

When Shivaji cheered Prasad

MP Anil Kumar (1122/81)

The contest for the Senior Cock House trophy was a two-horse race – a derby between Prasad and Shivaji houses. Ashoka and Nehru were not even pretenders. In fact, the Prasad vs. Shivaji contests generated so much of friction, heat, sparks, adrenaline, lather and house-spirit that the playgrounds generally resembled a battlefield, with the warriors (Prasadians and Shivajians) literally at each others' throats. Sports need not be – in the words of George Orwell – war minus the shooting, but Prasad vs. Shivaji was precisely that. And generally, the last interhouse competition decided the winner of this two-thoroughbred prizefight.

This narrative isn't on one of those belligerent on-the-court or off-the-court Prasad vs. Shivaji duels. It's about a riveting cricket match between Prasad and Ashoka that had an interesting sidelight. I was in the 11th. Ashoka had a star-studded team with the lynchpins of the School XI like Dennis Paul, Tojo Jose & Ajith Varma in their ranks. Our Prasad House team had just one superstar – B Nandakumar, the captain of the School XI.

The majority comprised 11th Std guys like Radhish, Bejoy, Korath, GKG, Shibu and self. It was an unequal contest, but we had steeled ourselves to make up with sheer grit what we lacked in stature. Both the houses had won the previous two

matches against Shivaji and Nehru. So, the stage was set for a gripping finale; the victorious House will lift the cricket trophy.

Ashoka won the toss, elected to bat. Their big guns boomed; Dennis, Tojo & Co were in fine nick and they plied a 90+ total in 25 overs. Unarguably, it's a huge mountain to climb by interhouse-match standards (it's the pre-TV era – no glitzy graphics of target & asking rate, no scoreboard, no wagon-wheels, no action replays; in fact, the players had to ply a running mental counter of the state of the match). When we batted, we lost the openers before we crossed the double digit. NanduB and I (#3) steadied the boat, but NanduB perished after pummelling a swashbuckling 20+. Ashoka had claimed our Viswanath, and they were over the moon. We had 50+ runs still to chase, and they simply had to skittle seven nonentities. We were looking down the barrel. However, I had hit a purple patch in the previous two matches, and Varma, Ashoka team captain, knew who he had to dislodge to lift the trophy. "We must get him," he impelled his team pointing at me. It was a war cry, nothing less.

Radhish and Bejoy hung around with me to reduce the target to 20 runs. The seesaw had begun to fro in our direction. Then we slumped by losing few wickets in a heap, much like the Indian team's middle-order. Two wickets and about 20 runs to notch up...Ashoka had regained

the upper hand. Sensing victory, Varma's face lit up again.

Out of the blue, I heard cheering from an unexpected quarter. Incredibly, the Shivajians (Ashokan, Venugopal,



MP with friends of the 80s from SSKZM

Jimmy, Ashok KC, Mani, Sunil T, Jayakumar, Manoj Mathew, Jayasankar, etc.) were cheering us, more vehemently than the Prasadians. (We had habitually jeered each other.) Not out of love; it's borne out of shrewd calculations. If Ashoka beat Prasad, then Ashoka would win the overall Games Trophy and pocket eight valuable points; if Prasad beat Ashoka, then Shivaji would grab the Games Trophy, pinch eight points and establish a headstart over Prasad in the Cock House derby. Boy, didn't I enjoy the clamorous cheering of our arch-rivals!

The match went down to the wire. It's perhaps one of the greatest chase-thrillers in SSKZM history. In the company of Shibu, we reduced the target to a single-digit. When GKG walked in to take guard, the match was evenly poised – it's anybody's game – a cliffhanger in the making. The Shivajians, like the Prasadians, cheered every run. Varma got more animated and vocal, and spurred his teammates to fight tooth and nail for

every run. But Prasad was unbeatable that day. GKG and I scored the remaining runs, and Prasad snatched a famous victory virtually from the jaws of defeat, with the last pair undefeated, 35 runs against my name.

Walking on air, we returned to the 'pavilion' to generous hurrahs. The Shivajians, willy-nilly, too were applauding, grudgingly, a memorable Pradian conquest!

Tailpiece: That's an unwitting favour from Prasad to Shivaji. As often happened, this favour too carried an exorbitant price tag. Prasad paid dearly. The two extra points Shivaji got owing to an Ashoka defeat proved decisive. Two points – that's exactly the margin by which Shivaji won the Cock House trophy in 1979-80!