

Lahore's fading sports traditions

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IN the Lahore of the 1960s and 1970s, the annual matriculation examination results were a big event. Newspapers carried the results. The radio interviewed the top candidates. It was an important portion of the year's calendar. This was followed by sports trials in colleges, to which flocked almost the entire sporting and social community. The young bucks were up on show and everyone was interested. It reflected the priorities of that age.

The three important educational institutions at which sports trials were held were the Government College, the Islamia College, and the Forman Christian College, Lahore. The Government College-Islamia College rivalry was a famed one — in every sport — and every time there was a GC-Islamia cricket match, the entire subcontinent was interested. The radio, and till the 1960s even All-India Radio, broadcast the results. It was an event to match a Test match. So depending on which *alma mater* one belonged to, there was a deep interest that the very best sportsmen were admitted. It was a matter of reputation, of pride, of honour. Once the trials were over the teams took shape, and training started and then came the com-

petitions. Sport had a definite place in the working of the educational system, a priority all its own, just as it is all over the 'same' world.

Nothing excited in Lahore more than the GC-Islamia cricket match. People in the walled city would put up scoreboards. Almost every vendor of the city headed that way. It was carnival time. The two teams, invariably, read like the Pakistan cricket team, and before the partition of the subcontinent like the Indian cricket team. In the late 1960s the GC cricket team had seven Test players, opening with Aftab Gul and Mushtaq Hashmi. Then followed Majid Khan and an array of stars. The same went for the Islamia College team, which had five Test stars, including Asif Masood the fast bowler. Even the intermediate teams read like a "Who's Who" of potential star players.

The best thing about this arrangement was that those selected on 'sports basis' were provided with a 'diet allowance', meaning thereby that each player would consume a healthy diet of milk and fruit every day. The old 'Fruit Shop' of Government College thrived on these sportsmen. Every year the very best in each sport was awarded a College

Blue, allowing him to wear a ribbon-edged college blazer. This was considered a great honour.

There is one such match, in which my elder brother played, that remains etched in my memory. The big day of the GC-Islamia cricket match came. All roads to the University Ground were blocked. The police was out in large numbers. Half the ground was occupied by GC supporters. The other half by Islamia College supporters. The usual slogans rang loud and clear. The GC camp shouting "Khall laya lao" (Get yourself skinned) denoting the fact that Islamic College was funded by the Trust that survived on sacrificial goat skins. The Islamia College returned the compliment with the slogan "Surkhi Powder" (lipstick and powder) denoting the upper class nature of the students of GC. The banter was very healthy. Once play started and the GC batsmen got cracking, tempers got frayed.

I forget the details for I was very young, but the end result was that a massive riot broke out. Tear gas filled the streets right up to Anarkali almost a mile away. I rushed back home through the streets. My brother appeared with a bandaged head,

for he had held on to a catch on the boundary. My father's sole comment was: "I have played for GC in the 1930s and never fought a war. But well caught." The old man had the latest news about the match, like every other Lahori, and he was a proud man.

Then came the day when the military authorities of Ayub Khan banned the match — for it posed a major law and order threat. That one ban did more damage to the cause of sports in Lahore than any other action the military has taken, for it effectively separated the people from educational institutions. Then came Gen Zia and sports seats were abolished. The mold for the warp was in place. The shop of Malik Sahib in GC closed, an institution that pains every Ravian even today. "I have served Edward Badshah and Bannerjee and Mankad with milk, how can you close down this shop," lamented the old man. The warps of our society as it stands today had taken form.

The traditions in hockey were equally well-known, with the FCC always putting forward a formidable team from the sizable Anglo-Indian community which produced great hockey players. Islamia had an edge in the muscular sports. The swim-

ming teams of GC, King Edwards Medical College and FCC always clashed. Just last week I had the experience of watching a swimming trial at the King Edward pool. The scene was pathetic. As GC has knocked down its 'historic' pool, there was no other place to go to.

In my youth I have battled in this pool, which today is a shadow of its past. The wrought iron architecture is beautiful. The young man I went to shout for won hands down. The competition was missing. The magic has gone. An entire generation of sports men and women have been denied the glory of their youth, what to speak of reaching even higher goals. It is sad that in a city of almost nine million, there are only nine swimming pools. There is no gymnasium. The cricket grounds are being covered into housing plots, just as graveyards are. The warp seems very visible.

The effort to reverse this process needs a massive effort by every citizen, no matter where one stands in society today. This is the real 'jihad', for a scholar's ink runs deeper than a martyr's blood ... so wrote the slave Bilal. This was a favourite quotation of the late GC Principal, Dr Nazir. — MAJID SHEIKH