

## Pradeep Daniel – The fiery Bowler of the Nineties

Cricket is undoubtedly the largest religion of Indians where nobody thinks of religious, caste or community differences. The reverence exhibited and the vehemence with which they protect their icons does not need any illustration here, even though the excessive levels of commercialization, match-fixings and several other scandals have distanced it from the minds of millions of Indians, who once used to be staunch practitioners of this sport, that had its glorious era during late Eighties and throughout the Nineties. No words would be sufficient to praise the role icons like Kapil Dev, Vengsarkar or Roger Binny and Kris Srikant played those days to pump cricket into the arteries of a nation of huge differences and distances.

I am talking about a period, where we had plenty of vacant space in our neighborhood and also the freedom to go out and play with other boys around. The occasional “window smashing” hits by one of the teammates, the sudden appearance of my father with a red face to take me back to the study table or the frequent use of Iodex to remove pain on the lower leg hit by the low-cost cork balls or the punishment waiting back home for ignoring the household work did not deter us in any way. The magic word of cricket held us in its charm. The selection trials at the college and hearing someone saying that my “outswingers” totally deceived the batsman on the other end, all made me believe I was born for cricket, though I still wonder how I managed to create those “outswingers”!

Weekends were meant only for cricket matches. The regular evening sessions during the week were the preparatory practice games for us to look forward to the weekends. Whether the kitchen had enough firewood or whether the father lay in hospital recuperating from a heart attack, did not seem to bear more weight than the magical fascination cricket had on us. The middle and index fingers were always kept in such a way to suggest that you were always ready to grab the ball and crush the stumps of any batsman. The matches against other local clubs around us were fought for a packet of “flower cakes”. The little pocket money saved or organized by different ways and means by each of the team members hardly sufficed to buy a quality BDM brand cricket ball and often we had to satisfy ourselves with the cheaper versions. The ‘lucky dip’ campaign offered Sunny’s Cricket Club, as we had named it, some funds to buy a cricket kit and the club even dared to challenge clubs from higher leagues, though the ultimate result was a crushing defeat for us. The most important privilege of those days was the freedom to play at the military ground without any security check or clearance. The huge ground was entirely available for anybody to go and play. No permission was required.

Every defeat reinforced the urge to beat the opponent next time. With every match grew our confidence to challenge the opponents next time. In sleep and at the college desk we were engrossed with the single thought of defeating the opponents next time. The revelation that the opening pace bowler of the then Kerala team was residing close to our locality came as a golden fork from heaven. Pradeep Daniel, the fiery bowler, always opened his door and just wanted to know when we needed him to bowl for us. The Kerala opening bowler bowling for an insignificant, tiny team? Such was the simplicity and readiness of this bowler, who later on played several times with us; despite the bitter fact that we could not succeed to uproot all ten players and win the matches, even though he always did justice by hitting the opposite bowlers frequently out of the boundaries or taking several wickets from his assigned five overs. During a very important match, Pradeep Daniel set a fielding with three slips and one gully and how an outer edge from the batsman landed with lightning speed safely in my hands still remains one of the unsolved puzzles in life.

With that catch and a sixer with my newly acquired *Symonds* bat during a match, Pradeep Daniel became immortal in my life. We felt grounded and buried when we heard that Pradeep Daniel moved to New York and was going to play for a club there. Not that he did not tell us, but that we could not say good bye to him, remained a cause of sadness for the years to follow. The pride, with which we used to boast of his occasional appearances in our team, suddenly became a past glory.

Years passed by. Clear distancing from today's commercialized cricket did not reduce the affection we once had for cricket. Not a minute of my time is being wasted today in front of the television set, though Pradeep Daniel continued to be a formidable part of my cricket memories. Not knowing anything about his whereabouts or what he was doing, often the thoughts revolved around the golden moments he had gifted us. Surely, he would not remember us, for we were just the tiny, local boys from another neighbourhood, who just wanted to enjoy the pride of his participation.

Decades later, sitting in my cabin at the Goethe-Zentrum last Saturday, Balan Madhavan, the famous wildlife photographer, came to meet me. A lean but muscular man sporting a sunglass with a multi-colour frame and draped in a body-tight batman kind of T-shirt and slim-fit jeans followed him. Seated next to Balan Chettan, as I fondly call him, introduced this US friend to me: " Syed, this is my friend from the US. He used to play for Kerala in the Nineties." Eyes rolled up, heart felt expanded; I could hear the stillness in it for a moment.

"Are you not Pradeep Daniel?", came the question spontaneously out.

"Yes, how do you know me?"

Why should he ever remember me?

He placed the sunglass over the table and his face shimmered with a smile that had not lost its depth despite the long years. Distance and time appeared to have lost significance in that very moment....

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