

GURU AND THE BEAUTIFUL GAME.

Lions and Loch Lomond

Guru loved football. It was as simple as that. We know how much he loved sports in general - athletics and tennis in particular - but his love of football was just as deep and had been with him since his childhood and his ashram days. It gave him joy.

Adarsha has written of how much football meant to us in Scotland, how much it was a part of our culture. (A famous football manager, Bill Shankly - a Scot, once said football was not a matter of life and death, it was much more important than that!) We were delighted to find out that Guru shared our love for the game.



From the earliest days of the Centre, the early 1970s, the Scottish boys would get together for a 'kickabout' in a local park - an informal game, maybe just two or three on each team, sometimes joining forces with others who happened to be playing in the park and were happy to make up the numbers.

Adarsha has also written of how we graduated from these rough beginnings to having a full-blown team, Chinmoy Lions, with our sky-blue and white strips. (We had the look, at least, Manchester City, with perhaps a little less skill!)

Guru was effectively our manager and coach, and on occasion he would actually join in a game and play with

us. It was such a blessing, like so much he gave us. (He *played* with us!)

There is one story from those days I feel compelled to tell. Guru was visiting Scotland and came with us to Loch Lomond. Of course in that glorious setting, we 'enjoyed nature's beauty' (as Guru would put it). But Guru being Guru, he was equally happy to encourage us to play football. (Naturally we had brought a ball along, just in case).

To our great delight, Guru said he would join in and we were thrilled to see him show off some of his skills. (I should add that nobody - but nobody - put in any crunching tackles on Guru. We gave him space and did our best to block his passes and shots). As I remember it, he played half the game on one side, half on the other.

As it happened, I had injured my hand the week before - a cut to my finger which had become infected. It was still painful but I had taped it up for the game. What could go wrong?

Late in the game someone clearing the ball from defence kicked it quite hard in my direction. It hit me right on the sore finger and I yelled out in pain. Unfortunately the yell took the form of a rather violent swear word - I won't quote it here - and I turned to see Guru was no more than six feet away and had obviously heard my outburst. Mortified, I looked at him, not sure what to say. Guru gave me the sweetest smile, full of humour and compassion.

'You are all right?' he said.

'Yes Guru.'

'Good!'

And the game continued.

Grass-Cutter.

Guru also joined us on the field in New York, on the hard bumpy ground at Jamaica High School track. Again nobody was rash enough to tackle him when he had the ball. It was sheer joy just to see him play - his poise and balance, his lovely flicks and passes, the way he crossed the ball from the wing, flighting it just at head-height. He told us the right wing had been his favourite position when he played at the ashram. (A thrill for me to hear, as that was where I liked to play, in the magical number 7 slot). Guru told us in those days he and his team-mates had no special shoes and had played barefoot. (His feet must have been so tough).

In those sessions at Jamaica, Guru would sometimes give us training tips, pass on tricks he had learned in his youth. I remember him showing us how he would kick the ball hard but keep it low. He hit it with his instep, body over the ball, sent it zipping, close to the ground.

'We called it the grass-cutter,' he said, smiling, and I could see the young man he had been, barefoot, smacking the ball into the net.

The grass-cutter.

The Sweet Spot

Sports writers often talk of 'being in the zone' - those moments when everything just falls into place as if by magic. The tennis player finds the sweet spot on the racket, the golfer sinks that impossible putt, the runner finds that extra gear. Some of my most vivid memories of football are about that sense of it all just suddenly going right. By sheer grace (and we know that's what it is!) there is no thought, just intuitive action, body and mind in sync. I recall two instances - remember them vividly.

Playing for the European boys against the Americans on games day in New York, a perfect ball played through to me as I ran onto it from the halfway line, two defenders chasing me, the goalkeeper coming towards me. The ball dropped just ahead of me and everything seemed to slow. I let it bounce once and hit it on the half-volley, watched it arc over the keeper's head into the goal.

Another year, again in New York. I'd stayed on after August celebrations and got to play a couple of games for the Meditation-Flames. One was at Randall's Island, a league game against a tough Russian team from the UN. I was on the left wing, marked by a defender as the ball came towards me. Again everything slowed and I found myself doing my version of the Cruyff Turn (named after Dutch master Johann Cruyff who perfected it). I flicked the ball between my own legs, spun round and left the defender going the wrong way as I moved clear.

The thing about both these moments is that they were unplanned. I couldn't have pulled off these moves again if I'd tried! They really were pure grace. The fact that I recall them, in my very cells, so many years later (when I've forgotten much more important things in my life!) shows what they meant to me, an experience of simple joy in the physical, the joy of play. I am all gratitude!

Vibration

Football isn't all sweetness. It can be gruelling, especially in defeat. On an early Christmas trip, in Bermuda, we put together an international eleven - some from Europe, some from the US - to play a game against a local team. It was an evening game, played under floodlights. It was raining on and off. We started in high spirits (watched by Guru!) but the game didn't go

well. Our opponents really were a *team*, used to playing together, and also they were quite simply better than us - fitter, faster, more skilful. more tactically aware. They hammered us. By midway through the second half we were losing 6-0. (That's a big score!) We did bring on a substitute, a young Swiss boy, just 16 years old. With all the energy of youth he scored with almost his first touch of the ball to give us momentary hope. But after that they marked him closely and he didn't get another chance. We tried, but couldn't get through their defence again and it ended 6-1.

After the game Guru gathered us round and commiserated, but he was also critical. Naturally he praised the goalscorer. Then he told one or two others they had been timid and fearful throughout the game. To one of them he said, 'Look at Janaka. He is small but his vibration is strong.'

I basked in that for some time. (In fact as I write this I am basking all over again!) Clearly Scottish grit and determination had a place in the scheme of things.

What I took from it (and I see it even more clearly looking back) was that Guru was always teaching us. Whatever he did with us, whatever he did *for* us, it was always instructional. He was bringing forward a strength in us, showing us how to be. (And what better way than through football?)

The Beautiful Game.

The end of the Millennium, the Christmas trip 1999, found us in Brazil. I was thrilled to be going there, especially because of what Brazil had meant to me as a boy. Brazil was the home of the greatest footballers in the world who brought a grace and artistry to the game. The finest player ever, the great Pele, had summed it up in the title of his autobiography, *Joga Bonito* - the Beautiful Game. One of the first things I did on arrival in Brazil was buy the national team's replica jersey, bright golden yellow with green trim.

We began our visit in Rio, and a few days into the trip, someone in our group discovered there was to be a game at the world famous Maracana Stadium (where Pele had played!) The game was between two of the top teams, Flamengo and Palmeiras, and we wondered if we might be able to get tickets so a few of us could go. We checked and tickets were indeed available. We could get a group rate and the price would include travel by bus to and from the stadium. The only problem was, it was an evening game and to go would mean missing a function, a meditation with Guru. What to do? In the end we did the only sensible thing - we asked Guru.

Not only did Guru give his permission to go to the game, he called us all to the front of the room before we left, and presented us with matching shirts (in a rather vivid yellow and blue). We put on the shirts, delighted, and Guru posed for pictures with us (just as he had with the original Lions team all those years ago). He was giving us his blessing, and we wore the shirts to the game, felt like a team. The stadium was huge (though far from full), The football was exquisite.(The Beautiful Game). The crowd was raucous. (We'd expected nothing else). A window in our bus was smashed (thankfully while we were in the stadium). The whole thing was an exhilarating adventure, and through it, wearing our blue and yellow shirts, we felt wrapped in Guru's loving protection.

For that, for all of it, thank you Guru.

Janaka

