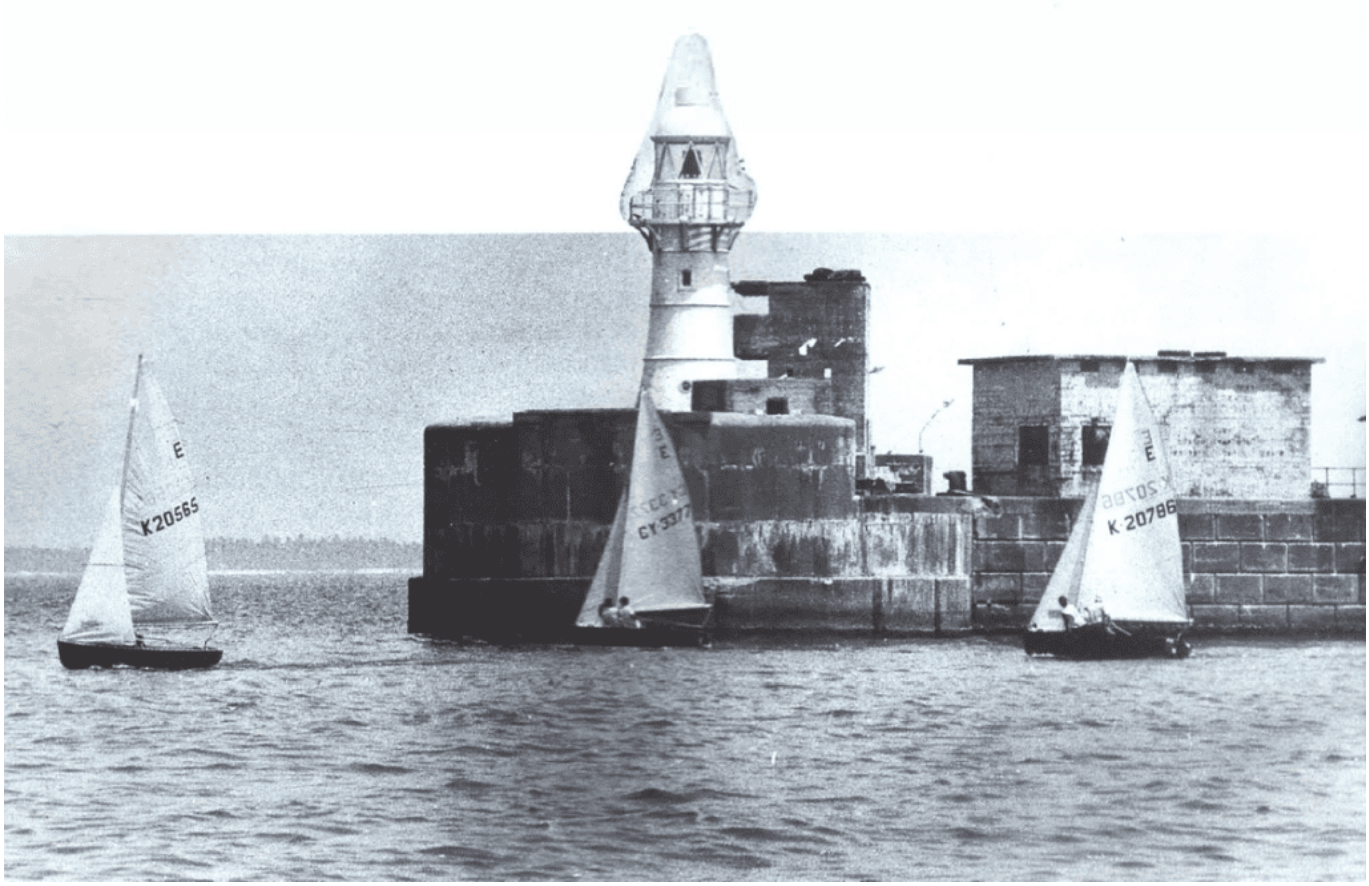
The Splendid Sport of Yacht Racing

Posted on

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In 1927 Sir Thomas Lipton gifted to the Royal Colombo Yacht Club (RCYC) the ornate and intricately crafted silver Lipton Cup in support of ·’the splendid sport of yacht racing” in Ceylon, as Sir Thomas wrote to the Club’s Secretary at that time. This magnificent trophy gave rise to the annual Lipton Cup Yacht Races which have been held by the Club ever since. This traditional and most important event the Club’s sailing calendar took place this year on February.

Under brilliantly blue skies, the small flotilla of racing boats bobbed gently on the calm waters in front of the Clubhouse with their sails fluttering like so many colourful butterfly wings in the light breeze that wafted across the Harbour. The

weather conditions seemed ideal for the regatta.

The excitement mounted before the morning’s race while the participants milled about in a confused jumble some making last-minute searches for a crew member others hurriedly jotting down the course and signing in, after which many went out to check their boats and ready them for the race. It was quite an international gathering including 27 Sri Lankans, 10 British, 9 Germans and one person each from America and Canada taking part. Amid all the hubbub, the pealing of a hanging bell called everyone to attention as the Club’s Commodore and Officer of the Day, Mr Joseph Kenny, briefed the assembly of sailors on the particulars of the two races to be held. As the Commodore spoke, my eye wandered around the Clubhouse and recalled to mind what I had been told about the history of the Club. When I first heard the name “Royal Colombo Yacht Club”, it conjured up an image of an elite group of wealthy people owning luxury vessels manned by large crews who cruised around on pleasure excursions. The reality of the Club is, however, quite different. Actually, the Club, which was founded in 1898, was originally christened the Colombo Sailing Club. It was only in 1924 when a royal charter was granted to the Club that the name was changed to the somewhat imposing one it has today. The 14 yachts currently owned by the RCYC, which I had erroneously pictured as luxury cruisers, are in fact light racmg craft called Waterwags and are manned by only two people: a helm who controls the tiller to steer the boat and a crew who helps to manoeuver the craft. Waterwags have been sailed in Colombo Harbour by the RCYC since 1909 and they remain today the Club’s class boat which are raced every Wednesday and Saturday in the Harbour.



Enterprises sailing through the Harbour heading out the open sea



Competitors positioning themselves at the starting line for the signal to begin the race.

The Clubhouse itself, constructed in 1916, was initially located on a different site along the Harbour front until ·1960 when its lease was terminated by the Government. TheClub’s boats were then transferred to Beira Lake where the Colombo Rowing Club made room for them until another place was finally found for a new Clubhouse in 1968. The new Clubhouse -the one in which I found myself today-was built on a site very near to the original one and was formally inaugurated in 1969. The RCYC now once again has its own facilities including boat sheds and a workshop, and its Clubhouse building has an open front overlooking the Harbour and a nautically decorated bar dispensing refreshments which have no doubt revived many a sailor after an arduous day of racing, as it would prove to do again today.

No, the RCYC is certainly no exclusive, stuffy club for the rich. The atmosphere is casual, and it is a friendly and welcoming place for those who love sailing to meet,

relax and practise their skills on the water. The RCYC is dedicated to encouraging and expanding sailing activities in Sri Lanka. It has recently resumed running sailing classes for beginners and offers student and group memberships at reduced rates and free sailing lessons to enable more and more people from all walks of life to participate in this exciting and exacting sport. Training in other aspects of sailing such as race management and skill development of experienced sailors are also being planned in order to improve to international standards the sailing abilities of the young and the not-so-young.

Another peal of the Clubhouse bell brought my attention back to what was happening around me. The time had finally come for the competitors to set sail and head for the starting line. Being there as an observer, I proceeded to board the Navy launch from which I would be able to watch the day’s events at close quarters.

In the two races of the regatta, five types of boats would participate : the Club’s Waterwags, Enterprises and G-14s from the Ceylon Motor Yacht Club at Bolgoda Lake, a Hobycat al o from Bolgoda, and a Lazer from Negombo Lagoon. In all, 26 boats were to compete in the first race which was scheduled to start at 11.30 a.m. However, the unexpected entry (unexpected by the Race Committee, that is) into the Harbour of a huge container vessel postponed the start by 20 minutes as the competitor reassembled themselves to make way for the incoming hip. In the interim, one Enterprise had a gear malfunction, so only 25 contestants set out when the tarting bell at . last signalled the beginning of the race. our launch did its best to stay out of the way of the boats, we passed the pilot station and pulled readily out in front of the fleet. This being the first time I had been out on the open ocean, I found it an exhilarating experience which momentarily distracted me from how the competitors behind us were faring. But once we reached our vantage point beyond the windward mark on the course two miles out to sea, we could clearly see the different types of boats’ variously coloured sails fan out in a rainbow arrangement as they zig-zagged through the Harbour entrance and out into the open sea. In the lead were the faster Enterprises and G-14s with the Hobycat and Lazer quickly gaining speed and the slower Waterwags bringing up the rear. From start to finish the race lasted a little over two hours with the first boat to finish being an Enterprise sailed by Lalin Jirasinha, who completed the course in 88 minutes.

The second race started shortly before p.m. and was held inside the Harbour due to a change in wind conditions. There were fewer entrants than in the previous race since several of the boats were forced to drop out for one reason or another. This notwithstanding during the second race there seemed to be more near misses and

barely avoided collisions as the boats tacked to change positions and the only boat to capsize that day occurred in the second day. However the fewer number of boats out allowed us to get a better view of how each type of craft performed. The single-handed Lazer seemed to cut effortlessly through the water which in the late afternoon sun resembled a sparkling field of diamonds dancing on the surface. Most striking of all though was the one-man Hobycat, a catamaran or two-hulled boat with its windfilled white sail looking like a graceful swan as it literally skimmed over the water at top speed to come in first over the finish line. However back on the shore after the handicaps had been worked out, Lalin Jirasinha was declared the winner for the second time that day.

It took far longer before the final results of the Lipton Cup Race were calculated, and while we awaited the decision, the by then tired sailor along with their families and friends refreshed themselves at the crowded bar and relaxed in little groups about the Clubhouse. It was now well past 6 p.m. and the un had set by the time the day’s winners were at last announced-the overall winner of both races and therefore of the coveted gorgeous Lipton Cup being none other than… Lalin Jirasinha. The awards ceremony was an extremely jovial affair with much handclapping, joke cracking and cheers not only for the winners but for the organizers and the sponsors of the race day as well. I was given a regatta T-shirt as a memento of the day, which wasn’t my only souvenir to remember the day by : the next morning I ended up with a bad case of sunburn from having been out so long on the sunny waters. But the fun and excitement of the race day more than compensated for any discomfort. Everyone agreed that it had been indeed a splendid day of sailing, and I wholeheartedly concur -sunburn and all.



The single-handed Lazer pulling out in front.