Golf in the Hill Country

Posted on

Thango

Golf in Nuwara Eliya. In the bracing climate of tea-draped mountains. A course which has been an inviting challenge to even the best pros in the game. It even

shares its name with the celebrated St. Andrew’s Golf Course in Scotland. Although golf was played in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) from the days of the Dutch occupation of the maritime regions, prior to 1796, its introduction to Nuwara Eliya was after the British planters established the mountain town as their special domain of nostalgia.

The Nuwara Eliya Golf Course remained a bastion of the British long after the courses in Colombo “fell” to the advance of the “club-wielding natives”, many years before independence was achieved in 1948. Today St Andrew’s Course and Club House at Nuwara Eliya are wonderful reminders of the traditions of colonial days. Almost a living museum of a venerable past which was the Plantation Raj, one of the great British outposts in the East. The bearers of the great names of the past, British and Ceylonese, have moved on, but their names live on on the honour boards and the priceless trophies they contested. Walk into the Nuwara Eliya Golf Club bar, as it stands today, and you are instantly transported into a different world, a different time. The wood stained to the exact colour of the age-old boards, the brass spotless and shining, the courtesy and warmth of log fires and smiling attendants, reminiscent more of a London pub.

Saturday night, and the planters trickle in. Now it is not just to play golf since the Club boasts of a larger number of pavilion members than golf playing members. By around 10.00 p.m. it comes alive with everyone rallied around the bar, and the log fire. The conversation is varied. It moves with the flow of people and ebbs with the fire covering the range of sports, politics, the prices of tea and fashions of an era gone by. Someone switches on the music and the strains flowing into the bar from the lounge have a few couples walk out for a dance. Then it moves to the grand finale of the evening, which is as dawn streaks across the sky in the early hours of the morning, the singing of the favourites of yesteryear. Then they all move out, alone or in pairs reminding each other that Sunday morning golf is a serious business. 8.15 a.m. on a Sunday morning and the Golf Club has sprung to life. It is peaceful seated on the verandah of the Golf Club, though the course is dotted with a few players who are heard more distinctly than seen. The avenues of trees, and large expanse of land hide the energetic strokes of the golfers, who strive after that elusive perfect stroke.

The Club is conducting one of its weekend tournaments and the competition is keen. Walking with the players as they go through the course, there is pin-drop silence as each contestant pauses before playing his stroke. Then comes an exclamation of relief if it is a good stroke or a curse of despair as the golf club makes more contact with the turf than the ball. After the game the Captain, Mr.

Vernon Tissera, announces the winners of the week This time it is the Club President, Ken Murray, who is also the longest standing President and one of the most popular men at the Club. Nothing less than champagne will do, and this is passed round the company in the winners trophy. Mr. Sam Mattau, life member of the Club and Secretary from 1953-67, said: The golf course has been highly improved but the atmosphere is just the same. The only thing that has changed is the proEuropean crowd, especially the European planter who is no longer here." The bar of the Golf Club as it stands today was designed by Mrs Dawn Waring. The four bugles that occupy pride of place were presented during World War II by a members of grateful regiments. Christopher Worthington discovered quite recently that the Keith Roller Cup was made of solid gold. Since that time it has occupied the central position of display at the bar, though caged behind bars for reasons of safety. The cup has been valued at £5,000, and is the only one of its kind in Sri Lanka. The other unusual trophy is the 'Gold Putter' presented by the Canadian repatriates working on the Maduru Oya Dam as a farewell present to the Club. It has been played for twice and won both times by Ralston Tissera. The first meeting of the Golf Club was held at the Hill Club during Easter week of 1889. Thirty-two ladies and gentlemen enrolled as members, on this occasion paying a membership fee of Rs. 10/- per annum. The golf course, lying 6,200 feet above sea level in a valley between hills that rise from 7,000 to 8,000 feet, was first laid out and played on by the Gordon Highlanders regiment in 1889. The course today is approximately 6,250 yards long and 66 acres in extent.

The "Times of Ceylon" Editorial of 28th August 1932 titled, "The Oldest Game Played in Ceylon," states: "The origin of an institution is more frequently lost than remembered. Such seemed to have been true in the case of golf in Ceylon until a short time ago when Mr. E. Reimers, the government archivist, hunting among the age-browned tomes of his literary museum, came across an inventory of the effects of a keeper of a place of public entertainment in the Fort of Colombo during the time of the Dutch occupation.

One of the items reads: "On the golf course 21 golf balls and 19 ditto sticks. It is accepted now with authority that golf originated in Holland before the 15th century. Before 1450 it was first mentioned as having been popularly introduced in Scotland. It is not unlikely that the colonial officers from Holland brought the game with them to Ceylon." Galle Face Green was the initial cradle of British sports in Sri Lanka. It was shared for horse-racing, polo, cricket, golf, rugby, football, hockey and tennis. Golf travelled to Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Galle, Ratnapura, Diyatalawa, Bandarawela,

Radella, the Kelani Valley, the Agras, Badulla and Jaffna Describing golf on the Galle Face Green, the “Times of Ceylon” in August 1937 stated in an article titled Golf in Colombo….Long Ago.

“With the exception of a flag to mark the holes, there was little or nothing done to create a course and we dug up a tee with our heels anywhere around the drive. The holes could not be called sporting. The short hole at the north end gave variety. A slice took one into the cemetery long grass which was reported to abound with cobras, while a drive over the main road might end in a hole-in-one, there being two holes on the so-called green; but the only time this happened to me I found my ball in the wrong hole.

“Another sporting hole was the drive from Galle Face Church over the old club chambers onto a concealed green. The fairway here was a favourite one for casual sleepers, and I remember a Malay boy being hit hard on the head by a topped ball which cannoned off into the lake some eighty yards away. The boy slept on, and on being awakened merely scratched his head and wondered dimly what had happened.”

The St. Andrew’s extension in the direction of the Ramboda Gap giving 8 additional holes, the ‘promontory holes’ being played twice over to make up 18 holes, was formally opened on 6 and 7 October 1893.

The Nuwara Eliya Golf Course was originally a nine-hole course. Due to the added interest in golf in Nuwara Eliya, Governor Sir West Ridgeway decided to give the swampy area below the Grand Hotel known as ‘Brocus Meads’ for an extension of the links. this was in 1897, but it was not until 1904 that this extension was opened.

The 18 holes bore the following names in serial order of play: Punch Bowl, Police Station, Bank, Crabbes, Bridge, P&O, Queens, Whites, St. Andrew’s, Ally Sloper, Jocks, Two Rivers, Hill Club, Scandal Corner, Grand, Post Office, Tennis Courts, and Old Cemetery.

Today the holes exist but not the revealing names. The holes derived their names from the surroundings, often because they were located next to the buildings like the Grand Hotel or St. Andrew’s Hotel or the post office. Some of the origins are not remembered. Others like ”Two Rivers” and “Scandal Comer” were recalled by Sam Mattau.

”Two Rivers” was the point at which two streams flowing from the east and west of Pidurutalagala met. “Scandal Comer” was a point on this stream where lovers met, bathed and then talked about the latest scandal in town – a most interesting method of keeping up with the latest news in town. From the anecdotes in the centenary history of the Club comes this one. When G. W. White quarelled with the Committee of the Golf Club, this was his way of showing his anger. There were two holes on the land between the present Municipal Council and the Police Station, which belonged to White. He withdrew his permission to the use of his portion of the course by erecting a barbed-wire fence.

The matter was resolved by the Chairman of the Committee, Rev E. V. Freeman, Incumbent of the Holy Trinity Church. Armed with ecclesiastical authority and a pair of pliers he proceeded to remove the obstruction. Obviously nobody thought of going against the authority of the handmaiden of the Lord Almighty and the course today retains this portion of the land. Further extensions to the course, taking in about four or five acres of Crown land belonging to the Queen’s cottage grounds, which the then Governor Sir John Anderson placed at the disposal of the Club, were completed in 1917. This section of the course, now commonly known as Switzerland, made a great improvement to the course.

All 18 holes were also then regrouped under Secretary C. J. Steer’s direction. The old Golf Club House was the building now known as the golf cottage. It is now the official residence of the Club Secretary. The present building formerly known as ‘Boslowick’ was acquired in 1923 from Mr. A R J. de Soysa. 1887, the year of Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee, was celebrated in Sri I.anka with a special jubilee tournament to honour the occasion. That year also saw the founding of the first major Club prize, the lady Mcleod Vase, a handicap tournament to be played annually. 1891 saw the inauguration of the golf championship of Ceylon. It was proposed that there be two championships a year, one in Nuwara Eliya and one in Colombo. A sum of Rs. 100/- was voted towards the purchase of the championship cup. The cup, it was decided, would become the property of the winner of three consecutive meets.

The notice for the first tournament held in Nuwara Eliya read:-” Nuwara Eliya Golf Club, Easter Meeting Championship of Ceylon Saturday, 28th March 1891 Open to all Ceylon Residents

”To be decided by match play in the same manner as the championship of Great Britain. Each match 2 rounds of the Nuwara Eliya links. The winner to become the

holder of the Challenge Cup, and to receive a token. Entrance fee of Rs. 5 – to go to the winner.” Col. F. C. de Saram, veteran golfer writing about golf over a period of years, states: ‘The difference between golf in those days and golf nowadays is that we did not have a big stake on the game. So far as I can remember, at the most the stake was a ball, and most frequently we only had a ball on the game. The thrill was more in the winning of the game than in the winning of a wager. “On the 27th of January 1962 I was deprived of my freedom. We played cricket with a tennis ball in the magazine prison and at the same time I persuaded the medical officer that golf would be a cure for a pain in my shoulder. With a dozen golf balls and a . ·o. 9 iron we managed to play golf in jail.

“On my first day of freedom in early December 1965, my cousin, Trevor de Saram, took me to the Royal Colombo Golf dub ·where the internationals were in progress. ‘ Such is the relationship of the game to the player.

Easter week next year will be the 100th year of the Golf Club of Nuwara Eliya. To mark the occasion a centenary stamp will be issued on 22 March 1989. The highlight of the occassion will be the Centenary Tournament, which will have as participants golfers from all over the world. This will be followed by the Centenary Ball, and the pageant of golf will continue in the normal Club tournaments conducted during the golfing season.

The Clubhouse of the Golf Club.