



***The 2011
MCC Spirit of Cricket
Cowdrey Lecture***

to be delivered by

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The Spirit of Sri Lanka's Cricket – A celebration of our uniqueness

4 July 2011

Mr President, my Lords, Ladies and gentlemen.

Firstly I wish to sincerely thank the MCC for giving me the opportunity and great honour of delivering the 2011 Cowdrey Lecture.

I was in India after the World Cup when my manager called to pass on the message that CMJ was trying to get in touch with me to see whether I would like to deliver this year's lecture.

I was initially hesitant given the fact we would be in the midst of the current ODI series, but after some reflection I realised that it was an invitation I should not turn down. To be the first Sri Lankan to be invited was not only a great honour for me, but also for my fellow countrymen.

Then I had to choose my topic. I suspect many of you might have anticipated that I pick one of the many topics being energetically debated today – the role of technology, the governance of the game, the future of Test cricket, and the curse of corruption, especially spot-fixing.

All of the above are important and no doubt Colin Cowdrey, a cricketing legend with a deep affection for the game, would have strong opinions about them all.

For the record, I do too: I strongly believe that we have reached a critical juncture in the game's history and that unless we better sustain Test cricket, embrace technology enthusiastically, protect the game's global governance from narrow self-interest, and more aggressively root out corruption then cricket will face an uncertain future.

But, while these would all be interesting topics, deep down inside me I wanted to share with you a story, the story of Sri Lanka's cricket, a journey that I am sure Colin would have enjoyed greatly because I don't believe any cricket-playing nation in the world today better highlights the potential of cricket to be more than just a game.

This lecture is all about the Spirit of the Game and in this regard the story of cricket in Sri Lanka is fascinating. Cricket in Sri Lanka is no longer just a sport: it is a shared passion that is a source of fun and a force for unity. It is a treasured sport that occupies a celebrated place in our society.

It is remarkable that in a very short period an alien game has become our national obsession, played and followed with almost fanatical passion and love. A game that brings the nation to a standstill; a sport so powerful it is capable of transcending war and politics.

I therefore decided that tonight I would like to talk about the Spirit of Sri Lanka's cricket.

The History of Sri Lanka

Ladies and Gentleman, the history of my country extends over 2500 years.

A beautiful island situated in an advantageously strategic position in the Indian Ocean has long attracted the attentions of the world at times to both our disadvantage and at times to our advantage.

Sri Lanka is land rich in natural beauty and resources augmented by a wonderfully resilient and vibrant and hospitable people whose attitude to life has been shaped by volatile politics both internal and from without.

In our history you will find periods of glorious peace and prosperity and times of great strife, war and violence. Sri Lankans have been hardened by experience and have shown themselves to be a resilient and proud society celebrating at all times our zest for life and living.

Sri Lankans are a close knit community. The strength of the family unit reflects the spirit of our communities. We are an inquisitive and fun-loving people, smiling defiantly in the face of hardship and raucously celebrating times of prosperity.

Living not for tomorrow, but for today and savouring every breath of our daily existence. We are fiercely proud of our heritage and culture; the ordinary Sri Lankan standing tall and secure in that knowledge.

Over four hundred years of colonization by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British has failed to crush or temper our indomitable spirit. And yet in this context the influence upon our recent history and society by the introduced sport of cricket is surprising and noteworthy.

Sri Lankans for centuries have fiercely resisted the Westernisation of our society, at times summarily dismissing western tradition and influence as evil and detrimental.

Yet cricket, somehow, managed to slip through the crack in our anti-Western defences and has now become the most precious heirloom of our British Colonial inheritance.

Maybe it is a result of our simple sense of hospitality where a guest is treated to all that we have and at times even to what we don't have.

If you visit a rural Sri Lankan home and you are served a cup of tea you will find it to be intolerably sweet. I have at times experienced this and upon further inquiry have found that it is because the hosts believe that the guest is entitled to more of everything including the sugar. In homes where sugar is an ill-affordable luxury a guest will still have sugary tea while the hosts go without.

Sri Lanka's Cricketing Roots

Fittingly, as it happens, Colin Cowdrey and Sri Lanka's love for cricket had similar origins: Tea.

Colin's father, Ernest, was a tea planter in India. While he was schooled in England, he played on his father's plantation where I am told he used to practice with Indian boys several years his elder.

Cricket was introduced to Ceylon by men like Ernest, English tea planters, during the Colonial period of occupation that covered a span of about 150 years from 1796.

Credit for the game's establishment in Sri Lanka, though, also has to be given to the Anglican missionaries to whom the colonial government left the function of establishing the educational institutions.

By the latter half of the 19th century there grew a large group of Sri Lankan families who accumulated wealth by making use of the commercial opportunities thrown open by the colonial government.

However a majority of these families could not gain any high social recognition due to the prevalence of a rigid hierarchal caste system which labelled them until death to the caste they were born into. A possible way out to escape the caste stigma was to pledge their allegiance to the British crown and help the central seat of government.

The missionaries, assessing the situation wisely, opened superior fee levying English schools especially in Colombo for the affluent children of all races, castes and religions.

By the dawn of the 20th Century the introduction of cricket to this educational system was automatic as the game had already ingrained into the English life; as Neville Cardus says "without cricket there can be no summer in that land."

Cricket was an expensive game needing playgrounds, equipment and coaches. The British missionaries provided all such facilities to these few schools. Cricket became an instant success in this English school system.

Most Sri Lankans considered cricket beyond their reach because it was confined to the privileged schools meant for the affluent.

The missionaries in due course arranged inter colligate matches backed by newspaper publicity to become a popular weekend social event to attend.

The newspapers carried all the details about the cricket matches played in the country and outside. As a result school boy cricketers became household names. The newspapers also gave prominent coverage to English county cricket and it had been often said that the Ceylonese knew more of county cricket than the English themselves.

Cricket clubs were formed around the dawn of the 20th century, designed to cater for the school leavers of affluent colleges. The clubs bore communal names like the Sinhalese Sports Club (SSC), Tamil Union, Burgher Recreation and the Moors Club, but if they were considered together they were all uniformly cultured with Anglicized values.

Inter-club matches were played purely for enjoyment as a sport. Club cricket also opened opportunities for the locals to mix socially with the British. So when Britain granted independence to Ceylon in 1948 it is no wonder cricket was a passion of the elitist class.

Although in the immediate post-independent period the Anglicized elite class was a small minority, they were pro-western in their political ideology and remained a powerful political lobby.

In the general elections immediately after independence, pro-elite governments were elected and the three Prime Ministers who headed the governments had played First XI cricket for premier affluent colleges and had been the members of SSC.

The period between 1960 and 1981 was one of slow progress in the game's popularity as the power transferred from the Anglicized elite to rising Socialist and Nationalist groups.

Nevertheless, Sri Lanka was made an associate member of the ICC in 1965, gaining the opportunity to play unofficial test matches with players like Michael Tissera and Anura Tennakoon impressing as genuine world-class batsmen.

In 1981, thanks to the efforts of the late Honourable Gamini Dissanyake, the ICC granted Sri Lanka official Test status. It was obviously a pivotal time in our cricketing history. This was the start of a transformation of cricket from an elite sport to a game for the masses.

Race Riots and Bloody Conflict

I do not remember this momentous occasion as a child. Maybe because I was only five years old, but also because it wasn't a topic that dominated conversation: the early 1980's was dominated by the escalation of militancy in the north into a full scale civil war that was to mar the next 30 years.

The terrible race riots of 1983 and a bloody communist insurgency amongst the youth was to darken my memories of my childhood and the lives of all Sri Lankans.

I recollect now the race riots of 1983 now with horror, but for the simple imagination of a child not yet six it was a time of extended play and fun. I do not say this lightly as about 35 of our closest friends, all Tamils, took shelter in our home. They needed sanctuary from vicious politically-motivated goon squads and my father, like many other brave Sri Lankans from different ethnic backgrounds, opened his houses at great personal risk.

For me, though, it was a time where I had all my friends to play with all day long. The schools were closed and we'd play sport for hour after hour in the backyard – cricket, football, rounders...it was a child's dream come true. I remember getting annoyed when a game would be rudely interrupted by my parents and we'd all be ushered inside, hidden upstairs with our friends and ordered to be silent as the goon squads started searching homes in our neighbourhood.

I did not realise the terrible consequences of my friends being discovered and my father reminded me the other day of how one day during that period I turned to him and in all innocence said: "Is this going to happen every year as it is so much fun having all my friends live with us."

The JVP-led Communist insurgency rising out of our universities was equally horrific in the late 1980s. Shops, schools and universities were closed. People rarely stepped out of their homes in the evenings. The sight of charred bodies on the roadsides and floating corpses in the river was terrifyingly commonplace.

People who defied the JVP faced dire consequences. They even urged students of all schools to walk out and march in support of their aims.

I was fortunate to be at Trinity College, one of the few schools that defied their dictates. Yet I was living just below Dharmaraja College where the students who walked out of its gates were met with tear gas and I would see students running down the hill to wash their eyes out with water from our garden tap.

My first cricket coach, Mr D.H. De Silva, a wonderful human being who coached tennis and cricket to students free of charge, was shot on the tennis court by insurgents. Despite being hit in the abdomen twice, he miraculously survived when the gun held to his head jammed. Like many during and after that period, he fled overseas and started a new life in Australia.

As the decade progressed, the fighting in the north and east had heightened to a full scale war. The Sri Lankan government was fighting the terrorist LTTE in a war that would drag our country's development back by decades.

This war affected the whole of our land in different ways. Families, usually from the lower economic classes, sacrificed their young men and women by the thousands in the service of Sri Lanka's military.

Even Colombo, a capital city that seemed far removed from the war's frontline, was under siege by the terrorists using powerful vehicle and suicide bombs.

Bombs in public places targeting both civilians and political targets became an accepted risk of daily life in Sri Lanka. Parents travelling to work by bus would split up and travel separately so that if one of them died the other will return to tend to the family. Each and every Sri Lankan was touched by the brutality of that conflict.

People were disillusioned with politics and power and war. They were fearful of an uncertain future. The cycle of violence seemed unending. Sri Lanka became famous for its war and conflict.

It was a bleak time where we as a nation looked for inspiration – a miracle that would lift the pallid gloom and show us what we as a country were capable of if united as one, a beacon of hope to illuminate the potential of our peoples.

That inspiration was to come in 1996.

An Identity Crisis

The pre-1995 era was a period during which Sri Lanka produced many fine cricketers but struggled to break free of the old colonial influences that had indoctrinated the way the game was played in Sri Lanka.

Even after gaining Test Status in 1981, Sri Lanka's cricket suffered from an identity crisis and there was far too little "Sri Lankan" in the way we played our cricket.

Although there were exceptions, one being the much-talked about Sathasivam, who was a flamboyant and colourful cricketer, both on and off the field. He was cricketer in whose hand they say the bat was like a magic wand. Another unique batsman was Duleep Mendis, now our chief selector, who batted with swashbuckling bravado.

Generally, though, we played cricket by the book, copying the orthodox and conservative styles of the traditional cricketing powerhouses. There was none of the live-for-the moment and happy-go-lucky attitudes that underpin our own identity.

We had a competitive team, with able players, but we were timid, soft and did not yet fully believe in our own worth as individual players or as a team.

I guess we were in many ways like the early West Indian teams: Calypso cricketers, who played the game as entertainers and lost more often than not albeit gracefully.

What we needed at the time was a leader. A cricketer from the masses who had the character, the ability and above all the courage and gall to change a system, to stand in the face of unfavourable culture and tradition, unafraid to put himself on the line for the achievement of a greater cause.

This much-awaited messiah arrived in the form of an immensely talented and slightly rotund Arjuna Ranatunga. He was to change the entire history of our cricketing heritage converting the game that we loved in to a shared fanatical passion that over 20 million people embraced as their own personal dream.

Arjuna's Leadership

The leadership of Arjuna during this period was critical to our emergence as a global force. It was Arjuna who understood most clearly why we needed to break free from the shackles of our colonial past and forge a new identity, an identity forged exclusively from Sri Lankan values, an identity that fed from the passion, vibrancy and emotion of normal Sri Lankans.

Arjuna was a man hell-bent on making his own mark on the game in Sri Lanka, determined to break from foreign tradition and forge a new national brand of cricket.

Coming from Ananda College to the SSC proved to be a culture shock for him. SSC was dominated by students from St. Thomas' and Royal College, the two most elite schools in Colombo. The club's committee, membership and even the composition of the team was dominated by these elite schools.

Arjuna himself has spoken about how alien the culture felt and how difficult it was for him to adjust to try and fit in. As a 15-year-old school kid practising in the nets at the club, a senior stalwart of the club inquired about him. When told he was from the unfashionable Ananda College, he dismissed his obvious talents immediately: "We don't want any "Sarong Johnnie's" in this club."

As it turned out, Arjuna not only went to captain SSC for many years, he went onto break the stranglehold the elite schools had on the game.

His goal was to impart in the team self-belief, to give us a backbone and a sense of self-worth that would inspire the team to look the opposition in the eye and stand equal, to compete without self-doubt or fear, to defy unhealthy traditions and to embrace our own Sri Lankan identity. He led fearlessly with unquestioned authority, but in a calm and collected manner that earned him the tag Captain Cool.

The first and most important foundation for our charge towards 1996 was laid. In this slightly over-weight and unfit southpaw, Sri Lanka had a brilliant general who for the first time looked to all available corners of our country to pick and choose his troops.

The Search for Unique Players

Arjuna better than anyone at the time realised that we needed an edge and in that regard he searched for players whose talents were so unique that when refined they would mystify and destroy the opposition.

In cricket, timing is everything. This proved to be true for the Sri Lankan team as well. We as a nation must be ever so thankful to the parents of Sanath Jayasuriya and Muththih

Muralidaran for having sired these two legends to serve our cricket at its time of greatest need.

From Matara came Sanath, a man from a humble background with an immense talent that was raw and without direction or refinement. A talent under the guidance of Arjuna that was harnessed to become one of the most destructive batting forces the game has ever known. It was talent never seen before and now with his retirement never to be seen again.

Murali came from the hills of Kandy from a more affluent background. Starting off as a fast bowler and later changing to spin, he was blessed with a natural deformity in his bowling arm allowing him to impart so much spin on the ball that it spun at unthinkable angles. He brought wrist spin to off spin.

Arjuna's team was now in place and it was an impressive pool of talent, but they were not yet a team. Although winning the 1996 World Cup was a long-term goal, they needed to find a rallying point, a uniting factor that gave them a sense of "team", a cause to fight for, an event that not will not only bind the team together giving them a common focus but also rally the entire support of a nation for the team and its journey.

This came on Boxing Day at the MCG in 1995. Few realised it at the time, but the no balling of Murali for alleged chucking had far-reaching consequences. The issue raised the ire of the entire Sri Lankan nation. Murali was no longer alone. His pain, embarrassment and anger were shared by all. No matter what critics say, the manner in which Arjuna and team stood behind Murali made an entire nation proud. In that moment Sri Lanka adopted the cricketers simply as "our boys" or "Ape Kollo".

Gone was the earlier detachment of the Sri Lankan cricket fan and its place was a new found love for those 15 men. They became our sons, our brothers. Sri Lankans stood with them and shared their trials and tribulations.

The decision to no ball Murali in Melbourne was, for all Sri Lankans, an insult that would not be allowed to pass unavenged. It was the catalyst that spurred the Sri Lankan team on to do the unthinkable, become World Champions just 14 years after obtaining full ICC status.

It is also important to mention that prior to 1981 more than 80% of the national players came from elite English schools, but by 1996 the same schools did not contribute a single player to the 1996 World Cup squad.

The Unifying Impact of the 1996 World Cup

The impact of that World Cup victory was enormous, both broadening the game's grassroots as well as connecting all Sri Lankans with one shared passion.

For the first time, children from outstations and government schools were allowed to make cricket their own. Cricket was opened up to the masses this unlocked the door for untapped talent to not only gain exposure but have a realistic chance of playing the game at the highest level.

These new grassroots cricketers brought with them the attributes of normal Sri Lankans, playing the game with a passion, joy and intensity that had hitherto been missing.

They had watched Sanath, Kalu, Murali and Aravinda play a brand of cricket that not only changed the concept of one day cricket but was also instantly identifiable as being truly Sri Lankan.

We were no longer timid or soft or minnows. We had played and beaten the best in the world. We had done that without pretence or shame in a manner that highlighted and celebrated our national values, our collective cultures and habits. It was a brand of cricket we were proud to call our own, a style with local spirit and flair embodying all that was good in our heritage.

The World Cup win gave us a new strength to understand our place in our society as cricketers. In the World Cup a country found a new beginning; a new inspiration upon which to build their dreams of a better future for Sri Lanka. Here were 15 individuals from different backgrounds, races, and religions, each fiercely proud of his own individuality and yet they united not just a team but a family.

Fighting for a common national cause representing the entirety of our society, providing a shining example to every Sri Lankan showing them with obvious clarity what it was to be truly Sri Lankan.

The 1996 World Cup gave all Sri Lankans a commonality, one point of collective joy and ambition that gave a divided society true national identity and was to be the panacea that healed all social evils and would stand the country in good stead through terrible natural disasters and a tragic civil war.

The 1996 World Cup win inspired people to look at their country differently. The sport overwhelmed terrorism and political strife; it provided something that everyone held dear to their hearts and helped normal people get through their lives.

The team also became a microcosm of how Sri Lankan society should be with players from different backgrounds, ethnicities and religions sharing their common joy, their passion and love for each other and their motherland.

Regardless of war, here we were playing together. The Sri Lanka team became a harmonising factor.

The Economic Impact of being World Champions

After the historic win the entire game of cricket in Sri Lanka was revolutionized.

Television money started to pour into the cricket board's coffers. Large national and multinational corporations fought for sponsorship rights.

Cricketers started to earn real money both in the form of national contracts and endorsement deals. For the first time cricketers were on billboards and television advertising products, advertising anything from sausages to cellular networks.

Cricket became a viable profession and cricketers were both icons and role models.

Personally, the win was very important for me. Until that time I was playing cricket with no real passion or ambition. I never thought or dreamed of playing for my country. This changed when I watched Sri Lanka play Kenya at Asgiriya. It was my final year in school and the first seed of my vision to play for my country was planted in my brain and heart when I witnessed Sanath, Gurusinghe and Aravinda produce a devastating display of batting. That seed of

ambition spurted into life when, a couple of weeks later I watched on television that glorious final in Lahore. Everyone in Sri Lanka remembers where they were during that final.

The cheering of a nation was a sound no bomb or exploding shell could drown. Cricket became an integral and all-important aspect of our national psyche.

Our cricket embodied everything in our lives, our laughter and tears, our hospitality our generosity, our music our food and drink. It was normality and hope and inspiration in a war-ravaged island. In it was our culture and heritage, enriched by our myriad ethnicities and religions. In it we were untouched, at least for a while, by petty politics and division. It is indeed a pity that life is not cricket. If it were we would not have seen the festering wounds of an ignorant war.

Bigger roles for the cricketers

The emergence of cricket and the new role of cricket within Sri Lankan society also meant that cricketers had bigger responsibilities than merely playing on the field.

We needed to live positive lifestyles off the field and we need to also give back. The same people that applaud us every game need us to contribute back positively to their lives. We needed to inspire not just on the field but also off it.

The Tsunami was one such event. The death and destruction left in its wake was a blow our country could not afford. We were in New Zealand playing our first ODI.

We had played badly and were sitting disappointed in the dressing room when, as usual, Sanath's phone started beeping. He read the SMS and told us a strange thing had just happened back home where "waves from the sea had flooded some areas".

Initially we weren't too worried, assuming that it must have been a freak tide. It was only when we were back in the hotel watching the news coverage that we realized the magnitude of the devastation.

It was horrifying to watch footage of the waves sweeping through coastal towns and washing away in the blink of an eye the lives of thousands. We could not believe that it happened. We called home to check what is happening. "Is it true?" we asked. "How can the pictures be real?" we thought.

All we wanted to do was to go back home to be our families and stand together with our people. I remember landing at the airport on 31 December, a night when the whole of Colombo is normally light-up for the festivities, a time of music and laughter. But the town was empty and dark, the mood depressed and silent with sorrow.

While we were thinking as to how we could help, Murali was quick to provide the inspiration.

Murali is a guy who has been pulled from all sides during his career, but he's always stood only alongside his team-mates and countrymen. Without any hesitation, he was on the phone to his contacts both local and foreign and in a matter of days along with the World Food Programme he had organised container loads of basic necessities of food, water and clothing to be distributed to the affected areas and people.

Amazingly, refusing to delegate the responsibility of distribution to the concerned authorities, he took it upon himself to accompany the convoys. It was my good fortune to be invited to

join him. My wife and I along with Mahela, Ruchira Perera, our physio CJ Clark and many other volunteers drove alongside the aid convoys towards an experience that changed me as a person.

We based ourselves in Polonnaruwa, just north of Dambulla, driving daily to visit tsunami-ravaged coastal towns like Trincomalee and Batticaloa, as well as southern towns like Galle and Hambantota on later visits.

We visited shelter camps run by the Army and the LTTE and even some administered in partnership between them. Two bitter warring factions brought together to help people in a time of need.

In each camp we saw the effects of the tragedy written upon the faces of the young and old. Vacant and empty eyes filled with a sorrow and longing for homes and loved ones and livelihoods lost to the terrible waves.

Yet for us, their cricketers, they managed a smile. In the Kinniya Camp just south of Trincomalee, the first response of the people who had lost so much was to ask us if our families were okay. They had heard that Sanath and Upul Chandana's mothers were injured and they inquired about their health. They did not exaggerate their own plight nor did they wallow in it. Their concern was equal for all those around them.

This was true in all the camps we visited. Through their devastation shone the Sri Lankan spirit of indomitable resilience, of love, compassion, generosity and hospitality and gentleness. This is the same spirit in which we play our cricket. In this, our darkest hour, a country stood together in support and love for each other, united and strong.

I experienced all this and vowed to myself that never would I be tempted to abuse the privilege that these very people had given me. The honour and responsibility of representing them on the field, playing a game they loved and adored.

The role the cricketers played in their personal capacities for post tsunami relief and rebuilding was worthy of the trust the people of a nation had in them. Murali again stands out. His Seenigama project with his manager Kushil Gunasekera, which I know the MCC has supported, which included the rebuilding of over 1000 homes, was amazing.

The Lahore Attack

I was fortunate that during my life I never experienced violence in Sri Lanka first hand. There have been so many bomb explosions over the years but I was never in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In Colombo, apart from these occasional bombs, life was relatively normal. People had the luxury of being physically detached from the war. Children went to school, people went to work, I played my cricket.

In other parts of the country, though, people were putting their lives in harm's way every day either in the defence of their motherland or just trying to survive the geographical circumstances that made them inhabit a war zone.

For them, avoiding bullets, shells, mines and grenades, was imperative for survival. This was an experience that I could not relate to. I had great sympathy and compassion for them, but had no real experience with which I could draw parallels.

That was until we toured Pakistan in 2009. We set-off to play two Tests in Karachi and Lahore. The first Test played on a featherbed, past without great incident.

The second Test was also meandering along with us piling up a big first innings when we departed for the ground on day three. Having been asked to leave early instead of waiting for the Pakistan bus, we were anticipating a day of hard toil for the bowlers.

At the back of the bus the fast bowlers were loud in their complaints. I remember Thilan Thushara being particularly vocal, complaining that his back was near breaking point. He joked that he wished a bomb would go off so we could all leave Lahore and go back home.

Not thirty seconds had passed when we heard what sounded like fire crackers going off. Suddenly a shout came from the front: "Get down they are shooting at the bus."

The reaction was immediate. Everyone dived for cover and took shelter on the aisle or behind the seats. With very little space, we were all lying on top of each other.

Then the bullets started to hit. It was like rain on a tin roof. The bus was at a standstill, an easy target for the gunmen.

As bullets started bursting through the bus all we could do was stay still and quiet, hoping and praying to avoid death or injury.

Suddenly Mahela, who sits at the back of the bus, shouts saying he thinks he has been hit in the shin. I am lying next to Tilan. He groans in pain as a bullet hits him in the back of his thigh.

As I turn my head to look at him I feel something whizz past my ear and a bullet thuds into the side of the seat, the exact spot where my head had been a few seconds earlier.

I feel something hit my shoulder and it goes numb. I know I had been hit, but I was just relieved and praying I was not going to be hit in the head.

Tharanga Paranvithana, on his debut tour, is also next to me. He stands up, bullets flying all around him, shouting "I have been hit" as he holds his blood-soaked chest. He collapsed onto his seat, apparently unconscious.

I see him and I think: "Oh my God, you were out first ball, run out the next innings and now you have been shot. What a terrible first tour."

It is strange how clear your thinking is. I did not see my life flash by. There was no insane panic. There was absolute clarity and awareness of what was happening at that moment.

I hear the bus roar in to life and start to move. Dilshan is screaming at the driver: "Drive...Drive". We speed up, swerve and are finally inside the safety of the stadium.

There is a rush to get off the bus. Tharanga Paranawithana stands up. He is still bleeding and has a bullet lodged lightly in his sternum, the body of the bus tempering its velocity enough to be stopped by the bone.

Tilan is helped off the bus. In the dressing room there is a mixture of emotions: anger, relief, joy. Players and coaching staff are being examined by paramedics. Tilan and Paranavithana are taken by ambulance to the hospital.

We all sit in the dressing room and talk. Talk about what happened. Within minutes there is laughter and the jokes have started to flow. We have for the first time been a target of violence. We had survived.

We all realized that what some of our fellow Sri Lankans experienced every day for nearly 30 years. There was a new respect and awe for their courage and selflessness.

It is notable how quickly we got over that attack on us. Although we were physically injured, mentally we held strong.

A few hours after the attack we were airlifted to the Lahore Air Force Base.

Ajantha Mendis, his head swathed in bandages after multiple shrapnel wounds, suggests a game of Poker. Tilan has been brought back, sedated but fully conscious, to be with us and we make jokes at him and he smiles back.

We were shot at, grenades were thrown at us, we were injured and yet we were not cowed. We were not down and out. “We are Sri Lankan,” we thought to ourselves, “and we are tough and we will get through hardship and we will overcome because our spirit is strong.”

This is what the world saw in our interviews immediately after the attack: we were calm, collected, and rational. Our emotions held true to our role as unofficial ambassadors.

A week after our arrival in Colombo from Pakistan I was driving about town and was stopped at a checkpoint. A soldier politely inquired as to my health after the attack. I said I was fine and added that what they as soldiers experience every day we only experienced for a few minutes, but managed to grab all the news headlines. That soldier looked me in the eye and replied: “It is OK if I die because it is my job and I am ready for it. But you are a hero and if you were to die it would be a great loss for our country.”

I was taken aback. How can this man value his life less than mine? His sincerity was overwhelming. I felt humbled.

This is the passion that cricket and cricketers evoke in Sri Lankans. This is the love that I strive every-day of my career to be worthy of.

Post 1996 Power Politics

Coming back to our cricket, the World Cup also brought less welcome changes with the start of detrimental cricket board politics and the transformation our cricket administration from a volunteer-led organisation run by well-meaning men of integrity into a multi-million dollar organisation that has been in turmoil ever since.

In Sri Lanka, cricket and politics have been synonymous. The efforts of Hon. Gamini Disanayake were instrumental in getting Sri Lanka Test Status. He also was instrumental in building the Asgiriya international cricket stadium.

In the infancy of our cricket it was impossible to sustain the game without state patronage and funding.

When Australia and West Indies refused to come to our country for the World Cup it was through government channels that the combined World Friendship XI came and played in Colombo to show the world that it was safe to play cricket here.

The importance of cricket to our society meant that at all times it enjoys benevolent state patronage.

For Sri Lanka to be able to select a national team it must have membership of the Sports Ministry. No team can be fielded without the final approval of the Sports Minister. It is indeed a unique system where the board-appointed selectors can at any time be overruled and asked to reselect a side already chosen.

The Sports Minister can also exercise his unique powers to dissolve the cricket board if investigations reveal corruption or financial irregularity.

With the victory in 1996 came money and power to the board and players.

Players from within the team itself became involved in power games within the board. Officials elected to power in this way in turn manipulated player loyalty to achieve their own ends. At times board politics would spill over in to the team causing rift, ill feeling and distrust.

Accountability and transparency in administration and credibility of conduct were lost in a mad power struggle that would leave Sri Lankan cricket with no consistent and clear administration. Presidents and elected executive committees would come and go; government-picked interim committees would be appointed and dissolved.

After 1996 the cricket board has been controlled and administered by a handful of well-meaning individuals either personally or by proxy rotated in and out depending on appointment or election. Unfortunately to consolidate and perpetuate their power they opened the door of the administration to partisan cronies that would lead to corruption and wonton waste of cricket board finances and resources.

It was and still is confusing. Accusations of vote buying and rigging, player interference due to lobbying from each side and even violence at the AGMs, including the brandishing of weapons and ugly fist fights, have characterised cricket board elections for as long as I can remember.

The team lost the buffer between itself and the cricket administration. Players had become used to approaching members in power directly trading favours for mutual benefits and by 1999 all these changes in administration and player attitudes had transformed what was a close knit unit in 1996 into a collection of individuals with no shared vision or sense of team.

The World Cup that followed in England in 1999 was a debacle: a first round exit.

Fortunately, though, the disastrous performance of the team proved to be a catalyst for further change within the dynamics of the Sri Lanka Cricket Team.

A new mix of players and a nice blend of youth and experience provided the context in which the old hierarchical structures within the team were dismantled in the decade that followed under the more consensual and inclusive leadership of Sanath, Marvan and Mahela.

In the new team culture forged since 1999, individuals are accepted. The only thing that matters is commitment and discipline to the team. Individuality and internal debate are welcome. Respect is not demanded but earned. There was a new commitment towards keeping the team from board turmoil. It has been difficult to fully exclude it from our team dynamics because there are constant efforts to drag us back and in times of weakness and

doubt players have crossed the line. Still we have managed to protect and motivate our collective efforts towards one goal: winning on the field.

We have to aspire to better administration. The administration needs to adopt the same values enshrined by the team over the years: integrity, transparency, commitment and discipline.

Unless the administration is capable of becoming more professional, forward-thinking and transparent then we risk alienating the common man. Indeed, this is already happening. Loyal fans are becoming increasingly disillusioned. This is very dangerous because it is not the administrators or players that sustain the game– it is the cricket-loving public. It is their passion that powers cricket and if they turn their backs on cricket then the whole system will come crashing down.

The solution to this may be the ICC taking a stand to suspend member boards with any direct detrimental political interference and allegations of corruption and mismanagement. This will negate the ability to field representative teams or receive funding and other accompanying benefits from the ICC. But as a Sri Lankan I hope we have the strength to find the answers ourselves.

A Team Powered by Talent

While the team structure and culture itself was slowly evolving, our on-field success was primarily driven by the sheer talent and spirit of the uniquely talented players unearthed in recent times, players like Murali, Sanath, Aravinda, Mahela and Lasith.

Although our school cricket structure is extremely strong, our club structure remains archaic. With players diluted among 20 clubs it does not enable the national coaching staff to easily identify and funnel talented players through for further development.

The lack of competitiveness of the club tournament does not lend itself to producing hardened first class professionals.

Various attempts to change this structure to condense and improve have been resisted by the administration and the clubs concerned, the main reason for this being that any elected cricket board that offended these clubs runs the risk of losing their votes come election time.

At the same time, the instability of our administration is a huge stumbling block to the rapid face-change that we need. Indeed, it is amazing that that despite this system we are able to produce so many world-class cricketers.

However, the irony to this is that perhaps our biggest weakness has been our greatest strength. It is partly because of the lack of structure we are fortunate that the guys like Lasith / Sanath / Murali and Mendis have escaped formalised textbook coaching. Had they been exposed to orthodox coaching then there is a very good chance that their skills would have been blunted. In all probability they would have been coached into ineffectiveness.

The Challenge Ahead for Sri Lanka

Nevertheless, despite abundant natural talent, we need to change our cricketing structure, we need to be more Sri Lankan rather than selfish, we need to condense our cricketing structure and ensure that the best players are playing against each other at all times.

We need to do this with an open mind, allowing both innovative thinking and free expression. In some respects we are doing that already, especially our coaching department anyway, which actively searches out for unorthodox talent.

We have recognised and learnt that our cricket is stronger when it is free-spirited and we therefore encourage players to express themselves and be open to innovation.

There was a recent case where the national coaches were tipped off by a district coach running a bowling camp in the outstations. He'd discovered a volleyball player who ran to the crease slowly but then delivered the ball while in mid-air with a smash-like leap. His leap would land him quite a way down the pitch in the follow through. The district coach video-recorded his bowling for half an hour. National coaches in Colombo having watched the footage invited him out of curiosity a week later to come for formal training. The telephone call found him in a hospital bed tending a strained back as he had never bowled for such a long period as 30 minutes before in his life.

Another letter postmarked from a remote village in Sri Lanka had the writer claiming to be the fastest undiscovered bowler in Sri Lanka. A district coach investigating this claim found the writer to be a teenage Buddhist priest who insisted upon giving a demonstration of bowling while still dressed in his Saffron-coloured robes. Cricket in Sri Lanka tempts even the most chaste and holy.

On that occasion the interest in unique talent did not yield results. But the coaching staff will persevere in their search to unearth the next mystery bowler or cricketer who will take our cricket further forward.

Cricket's Heightened Importance in Sri Lanka's New Era

If we are able to seize the moment then the future of Sri Lanka's cricket remains very bright. I pray we do because cricket has such an important role to play in our island's future.

Cricket played a crucial role during the dark days of Sri Lanka's civil war, a period of enormous suffering for all communities, but the conduct and performance of the team will have even greater importance as we enter a crucial period of reconciliation and recovery, an exciting period where all Sri Lankans aspire to peace and unity. It is also an exciting period for cricket where the re-integration of isolated communities in the north and east opens up new talent pools.

The spirit of cricket can and should remain and guiding force for good within society, providing entertain and fun, but also a shining example to all of how we all should approach our lives.

The war is now over. Sri Lanka looks towards a new future of peace and prosperity. I am eternally grateful for this. It means that my children will grow up without war and violence being a daily part of our lives. They will learn of its horrors not first-hand but perhaps in history class or through conversations for it is important that they understand and appreciate the great and terrible price our country and our people paid for the freedom and security they now enjoy.

In our cricket we display a unique spirit, a spirit enriched by lessons learned from a history spanning over two-and-a-half millennia. In our cricket you see the character of our people, our history, culture and tradition, our laughter, our joy, our tears and regrets. It is rich in emotion and talent. My responsibility as a Sri Lankan cricketer is to further enrich this

beautiful sport, to add to it and enhance it and to leave a richer legacy for other cricketers to follow.

I will do that keeping paramount in my mind my Sri Lankan identity: play the game hard and fair and be a voice with which Sri Lanka can speak proudly and positively to the world. My loyalty will be to the ordinary Sri Lankan fan, their 20 million hearts beating collectively as one to our island rhythm and filled with an undying and ever-loyal love for this our game.

Fans of different races, castes, ethnicities and religions who together celebrate their diversity by uniting for a common national cause. They are my foundation, they are my family. I will play my cricket for them. Their spirit is the true spirit of cricket. With me are all my people. I am Tamil, Sinhalese, Muslim and Burgher. I am a Buddhist, a Hindu, a follower of Islam and Christianity. I am today, and always, proudly Sri Lankan.