and play and we took Gilchrist to task after the match till the ICC stepped in and covered him up.

Now the Sunday Times Sports from the three pages in 2003 has grown to 8-11 pages. Some have bid adieu while the nucleus of Rangī, Haren, Aubrey, Shamil, Shamseer, David Stephens and the new blood of Naushad Amit along with our photographers – Ranjith Perera and Amila Gamage have made our team strong and on the job.

