

## Five

*‘ The battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton ’*

*attributed to The Duke of Wellington*

Upon our arrival in Singapore, Elsie and I were anxious that our three sons should have some sporting activity, particularly, if possible, soccer which they had enjoyed at home in Vancouver. The climate was not necessarily conducive to playing in the heat of mid-afternoon but we were determined that they needed the exercise, the regular activity and the possible friendships to be developed.

The only organized league in which they had any chance of playing was sponsored by the British armed forces. Most of the youth playing were sons of forces personnel, augmented by boys from the British civilian community. Our sons spoke with very distinct Canadian accents, a claim, which their parents could never make! There had never been any North American boys in the league and they were wary of creating a precedent for fear of opening the flood-gates, as it were. Our British heritage eventually carried the day, with the result that the boys were admitted into the league sometime

before Christmas.

I have long believed that the true character of a person can be seen on a playing field, where, regardless of talent, the qualities of competitiveness, fairness and determination come to the fore. The corollary is that an individual's weaknesses also become evident, so that the tendencies to cheat or be unnecessarily violent are exposed. Hopefully an early exposure to team play can help eliminate any of these unsociable characteristics, yet, at the same time enhance the more acceptable traits. We wanted to inculcate these better personality attributes into our sons.

Leagues were divided according to age. The competitions were set as separate league tables for the season or session and a post-season knockout play-off tournament. The games were all played on a magnificent complex of fields at Terror Barracks in the northern section of the island. The main gates were flanked on each side by large cannons taken from the decks of HMS Terror before her break-up. It was a very impressive entrance.

Since the end of World War Two the British Government had been withdrawing troops from their former colonies in Asia as they felt the pull of the European Common Market as their new trading partner. The 'East of Suez' policy had already seen dramatic pullbacks in military personnel strength. Yet when we arrived, the presence of the British forces was still very noticeable in most sections of the city-state. There were scattered military compounds and other residential areas where the forces families were concentrated. Their contribution to the national economy was substantial, even though their numbers were considerably reduced. Nevertheless there was talk that

they would soon be withdrawn altogether. And so it developed that they were to leave in November 1975. This would herald the final transition of Singapore from colonial outpost to an exciting new world country capable of true independence.

The last British regiment to leave was the famous 'Gordon Highlanders', which was very appropriate because they were one of the two final regiments to fight the Japanese in Malaya before the withdrawal to Singapore in January 1942. Together with squadrons of the Royal Air Force and members of the Royal Navy they paraded at the last Remembrance Day service at the Kranji Cemetery, maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. This noble organisation is responsible for the maintenance of Commonwealth cemeteries the world over and I have also visited, with complete humility, those in Burma, Thailand (River Kwai) and Hong Kong, as well as some in Europe. The Americans have similar resting-places for their fallen heroes in many overseas fields of battle.

November 11, 1975, was, therefore, a poignant day in Singapore's history as the British ceremoniously paid respect to their dead for the last time en masse. There was a multi-denominational service, with ministers of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist faiths leading the prayers. It was a colourful and solemn occasion, which Elsie and I considered ourselves privileged to attend.

I shall always remember the wonderful sound of the massed bands at Kranji, including the swirl of the pipes, and the solemnity of the lone piper's lament in the misty chill of a tropical dawn.

In later years, at the cemetery in Rangoon, I met a survivor of the sinking of the battleship 'The Prince of Wales' in December 1941,

his subsequent incarceration by the Japanese in the notorious Changi Prison, (described in Clavelle's 'King Rat') and the even more horrendous Burma Railroad. He was so thankful for his own survival and yet so dedicated to the memory of those who had died, that he had made his life-long hobby a study of these cemeteries. Any next of kin could contact him for the location and a photograph of a headstone. Visiting one or more of these tranquil sites annually had become a true labour of love for him and gave some solace to those who needed some evidence of the final resting place of their loved ones.

Initially, in my mind, the withdrawal of the military and the formation of a new soccer league were inextricably entwined. Naturally, time has changed this focus and has little significance for later generations, but I still remember the atmosphere of tradition, change and anticipation, which prevailed at that time.

In a different historical context it was the aftermath of the Vietnamese war. The Americans had conceded defeat and had withdrawn their forces from the area. It was feared that the victorious Viet Cong would try to overrun the adjacent countries in what was known as 'the domino theory', with each country falling under their control in turn. Cambodia and Laos were certainly considered at threat, while Thailand was very nervous. For reasons not quite clear now, we felt that there was at least five years before Singapore would be threatened. Even so, in this atmosphere of doubt, the British army was being repatriated, leaving the region's countries without foreign military support for the first time in recent history.

As the forces prepared for withdrawal we had to prepare for a

youth soccer league of our own. I proposed to the Commanding Officer of the British Garrison that if he would bequeath their trophies to a new league I would undertake to create one. I don't know now why the trophies themselves were so important! At any rate, he agreed and the die was cast.

I recruited the assistance of Frank Wakefield, a cotton surveyor from Liverpool, and Gordon Gerachty, an Australian businessman, both of whom had sons of playing ages. Due to business pressures Frank soon withdrew. To cover our insurance liabilities we asked John King, a leading insurance manager, to guide us in arranging suitable protection for the boys. In later years, to our sorrow, we were happy to have this coverage as injuries and a fatal accident occurred

Our dining room became the nerve centre for the formation of the new league. In December 1975 I distributed about 1000 application forms to the local expatriate schools, inviting boys to join the International Junior Soccer League for a competition commencing in January 1976. About ninety boys replied! On the appointed day only 33 of those turned up to play, together with a few of their friends. Not a very auspicious beginning!

We had negotiated with United World College for the use of their wonderful playing fields and were set. Special goalposts were designed and constructed for us. While the senior boys were to play with regulation-sized posts, the smaller lads were to play with ever-diminishing dimensions according to their age. In addition the two youngest leagues were to play across half of the pitch because the full area was far too great for them to cover.

We had devised a four team league in each age section, wearing

distinctive colours and named appropriately after the departed forces-

The Flyers in blue shirts - after The Royal Air Force

The Gordons in red -after The Gordon Highlanders

The Sailors in white - after The Royal Navy

The Warriors in green - after The Jungle Warfare School

News about the actual beginning of play quickly circulated by word of mouth around the schools to the effect that within three weeks we had over one hundred players and soon there were so many younger brothers and friends that we had to expand the age-groups down to five-year olds. It became an amazing success, with a full complement of volunteer fathers serving as team managers, coaches and referees. Saturday afternoons became a family social occasion as mothers and siblings patrolled the sidelines, encouraging their sons or brothers. Allegiances and friendly rivalries developed amongst all participants in a way that we could not have envisaged.

We followed the basic format of the British forces' league, with seasonal and post-season competitions. On the last day of each season we held a presentation ceremony at which trophies were presented and every boy participant received a small individual trophy, with slightly larger ones for the winners, suitably inscribed. The ceremony became a real celebration. At the first awards presentation the trophies bequeathed to us by the Forces were presented to the relative captains on the understanding that they would quickly be returned to us. The senior trophy was never seen again and is believed to grace the mantle of some home in Australia.

At the end of that first season it was obvious that we needed some

formality. The inspiration for this came from John Curran, a chartered accountant and long-time Singapore resident. It was his opinion that in the structured nature of Singapore it was essential that an organisation have official status and recognition. The natural progression would have been for us to form our own society, but this was an onerous task, involving a great deal of red tape. Each national community had their own society already in situ - Brits, Americans, Aussies, etc. Gordon Gerachty, then the chairman of the Australian and New Zealand Association (ANZA) offered to explore the possibility of our becoming a sub-committee of their organisation to avoid all of the complications. Thus was conceived ANZA International Soccer League.

We had a scare after two years of competition. The Singapore Sports Council, which actually controlled the playing fields of The United World College, decided to re-deploy the fields so that they were no longer available to us on a dedicated basis on Saturdays. Without playing facilities our league was in jeopardy. Many Singapore technocrats have a reputation for intransigence, so we approached our requested meeting for alternate facilities with some trepidation. Our fears were groundless because these pragmatic people recognised the importance of this recreational outlet for so many children and quickly allocated three fields at Portsdown Road on an exclusive basis each Saturday afternoon. Our continuation was assured.

Registrations continued to grow so that we reached 500! Now over 20 years later the League continues to flourish and thousands of boys have had the enjoyment of their Saturday soccer. It became the focal point for family Saturday afternoons - after all, if we had 500 boys playing, then their parents and siblings easily brought the total

of people involved to over 1000!

After five years as Chairman I withdrew in favour of Gordon, who had always been a faithful and very industrious supporter of the concept.

Our aspiration for friendships was definitely fulfilled. Not surprisingly, due to the transient nature of the ex-pat community, most of them lasted only for the duration of one's stay in Singapore. However, our middle son, Bruce, formed a lasting friendship with Sharaz Karim, who was best man at his wedding. For our part, Elsie and I are fortunate to have maintained close links with the Aitkens, Starmers and Tattersalls since sharing the excitement and fellowship on the soccer fields of Portsdown Road.

I salute those who have continued to manage the league over the years and maintain it as an important part of the children's lives. I would like to return in 2001 to celebrate the twenty- fifth anniversary. It would be my personal odyssey for the beginning of the next millennium.

It was suggested to me, however casually, that had I chosen the British Association rather than ANZA as the banner organisation, that I might have been recommended for an OBE - The Order of The British Empire. I have always had little regard for awards of this nature, feeling that, despite being instituted as relatively recently as 1917 by King George V, it was long an anachronism. One's reward should be in the inner comfort and satisfaction of the achievement. Anyway a glance at the atlas did not show much remaining evidence of an Empire. Gone were the halcyon days of Empire, chariots of fire and my childhood when the maps of the world were covered with the pink territories of The Empire, on which the sun never set.

I had been part of the dismantling at that ceremony at Kranji in November 1975.

*Sic transit gloria mundi.*