

Sanmar Group: in it purely for the love of the game

S. Dinakar

CHENNAI: N. Sankar, Chairman, Sanmar Group, shared his thoughts with *The Hindu* on his long and rewarding association with the Jolly Rovers Cricket Club.

Can you tell us about the satisfaction of your association with Jolly Rovers for fifty years. It has been a long journey.

We started right at the top. The very first year, we won the league. We set a very high standard for ourselves.

We got a whole bunch of top cricketers. Before that (1967), the sponsorship of the team had mainly been public sector institutions like the State Bank, the IOB or Southern Railway, or some of the foreign companies like Binny and Parry's.

For an Indian corporate house to take over the responsibility, I think it was the first time. There had been persons at the private level like S. Rangarajan of *The Hindu*, Balakrishna Rao of Dasaprakash... they were running Jolly Rovers. These were all sporadic. To do it in a formal, professional way, to give jobs, I think it was for the first time.

What gives me happiness is that we have been able to stay at, or very near, the top for the last 50 years. We have been able to adapt to the changing conditions.

When we started with matches of just one day, mostly decided on first-innings lead, many of the matches would end with the first innings not completed. In the first 10 matches, we got the other team out and took the lead.

The 11th match could have been a record; I think it was [last] done in 1930, and after that no team had secured 11 successive leads. But we fell one wicket short. We largely played on matting, and bowling was very important those days.

Can you enlighten about personalities from the club who have left a lasting impression on you?

K.S. Kannan was a very well-known coach. He was also a playing coach. He was short and rather old. Yet, from the three steps from which he would bowl his slow medium, the ball would swing enormously. He would get the best batsman from the other team out almost on call. His English used to be very funny.

We had K.R. Rajagopal, in my opinion, one of the best batsmen I had seen; totally natural talent. He would come on the overnight train from Tirunelveli or somewhere, travel to the ground in some torn cotton shirt and cotton pant – there was no flannels and all, those days – wear canvas shoes. He would grab someone's bat, pads... even the guard sometimes, and go in and score 70-odd in very quick time.



N. Sankar, chairman of the Sanmar Group, with Bharath Reddy, executive vice-president-corporate affairs – PHOTO: M. MOORTHY

Najam Hussain would spin his body more than he would the ball, but would get a lot of wickets; a very good bat too.

Then there was Kalyanasundaram... T.E. Srinivasan was one of the most stylish players.

I remember his innings at the Vivekananda ground, when he took on Venkatraghavan and V.V. Kumar in their prime and scored a century in a couple of hours.

Don't you feel the sheer joy of playing the game is no longer there in these professional times?

Yes, that has gone out. That's natural. Those days, cricket was just a hobby. People didn't do it as a job. Then it changed and we got into the truly professional era. It's good because people can make a living out of cricket.

Now you go to a third division match and you will see the joy. In the lower division, you still have people playing for fun.

If you take tennis, we have been sponsoring the league – the Sanmar tennis league – in Chennai for the last 23 years. There is a lot more amateurism, but the top division is professional. But, in any sport, professionals will not last without amateurs. In any sport, unless the amateurs are there originally, it cannot be purely an amateur sport.

Over the years, which have been your most satisfying victories?

In recent times, winning the Corporate Trophy gave us a lot of happiness. When we were finally given an opportunity, we won in the second year showing we were the No. 1 corporate team in India.

Five years back we didn't have seven main players but still beat India Cements at Chepauk. That was very satisfying.

Unlike other major cities,



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corporates continue to support cricket in a big way in Chennai.

It was there in Bombay: we had Mafatlal, Tata, Air India...

The trouble is that the identification of the owners with the company has drifted. In Chennai, me in Sanmar, Mr. Srinivasan in India Cements or Mr. Mammen in MRF, we are still identified with the company and the game.

In the early days, TVS was among the big sponsors of the game. With TVS, the younger generation of the management got into other sports. That is why Alwarpet came to us.

With us, my father was interested in cricket, I am interested, Vijay (Sankar's son) is interested... Owners have to show interest.

Now you have a totally professional set up for cricket at Sanmar.

Yes, Bharat Reddy runs the team. He joined us in the 80s. Since then he has held it together like glue, and we give him a totally free hand to run the team. We give our inputs but he runs the team.

Long back, I took a decision that I would not interact with the players. Without Bharat we would not have the kind of success we have had. He has run it very professionally.

Bharat's talent-spotting is amazing. One day he brought three people to me. He told me: "Sir, meet Harbhajan Singh, Harvinder Singh and Debasis Mohanty." I had not heard of these players and wondered why he was bringing them in. Within one year, all three played for India. We get no commercial value out of it. We don't sell a product. It is purely for the love of the game. I love to win but as long as it is a good game of cricket I am happy.