Rugby: Entertainment in Season

Posted on



Rugby is a popular spectator sport in Colombo.

Looking for excitement – an action-packed evening followed by winning, dining, fun and maybe dancing? Then the best place to be dining, fun and maybe dancing? Then the best place to be would be Colombo, during the months of April to September. Yes, during this six month period Colombo is all agog with the excitement rugby football which is about the only sport in Sri Lanka that not only caters to a wide cross section of spectators but also contributes largely towards the social life of the country. Social life and rugby have gone hand in hand in Sri Lanka ever since the British introduced the sport to the country as a form of recreation over 109 years ago, in 1879. It all began onJune28, 1879 with the formation of what was the first ever rugby football club, The Colombo Football Club, a strictly European concern at that time.

Clubs then began to spring up in other parts of the island, mainly in the tea plantation sector up in the cold climes which were controlled and run by the British. With the formation of these clubs the British planters began to play the game as a

recreation. These matches were followed by socials arranged by the host club, which began the tradition of rugby evenings. In fact it can be said that the British have left two of the best legacies to this island paradise- these are tea and rugby football. To many, the survival in Sri Lanka of rugby football and the social life involved with it may come as surprise when considering that the game has died in larger countries of the region such as India and Pakistan since the departure of the British, Scots and Irish. The Sri Lankans however, are different. They were attracted to this fast rugged sport and the life style that went with it. They were quick to learn and take to the game which accounts for rugby's survival in Sri Lanka. Colombo has now become the centre of rugby in the island, with three of the oldest and most popular clubs involved in rugby being situated here.

Many a visitor to Sri Lanka when told of the fun and entertainment of rugby would take out temporary membership at one of the clubs to join in the excitement. When the three major clubs CR & FC, Havelocks and the CH&FC meet each other excitement runs high before and during the match. Later in the evening the fun begins as the host club true to tradition holds a grand social in honour of their opponents. This social open to members and guests includes wine, dining and dancing to live bands. The dancing goes on till the small hours of dawn. Part of the fun of a Rugby Dance, which is not a stiff, formal event, is the singing and dancing of Balla, the catchy calypso-like music of the Portuguese which is now part of Sri Lankan music. The CH & FC, or the Ceylonese Hockey and Football Club, is the oldest of the three clubs in Colombo. It was founded in 1892 as the Colombo Hockey Club and later amalgamated with the Colombo Football Club and the Queens Club.

Today it has a membership of over 1000 and opens its doors to tourists and expatriates who seek temporary membership. It is equipped with two good bars, of which the President's Bar is considered the best in sports clubs. Along with rugby, other sports including hockey, cricket, squash and billiards are played at this club which is situated at Maitland Crescent. Tennis is played at the Queens Club situated at Baudhaloka Mawatha, on some of the best laid courts in the city. The second oldest club is the Havelock Sports Club founded in 1915. This club which was first housed in a small wooden caravan still in use, is now one of the most popular sports clubs in the island, with the largest following of rugby fans. While rugby takes pride of place and big socials are the order, the club also has hockey, soccer, billiards and badminton. The bar of the Havelocks is regarded as the friendliest in the city. It has a pleasant lawn where drinks are served, and the finger foods from the club kitchen are good samples of Sri Lankan cuisine. Foreigners wishing to make use of the club

facilities need only take out a temporary membership. The last of the big clubs is the CR & FC Ceylonese Rugby and Football Club formed in 1922.

Today the club has teams playing not only rugby, but soccer, hockey, tennis and squash. The CR, as it is called, has a gymnasium considered the best equipped in the island and a spacious restaurant, too. A rugby evening at the CR is always a place for good entertainment where one meets many Sri Lankan professionals in a mood of relaxation. Here too temporary membership is available to foreigners.

Clubs in the hill country, at places such as Dimbulla and Dickoya, have their own social life which too involves rugby, a tradition coming down to them from the time of the British Planters. If you spend even a few days in Colombo this season, be sure to take in a rugby match and social event. If you make a friend while in town, it’s likely that they’ll be a member of one of the clubs and will introduce you as a guest or temporary member. Otherwise ask your travel agent or hotel manager.



A section of the enthusiastic spectators at a Rugby match in Colombo.