



MR. Quentin Israel – The Coach, The Mentor - A Tribute!

There are many stories that can be told of Mr. Israel, also known to many of us as SIR. Affectionately referred to outside his presence as Q and Quinta. He has completed his journey here. However the memories he leaves behind are legendary and he leaves a legacy that will never be matched again as a rugby coach and as a Master at STC.

I had the good fortune of playing in a rugby era of S'Thomas' that was coached by Q. I played in 1990 and 1991. He would often say the 5 yrs from 1988 – 1992 were the best rugby sides he has ever coached. He would often reminisce about these sides, as he spoke of the strength of these sides were, we had some of the best forwards and three-quarters ever to grace the rugby field. He knew that these sides had a very good knowledge of the basics of rugby and thus he set about to bring out the best at the next level of playing “thinking rugby” “the mind game of rugby”. He would never let us use the word tactics, he said there are no tactics, there are only ploys on the rugby field.

If I go down memory lane about the 2yrs under the captaincy of Narein Perera and Charya De Saram, this article will never finish however a few instances of the inside workings of a very shrewd tactician as a rugby coach we must admire. Q would always leave the on field decisions to the captain, even when it came to selection, he would first give his Captain, Vice- captain, and 3 senior most players their choice of the 1st XV. Once the selection was done he would consult with them and give his opinions, depending on the opponents we would be facing. It was still left to the captain and his seniors to decide and call out the final team. I once asked Sir why did you do that and he said “I am not playing on the field it is the captain and the team so he needs to pick the side he thinks is the best team, I can only advice as the coach” I'm sure Q still got his way in the team chosen. He would study the opponents within minutes of one of their games and would never wait for the entire match to finish. He would come back for practice later on and tell us “Ok boys these are the weaknesses and these are the strengths” and advice us how we would need to adjust the game, which would be a week away. So we change and practice the game plan according to the opponents. However these game plans were always implemented after 10-15 minutes of the game, The master plan was the first 10-15 minutes, spent involving the opposition forwards rucking and mauling taking the breath and strength out of them. We did collapse a few scrums just so we could have a few extra restarts to tire the opponents down. The trick was we didn't do 20 laps round the college grounds in post-season for stamina, we played 1 1/2hrs to 2hrs of full blown contact rugby for stamina. Q would always say “on the field you are not going to be running around doing nothing, this is a contact sport so the body is always going to be more tired than when just running, so when the body gets tired you must still able to think” The “main focus is thinking rugby till the end” “out wit your opponents when they are tired” another one of his famous lines were “use the killer blow, the drop goal in the first 10-15mins, so you can break their spirit”. These were some of the last



words Q would utter to us in his motivation speech he would give in the dressing room huddle. He would look in to every set of eyes when he delivered his pep talk, including the reserves, as they were as important as the 1st XV and should know exactly what to do in the event a replacement was required.

We had some fine rugby players in my time and I am sure Q can boast of quite a number of outstanding players during his 25 plus years at STC, but what is even more important is that he knew to get the best out of every player and got just that little bit of extra from the finest of players to contribute to the games. As he would always say “rugby is a team sport where 15 players get together and take one of the 15 players over the goal line with the ball”. His philosophy was always to ensure the best side played, not the most senior. He made very sure the seniors always knew their positions were never guaranteed and this way he kept his senior players in prime condition and motivated and also the 2nd XV and Under17 players motivated and attending practices as they knew if they were good enough they will be given the green light in place of a senior or coloursman such was the coach he was. In later years when I continued to have the good fortune of Q’s company at either my parents home or at some event or rugby encounter or even over a drink at a club, he would always say “all boys are special in their own way, no one single player can win a rugby game however fine or brilliant a rugby player he may be”.

One of Q’s most talked about ploys was code named HELL (Q would always ponder why we came up with this code name if my memory serves me right Charya De Saram, our captain, decided “this ploy could only be done once so it’s a hellish ploy”) – executed during the Trinity vs S. Thomas’s match of 1991 played at the Sugathadasa Stadium. During practice sessions Q said boys you can practice this ploy as much as you want to and perfect it, but you will only be able to use it once, as after that it will be spoken of at every rugby club/pub in Sri Lanka and dissected and no one will ever be able to use it again, so it is only to be used during the most crucial of times and only if we had to do it as a last ditched measure to win a match. As HELL was a fine line between perfect execution, the laws of rugby and the referees’ interpretation at that very moment! So we were confused when Charya called HELL, as we had broken down the Trinitians and could have opted for the scrum and scored a pushover try, I think it was a matter of stamping our authority and to show who knew to play the mind game better. We followed orders, and for Q’s part he never questioned De Saram’s decision all though we were under strict instruction not to use this ploy if not absolutely necessary. Such was the great coach he was, the captain made the decision on the field and was not to be questioned even by him.

The shrewdness of Q’s coaching lay in how he manipulated the basics of rugby and created variance to the normal flow of playing rugby. He was not just a rugby coach who taught teams to play rugby but showed how to create opportunities on the rugby field in the process of playing the basics, he ensured this by instilling belief in each players natural abilities and that of his team through motivation and dedication that the basics



firstly need to be executed with pin point accuracy then all the changes will come naturally as he manipulated every set piece too during practice so we would master them. We didn't have a single set piece that was basic. By the time the ball was thrown in to a line out or scrum or once a ruck or maul had formed it would be changed to a ploy. Some of us when introduced to all the ploys during practice would have to write down the codes and ploys to keep and study up, as these would change from game to game practice session to session. Direction of driving the ball, his famous strategy off the line outs was number 4 throw, hooker secures the ball and the rest of the forwards create an arrowhead thus creating a single point of thrust at the centre where the Second row and the prop and flanker have bound making the opponents spread wide thinking it is a big rolling maul. He would always say forwards win matches. If you have good strong and agile forwards you are guaranteed to secure the ball and only if you had the ball could you create opportunities, said simply "offense is the best form of defense" and without the ball there is nothing you can do! Some thoughts of a shrewd mind of one the most outstanding rugby coaches of the modern game. I am sure there are so many more incidents, instances and memories from his many students and friends. What I have recounted are a very few of the examples of the great rugby coach he was.

The last time I met Mr. Israel was in September of this year on my holiday to Sri Lanka, once again at my parents' home. He would often visit my parents and spend a few days. The topic of discussions would be Rugby, the 88 to 92 reign of Thomian rugby and his achievements of the few years he coached the Trinitians. Although Mr. Israel lived a very humble and simple life, his riches in life that he imparted to so many students and friends can never be measured in money values, for if you did there are not enough banks to deposit these riches! Goodbye SIR!

May he rest in peace!

Webmasters Comment : This article was submitted by One of our Batch mates' and 1st XV Player.