

MATCH IN BLOOD

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Hari spun his off break a little outside the off stump, and as it bit and turned on the dirt wicket, the Swiper's flailing bat slammed into the spin.

We watched the ball zoom high and arc over to where "Wang Yu" was fielding at long on.

Wang Yu dropped it!

Hari collapsed and sat on the grass with his shock of heavy black hair between his knees while Swiper and the other batsman ran a single. Wang Yu threw in the ball to our wicket-keeper Sanchez and it was the end of Hari's over.

"Boy, we loss the match," Dukko, our captain, moaned. I felt so too. The Swiper was our opponent's last real batsman and we had set him up for the kill. If Wang Yu hadn't dropped him, our school, St. Jude's had the match and the trophy. We were playing the final match for the schools in our county.

When Wang Yu reached the wicket, Tony said, "But Wang Yu, you like ah Englishman, boy. You can't even catch a cold in winter."



Wang Yu did not answer. His narrow Chinese-Creole eyes blinked quickly at Tony, like when he was very angry. Then he went to his place on the field.

“Come on, play the game,” Sir said from the umpire’s position at square leg. “Win or lose, play the game. Put someone else on to bowl.”

Hari got up from the grass still angry with Wang Yu for dropping the catch.

“Put on Miss Yew Lee,” he said quietly so that Sir could not hear.

Miss Yew Lee was Wang Yu's sister. She had recently come from Training College and joined the staff at St. Jude's, and Sir was so much in love with her he started day-dreaming in front of the class, a thing he never did before. Since then, Wang Yu, whose real name was Tom Yew Lee was like Sir's baby brother.

"Go and bowl, Randy," Dukko told me. "Set the field as you want it."

That was something to think about. The Swiper was our last obstacle. With seven wickets down and 84 runs on the board against the 96 we had made, he could win the match for his side in a couple of hits.

All he had to do was to swing his cutlass-bat and slaughter me. But if I went round the wicket and sent it between the pad and his swinging bat, giving his swing less opportunity to strike, I might get him that way.

I told Dukko so and he agreed.

He, Hari and the joker Tony went into slips. He tightened the field and called on everybody to "look sharp."

My first ball was aimed straight at the Swiper's body. He stepped into the wicket and let it run past the wicket and past Sanchez for a bye.

The other batsman was a dooglah boy called Roy who batted well. But unfortunately for him, the second ball faster and on the length, hit a rough spot and reared up awkwardly. Poor Roy took fright and jerked the bat up in front of his face. The ball struck it high up near the bat handle and Hari took the very easy catch.

“One gone, two more to go,” Tony the joker sang out, calypso fashion. The other Sir called out to our Sir and told him I was bowling bouncers. Sir told him I didn’t look like any Griffith as he could see, but it was the state of the wicket. But the other Sir, alarmed now that his team might lose the match decided to caution me himself. He said, “Look, Wes Hall, take it easy before you kill somebody, eh.”

Hari heard him and said very loudly for everyone to hear, “Like this man born in India, yes. They don’t have fast bowlers there. He calling slow bowling fast.”

“Cut that out, Haricharan,” our Sir called out loudly. “None of that now.”

Tony was laughing his head off because the other Sir was an Indian like Hari. Tony could see a joke in anything.

The other batsman came in. I had four balls to bowl. I told myself if I could bowl a hat trick I wouldn’t have to meet the Swiper again. And we would win the match easily.

I was day dreaming. The new batsman, an Indian like Hari, glided his first ball sweetly to leg and they took a single, bringing the Swiper to face me again.

It was 87 for 8. Only 10 runs to win. He could do it in two swipes.

I aimed the ball close to his leg and, thank heavens, dead on the length. He brought the bat over and blocked it in a very comical way.

Tony laughed and said, “Boy, that is a Watusi stroke.”

“You keep him at that, Randy,” shouted Dukko, encouraging me.

The Swiper blocked the next two in his “Watusi” way. He understood his danger. I was so “dead on” that if he curved his cutlass swipe, he would be bowled.

At the end of the over, he glared at me like an angry animal. I was denying him his personal enjoyment of swiping big hits and threatening to take the match away from his school.

Dukko took the next over at the other end, bowling his natural in-swingers very fast. The batsman got a snick and it tore through the slips and they got two more.

Eight runs to win and two wickets to fall.

“Match in blood!” Hari sang out desperately.

Dukko tried to be more careful but the next one went to leg and they took a fast single to bring the Swiper back to face the bowling.

Our captain’s blood was up. He was excited and angry at the possibility of our losing the match. He aimed a terribly fast ball straight at the Swiper’s body. The boy pulled back from the wicket hurriedly and although the ball struck Sanchez’ glove they were still able to take a bye.

The other Sir walked to the centre of the wicket and told our Sir,

“Look, man, this is bad business. you’d better caution this Wild West gang you have here. They have gone berserk.”

Hari never gave our Sir a chance to answer. He yelled out,

“Match in blood! Play the game, St. Jude’s! Play the game. We bound to beat them.”

Sir said quietly, “Look you chaps, play it cool, play it cool. It’s only a game of cricket.”

“Is a game to win,” Hari shouted again. “Play the game.”

There was the Swiper facing me again with six runs to win and two wickets to fall. I felt the game was now on my shoulders.

Wang Yu, crossing the pitch, came up and put his arm around me. He was our best batsman. He said quietly,

“Keep it on the length and aim for his leg stump. No big thing.”

No big thing indeed. One clout now from the Swiper and it was all over.

“Bowl the man down!” Hari shouted.

“Bowl him down,” the whole team shouted in chorus. It was like a battle cry.

I wiped my hand in the dirt to get off the sweat and turned to face the Swiper. He was glaring at me. He and I were equally desperate. As I ran up he backed away from the stumps giving himself room to swing. He made contact and the ball flew to mid on.

He started to run. They took one. They turned to take two, but Wang Yu had the ball and sent it back straight to me at the stumps. The batsman was out by yards, but not the Swiper. He was safe at the other end.

They had a run but lost a wicket, so it was now four to win and the last wicket to fall. Our team crowded round the wicket and everyone was saying,

“We going to beat them. We have to beat them,” and cautioning me, “Bowl good, Randy. Bowl good. Don’t make the Swiper hit you at all.”

Easier said than done.

“Come on, play the game, boys,” Sir said as the last batsman reached the wicket.

He was a little thin lad and Tony the joker called him the runt. He ran close up to him and said, “But boy, how you small so? You think you could play cricket with big men like me? We going to eat you like a tiger. Aarrgh!!”

The poor little fellow jumped nervously and Tony took his place in the field laughing heartily.

To me the Swiper now looked bigger and fiercer in his desperation to get the last four runs. I felt equally fierce in my determination to win this game so nearly in their grasp and ours.

He didn’t back away again. He played his funny round arm Watusi block and I felt he was waiting for the right one to heave his mighty swipe and finish the game. I could see he didn’t want to give the runt strike

or for him to get run out again. It was all or nothing at all, this time. I sensed that was what he was thinking.

When I was about to bowl the fifth ball of the over I knew that was one he intended to hit. He crouched down grimly over the bat like a fierce animal waiting to spring.

I ran to the wicket and bowled in the usual way, but holding it back, cutting the speed. The Swiper never suspected. When he had finished swiping the wind for six with a fierce swing that dragged his foot out of the crease, the ball was in Sanchez' gloves.

The wicket-keeper laughed gleefully and stumped him!