

My Golden Days at St John's (1952 - 1963)

By

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When I first entered St. John's from the neighbouring Tamil School in the early '50s, I was pleasantly surprised by the beauty and vastness of the college. It was like arriving from Colombo to Melbourne. The beautiful grounds, the well maintained science block and the huge Williams Hall were very impressive. In those days when Old Park Road gate was the main entrance, Old Park Road would be packed with boys and girls, just before 8.45 am and just after 3.45 pm, so much so that cars found it difficult to get through. Some of the boys treated the Old Park and the neighbouring houses as extensions of St John's. They would throw stones at any house having "navat palam", "kodang kai". "villankai", and mangoes. Even the sourest raw fruit had lot of demand in the classrooms. There were some students who would supply salt to make it a two course snack. Of course, the short boundary wall of Old Park was very tempting and I have not heard of any boy not having jumped the wall.

There were also very scary places like the graveyard next to our classrooms and the smelly set of drinking water taps near the science laboratories and next to the grounds. The graveyard later became less scary as, first my grandfather and later my father were buried there.

I was also scared of Chinniah who used to be our first aid man. Boys used to call him, " Dr Kill". During my time boys were also terrified of Mr James, Mr Gunaratnam, Mr Eliathamby and Mr Anantharajah. I knew Mr James before I joined St John's. His way of punishing boys was to whack them with the rope in which he had his whistle. The first thing he did as a new teacher was to inspect our finger nails. Being short, I immediately hid myself among the boys and soon joined the inspected side. Boys with dirty finger nails were punished with his rope. When he finished the inspection I was very happy. But this happiness did not last long. Soon he remembered that he had not inspected me and I ended up with some, bonus whacking as well. Although we were scared of these gentlemen they were all helpful at latter stages with their advice.

As I lived very close to St John's I used to be in and out of the school on Saturdays and holidays. Some of the Teachers used to ask me to buy them cigarettes occasionally. At times we used to play rounders or cricket with some teachers. Sometimes I spent more time at School than at home. I enjoyed the whole time I spent at St John's. But there are four things which stand out in my memories of our 'alma mater'. First is the cricket season which culminates with the big match against Central College. Second is the prize giving, because the preparation for this function ended up in cancellation of regular classes for singing practices. During this time the middle school boys ended up at home, Old Park or at the beach fishing. The upper school boys ended up at home, Thurairajah Kadai or at the Regal Theatre. The singing of the College Hymn "Mid the shadows ..." and the College song "Decked with shady..." was always well done by the boys. The third enjoyable time was the period between end of examination time and end of term. This was the time we had our cricket and soccer matches. Sometimes we would travel to the Forest Department area to play our matches. Fourthly the rainy days in December were enjoyable for the grade 4's and the 5's. Our grounds looked like a pond during the heavy rainy days and the boys enjoyed their walk through the 'pond'. Later the grounds were levelled and the 'ponding effect' was stopped. Sometimes if it was really pouring we would get a half day. Of course if we have half days we would end up having school on Saturdays.

During my career at St. John's, we had three principals. When I joined College, the Principal was Rev. J. T. Arulanantham. I had only one encounter with JT as he was called then. I was sent to him by Mr Karunanathan, who was teaching me Scripture at that time, to explain why I

did not attend the Evening Chapel Service the previous Sunday. We were very familiar with Mrs Arulanantham who used to direct our plays and dramas. We used to have the rehearsals at the Principal Bungalow. This brought us very close to the kodankai and the Willard mango trees. The second Principal we had was Mr P.T. Mathai. Mr Mathai was very well respected by the boys. He was the only Principal who used the bicycle to travel the distance between the Principal's Bungalow and the Office. He was also an author of a book of Mathematics. The third Principal was Mr A .W. Rajasekeram whom I was very familiar with because I was a senior student during his time as Principal. His advice to the Prefects at that time was, "If gold rusts what shall iron do'. Mr Rajasekeram took St John's through a difficult period of take over of schools and the sathyagraham at the Kachcheri in which some of our boys were involved. I still remember my friends Rajasingam (a great gully fieldsman and a superb goal keeper), Gnanalingam and others falling in front of a Police Jeep in which A .S. P. Van Twest was being driven.

St John's was always respected for its high standard of education. It is said in Ceylon wherever you go there will be a Doctor, Engineer or an Accountant who will be an Old Johnian. The educational success of St John's was brought about due to the good teachers, hard working students and the high level of discipline maintained within the School. The 1959 students who sat the H.S.C Examination gave the school the best results during my time. I can still picture the page 3 of the the Ceylon Daily News giving a long list of the Johnians who were successful. Although our School had always been one of the leading schools in Ceylon, that year we became the outright leading school in the Island. We had the most students entering the university that year. It is very difficult to give a rating as to who would have been the best student during my time. I would select Iswarakaanthan who entered Medical College with a scholarship in 1960. I also rate very highly students who did more than one sport and then entered University. In this category you will have students like brothers Balakrishnan and Anandakrishnan, Tissanayagam brothers, Sivananthan, Selvadurai, Varnalingam, Kanagathurai and Deivendra. If there was a contest for the best allround student in the College's history I would choose Balakrishnan. He was a Senior Prefect, played cricket and soccer, entered Medical college and then as an Old Boy played cricket for Ceylon. His score of 50 against the Australians, which he made as an opener, was a great innings against a bowling attack led by Graham McKenzie. I consider myself privileged to have played under Balakrishnan in 1961.

The Captains of cricket, soccer and athletics appointed by our school are well respected by the students. Once a captain is appointed he automatically becomes a prefect. Thus great sportsmen in year 10 have a chance of entering the Prefect Body for which normally only the HSC students are considered. The cricket Captains during my time included Thevanayagam (1950-S I), Canaganayagam(1952-53),Mahalingam (1954), Maurice(1955),Navaratnam(1956),Tissanayagam(1957-58),Paramalingam(1959), Balakrishnan (1960-61),Selvanayagam(1962) and Selvadurai(1963). The soccer Captains were Segarajasinghe (1950), Shunmuganathan(1951), Sivapran 1952, Yogaratnam(1953), Dharmavarathan (1954), Urudhiran (1955), Ganesasundaram (1956), Rasanayagam (1957), Paramalingam (1958-59),Arumugam(1960),Rajasingam (1961). The athletic Captains were Ganesh (1951), Canaganayagam(1952), Mahalingam (1953), Mylwaganam (1954), Shunmugalingam (1955), Paramalingam (1957), Yogacumaran (1958), Varnalingam (1959-62) and Selvadurai (1963).

The highest office a student can attain is to become the Senior Prefect of the School. In schools in Melbourne a similar position is called School Captain. At St. John's, the Senior Prefect was respected in the same way as a member of staff. He has his own private room in the School as well as many other privileges. During my time the Senior Prefects were: Ratnesar(1951), Benjamin (1952),Yogaratnam(1953), Dharmavarathan (1954), Maurice(1955), Tissanayagam (1956), Sivasubramaniam (1957), Reginald(1958), Karunakaran (1959),Periyaswami (1959). Balakrishnan (1960), Sivashanmugam (1961) and Varnalingam (1962).

When do we stop thinking about St. John's ? Is it after we leave school? Or is it after we get a vocation. We should never stop thinking about St John's. We should always cherish the lessons we learnt, the friends we made and the unforgettable times we had in one of the finest learning institutions in Ceylon.

