

The sports desk, then and now

BY RANGI AKBAR

The Paste-Up Department at the Sunday Times at the start of the paper in 1987 played a key role. Much depended on the 'look' of the paper and its presentation. This was done by the Paste-Up Department manually. They played a major role in making the paper look attractive.

During one of these anxious days when we were struggling to put the paper out I was shocked to see paste-up artist Senaka spilling a bottle of gum on the half made page. Quickly he mopped it up and started cutting the bromide to paste on it. Meanwhile, sub-editor Gerry Perera was trying to shove in a story into an already packed page. Laying out the pages in a pleasing way to the eye was of no concern for Gerry. He wanted to put in as many sports items on the page irrespective of how the page would look. He belonged to the older generation of journalists to whom cramming in as many stories into a page mattered. His main problem when the pages were being rushed for printing was whether the headline he had given was 'Is or Was'.

I had just returned after eight years in Dubai having worked as a sports reporter for the Gulf News. I was appointed as the Sports Editor of the Sunday Times which had cut its teeth a year earlier. Mike Andree, Amith Passela, Ricardo Gunewardena, Harry Jayachandra, Anosh Ahmat, Marlon Fernandopulle (a former Sports Journalist of the Year) and Thilan Senaratne (a Royal rugby player) were the set of reporters attached to the Sports

Desk. It was tough going. The system of printing the newspapers was on the verge of being computerized. We were the set of guinea pigs for this major step forward. As the head of

the Sports Desk, I had a trying time to organize things.

The name Sunday Times alone was not enough to please our readers. We were often mistaken for the old Sunday Times which was now defunct. We, however, worked on the name which had been bought over by our publisher. We had to start everything from scratch.

Vijitha Yapa was our editor. He had been appointed on his successful run at the Sunday Island. He was committed to hard work and expected his staff to follow suit. When Mr. Yapa found that there was nobody to do the typesetting of a copy he himself would walk down to the Typesetting Department and set his own copy. On weekends he would drive down South and experience some of the hardships during the height of JVP activities to jot down his own experiences.

Some of the journalists at the Sunday Times at that time were Keith Noyahr, Raine Wickrematunga, who had come after a stint at the Sun and the Hong Kong Standard and Gordon Heyzer of Lake House fame. Mr. Nadarajah was the Chief Sub-Editor. He had loads of experience in journalism as he had worked at the Daily News and Gulf News in Dubai (UAE) as well. Ameen Izzadeen, who is our Deputy Editor (Subs) now, was being trained by Mr. Nadarajah at that time. Also doing a political column for the paper was the late Lasantha Wickrematunga who went on to be the well-known Chief Editor of the Leader.

It was at this stage that Sinha Ratnatunga took over as editor of the Sunday Times after Mr. Yapa resigned from the post. I, of course, had met Mr. Ratnatunga earlier at rugby matches. Mr. Ratnatunga had made a name for himself with his well-read political column 'Migara'.

Those were hectic days. We used to work till about 2 to 3 a.m. at that time to put out the paper and go home when JVP activities were at their worst.

The chaotic situation at the Sports Desk could be summed up when at one stage a 'stringer' — the word refers to a free-lance reporter — who was attached to the Advertising Department and reported on sports events mainly to boost his income, came to me and asked me for a letter to obtain a visa to go to Japan with a Sri Lankan Table

Tennis team. Since the editor was not in and time was running short for the tour he was practically begging me for this letter. Without much ado I gave the letter. He took the letter, obtained his visa and went to Japan and vanished on landing at the Tokyo Airport. A few days later, Japanese Embassy officials were on line to editor Ratnatunga who was all fire and brimstone with me and wanted the Japanese Embassy to have him arrested. I had to explain the situation. To cut a long story short, my explanation was accepted by the management, after which a Chief Executive Officer was appointed to attend to such matters.

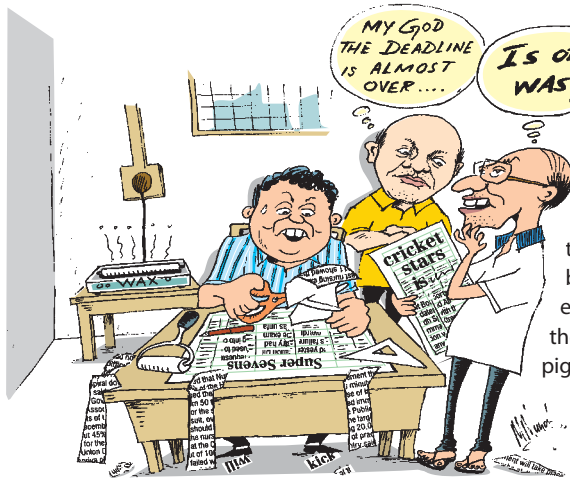
We made the best use of all the facilities given to us. The Paste-Up Department played a key role in our activities. There was Mohammed Munaf (now Cartoon Artist), Jayantha Dabare, Saradha, Mahinda Jayasinghe, Samantha Premalal, Senaka Nicholas (diseased), Bandara Wijekoon, A.R.J. Bandara and Sarath Weerawansa, working with set squares, scissors, box cutters and smoothing out the pasted items on the page with rollers. The colouring on the pages was done by pasting tissues on the pages and indicating colours on it.

After setting up the Sports Desk, I had to leave the Sunday Times in 1993 as I was offered an attractive post at my former newspaper, the Gulf News in Dubai. Gerry Perera, a former Daily News courts reporter and famous netball coach, who had been trained in England, was appointed as the Sunday Times Sports Editor. After my departure Gerry had resigned as Sports Editor and Annesley Ferreira was appointed in his place. It was with great grief I read whilst in Dubai that Gerry had met with an accident and died. Amith Passela too found employment in Dubai with the Khaleej Times.

When I came to Sri Lanka after having relinquished my post as the Sports Bureau Chief in Abu Dhabi, I was posted to the blossoming Midweek Mirror and subsequently was asked to work for the Sunday Times as well.

It was at this juncture that the present Sports Editor Ram Pathiravithana joined the Sunday Times and in due course was elevated to Deputy Editor (Sports).

And so the work goes on. The demand is high but we carry on with smiles despite the long hours. Long live the Sunday Times!



An ocean of experiences

Taj Samudra
Colombo