

Love of cricket keeps them going

C. SANTHOSH KUMAR
CHENNAI, JULY 10

It's celebration time for Sanmar Group. It's been 50 years since the iconic first division team, 18-time winners of the Palayampatti shield - the symbol of supremacy in Tamil Nadu cricket, came under the family of K.S. Narayanan, chairman emeritus of Sanmar and co-promoter of India Cements Ltd.

N. Sankar, son of Narayanan and the current chairman of the group, talks about the family's passion for sport and how they have been running a professional cricket team with great success over three generations.

Q It's been such a long journey. How do you look back?

It gives us immense pride. Jolly Rovers and Alwarpet are two of the oldest clubs in Tamil Nadu. We relish our association with Rovers over the last 50 years. We never had commercial interests on our mind. We don't sell shares or branded products using our cricket teams. It's always been for the love of the game starting from my father's time in 1966.

We will be celebrating our 50th anniversary on July 29 because it was on that day Mr. VA Parthasarathy walked in to my father's room at India Cements office and said he couldn't run the team any longer owing to financial reasons. He was earlier getting support from Dasaprakash and The Hindu family. I was sitting in the room and it came as a big surprise. Given my father's love for sport, he didn't think twice before saying yes to him. When we took over, we had Mr Ananthanarayanan - a celebrated Ranji batsman in the '40s - and K. Ramamoorthy assisting my father.

Those days, corporate sponsorships were mostly restricted to foreign firms such as Best & Crompton and Parry and government-owned banks such as IOB or State Bank of India. For companies like us, it was uncharted territory, but it worked out well for us.

When we were looking for players to build the team, my father got a call from Mr B.K. Anantharaman, former general manager of ITI. He sent three of his players - K.S. Rajagopal, Nazam Hussain and Erapalli Prasanna - to us as he was struggling to accommodate players. Prasanna didn't join us because we couldn't meet his demand of an extra ₹50. At one stage, our team was so strong that people complained about monopolising TN cricket.

Towards the late '70s, the cement industry was facing hardship and the company couldn't spend too much money on cricket. So the team drifted down and we did badly. That was when the team came under me.

From 1978 to early '90s, I was running it with my



N. Sankar (right), chairman of Sanmar Group, and his son Vijay Sankar.

- E.K. Sanjay

SILVERWARE COLLECTION

Palayampatti shield	18
VAP Trophy (TNCA limited overs)	5
YSCA Trophy	2
Moin-ud-Dowla Trophy	6
KSCA Trophy	3
Corporate Trophy (BCCI)	1 (2013)
Hindu Trophy (Madras CA)	8
Corporate Trophy (Mumbai CA)	1
Buchi Babu Trophy	3
Canara Bank Centenary	1
CCFC T20 Tournament, Kolkata	1
Arlem Trophy, Goa	2

ROVERS WHO MADE IT BIG

VB Chandrasekar, S. Venkatraghavan, Bhadrath Arun, Bharath Reddy, Hemang Badani, S. Ramesh, TA Sekhar, Robin Singh, TE Srinivasan, Sujith Somasundar, L. Sivaramakrishnan, L. Balaji, Dinesh Karthik, S. Badrinath, R. Ashwin, Murali Vijay, Dinesh Mongia, Piyush Chawla, M. Venkatramana, Harbhajan Singh.

brother N. Kumar. After his graduation, my son Vijay has been involved in decision making. Hopefully, the dynasty will continue as Vijay's son is also showing interest.

Q How has Sanmar group's approach changed over the last three generations?

When we started in 1967, cricket was just a part of the CV to get a job. It, however, changed gradually and people worked occasionally playing professional cricket. Players such as Rajagopal and P.K. Bellappa used to practise only after their office hours. When we started giving more money and leeway to our cricketers the rest of the office started reacting. But in late '80s, we decided to treat the cricketers differently. They became professionals with more private teams such as Spic, TVS, India Cements, India Pistons, MRF and Murugappa coming in the fray. We also made it clear that once the playing career was over, they had bigger roles to play in the office. We gave them training and also offered sponsorships to take software courses.

Over the last three generations, we always dealt with

cricketers through professionals as we never wanted to influence team decisions. Earlier, M. Subramanian used to be team incharge. And in 1983, Bharath Reddy came in. I rarely interact with the players because it leads to problems. We always maintained a distance with them. It doesn't mean we are not friendly with them.

Q What were the challenges of running a first division team in the '80s and '90s and how about that now?

The budget has been increasing steadily. It is running into crores now. Managing a first division team has become very expensive. When the company goes through a difficult time, it's tough for us to justify our expenditure on cricketers. You can cut salaries of other people, but I have never done that with a cricketer.

Another challenge was keeping the team intact. In the late '80s, a businessman came in out of nowhere and tried to poach all our players. They offered double the salary and I couldn't stop them. We ended up doing a joint venture and later his interest waned as expected. In a way, I succeeded in

keeping the team together.

In the early '90s, when I was the president of the TNCA, I went out of the way to show that there was no favouritism to my players. We, in fact, had a disciplinary action against Robin Singh, who was the captain of my side. After being banned for two games, he told me 'sir, I am playing for you'. I told him it was all the more reason I banned him.

Q What would you call the finest moment of Jolly Rovers?

We had success in four different phases. We had our strongest team in the '80s and '90s. And we are achieving a lot in the last 15 years, winning almost all major tournaments. We have been consistent in our performance. In the last five decades of TNCA first division league, we always finished in top four barring one year. We have won the Palayampatti shield 18 times with six in a row from 2000. We are the only private sector team to have won the BCCI Corporate trophy. Apart from the silverware, we take pride in talent spotting. Bharath has been doing a fantastic job. I would say it's TN's loss that they are not using Bharath's expertise. The likes of Harbhajan Singh, Harvinder Singh and Debasish Mohanty played for Rovers even before they made their Ranji debuts. M. Vijay has been with us since his college days. Sadagopan Ramesh was picked out of an U-16 match. The likes of S. Badrinath, L. Balaji and R. Ashwin started with us.

Q As a former president of TNCA, what's your opinion on the standard of TN cricket? The quality of spin bowling is deteriorating. The league, of late, has been played on dead wickets. It's difficult to get those spirited crowd back to watch league games. The state team reached the final last year. I hope they will do better this season. TN has definitely got the best league infrastructure in the

country. From the days of MA Chidambaram (former president of TNCA), a lot of money has been pumped into the game. The TNCA is doing a great job now, providing a platform for the league teams to grow. However, TNCA's vision has become much bigger. I think there is not much attention on TN cricket at the highest level. I think we need someone who is much more active on the ground in TN cricket. We have talent and infrastructure. But TN cricketers are getting everything too easy. It's a question of pushing them in the right direction and getting the right people to select and train.

Q Can you name a few Jolly Rovers who are close to your heart?

Rajagopal was the most impressive. He is like John McEnroe. Hardly practised, but always performed. He used to travel all the way from Tirunelveli, taking an overnight train, to the ground. Now, Vijay is making us proud. R. Satish, Ajay Kudua and Hemanth Kumar have also been consistent.

Sanmar has the unique distinction of sponsoring the first first-class match between Tamil Nadu and Western Australia in 1989. Tamil were the Ranji champions and Western Australia were Sheffield Shield champs. When the match was played in Chennai, half of Australia's national side including the likes of Geoff Marsh, Tom Moody was part of WA. TN also went Down Under for a return match. In those days, foreign trips for domestic cricketers were unusual.

- VIJAY SANKAR



ROVERS'**1966-67 CHAMPIONS SIDE**

Standing (L to R): PS Narayanan, AK Vijayaraghavan, VR Rajaraghavan, K Bharadwaj, N Kumar, TH Rao, KVR Murthy and G Srinivasan. Seated (L to R): George Thomas, K Ramamurthy, Najam Hussain, PK Bellappa, S Venkataraghavan, KS Kannan, and PK Dharmalingam.

FIVE DECADES OF A JOLLY RIDE

R. MOHAN
CHENNAI, JULY 10

Jolly Rovers, the leading city cricket club, will be completing 50 years this month. As a premier club in terms of shield-winning performances, the club was looked after extremely well by the late K.S. Narayanan, his sons N.Sankar and N. Kumar and now Sankar's son, Vijay. The club has enjoyed an extraordinary history across five decades of great team spirit, recruiting star players from all over the country and benevolent management, which began in the amateur era and adapted so well to the professional age.

Team management of the non-interfering kind in which the professional manager, in Bharat Reddy having all the power to execute team plans besides playing talent scout was an important part of how Jolly Rovers evolved into such a powerful team winning the premier division of the much vaunted TNCA league 18 times and finishing runner-up another 14 times.

Success in various tournaments outside Chennai and Tamil Nadu like in the Moin-ud-Dowlah, the BCCI's Corporate trophy, the KSCA trophy, etc. reflects how powerfully woven was the team spirit of "I have your back" which melded some fine players into a winning combination. How about popularity? As Sankar explained in the course of a cheerful interview with Deccan Chronicle in his corporate headquarters at Sanmar house - situated now in what was once his father's home which had a tennis court and a snooker table too, illustrative of a firm connect with sport - the public had a different perception of Jolly Rovers.

Name any star player

and he was with Jolly Rovers. The virtual monopoly of the first division title meant that the cricket-loving public of Chennai were in awe of the Rovers but would support the underdog against the strong team. Sankar recalled how once the public came after the team at a city cricket ground, throwing stones and how his father stood up to the barrage while rescuing his players and taking them home in his car.

The Rovers, once run by S. Rangarajan, had signed up Salim Durrani, who was probably the first professional cricketer in the Madras league paid an appearance fee to play matches. After Narayanan took over the team in 1965, he allowed his advisers to rope in the best from other southern states and Errapalli Prasanna was about the only star who missed out because of the difference of ₹50 in the offer of monthly salary.

K.R. Rajagopal, an entertaining opener from Karnataka who believed in striking the ball and did it with elan, was a batsman worth going a long way to see. S. Venkataraghavan played for Rovers too before moving on to more lucrative offers. The club may have brought in a lot of players from other states, but it took great delight in promoting local talent too. Many, including the loyal Murali Vijay were picked by Bharat long before they earned international laurels. Harbhajan Singh is another name that springs up in this category of the unknown arriving at Jolly Rovers to blossom.

In the amateur era, the company offered a good job and prospects after players faded out of the game. As the scene transformed to domination by players, the club kept

pace, spending crores a year to keep the structure alive as players took money per match their predecessors may not have earned in a whole career. Sankar's vision kept the Rovers alive even

as competition hotted up with India Cements in the fray once again after Narayanan had moved on in the '70s from HQ in the Dhun buildings on Mount Road.

Cricket was the biggest weekend entertainment in the '70s and crowds would follow the fortunes of league teams across the city in hundreds. Sunil Gavaskar's presence in a Mafatlals XI saw thousands descend on Loyola College post the 1971 tour of the Caribbean. The opponents were the Rovers and

B. Kalyanasundaram, who used to be really sharp off the pitch and accurate, may have had Sunil plumb in front. Much like Dr W.G. Grace, the umpire may have decided that all those people had come to see him (Sunil) play and hence turned down the LBW while Balaji Rao, a specialist slip catcher of those days, put Sunny down early.

One family's commitment has been the key factor behind the great cricket story of Jolly Rovers, which began long before the game changed into a treasure hunt for players and IPL franchises. The golden jubilee function at the month end should be a jolly affair in keeping with the club's history of competing hard while having great fun in just playing the game. In recognising those who were part of this 50-year story, the club would be honouring the stars as well as nine, ten and jack who also played a vital part in keeping up the morale of the team across the vicissitudes of time and cricket.