

## Sailing vs Golf

As sports go, sailing is up there with the oldest, alongside *buz khasi*\* and the ancient Olympian pastime of discus-hurling. A great many heroes of yore were sailors, starting with Jonah (you remember, the chap in that unfortunate incident with the whale) through to Jason (of Argonaut fame). Every time St. Paul wrote one of those epistles of his to the Corinthian citizenry or decided to take off to Philippi for the Bank Holiday weekend, it was to his trusty sailboat that he had to turn. Nelson and Drake wouldn't be household names if not for their skills on the water. Sailing is a truly ancient art.

Not long ago, you couldn't have dreamed of being the progenitor of some great race if you weren't able to get your genes across a fair bit of water. Right silly the Crusaders would have looked if they had to swim the channel, horses, battleaxes and all. To prove early-humans' propensity for sailing, the late Thor Heyerdahl spent much of his time building improbable craft and sailing them across vast expanses of ocean, providing the coastguard services of several maritime nations an endless source of merriment.

Ah, how times have changed! Nowadays, you can get by even if you don't know your port from your starboard, or for that matter, your port from your sherry. We have become a bunch of sissies, landlubbers almost to a man. And the cause of it all is this newfangled sport (I use the term loosely) they call golf. Picture if you will Papa Columbus on a Sunday morning asking young Christopher, a pimpled youth of 14, if he'd like to motor down to the local yacht club for a sail. 'Bracing breeze this morning, me boy', he'd say (in Italian, of course, but I can't do the dialect). 'Would you care to go down to the water and practice going west? It'll put some pink on those sallow cheeks of yours.'

What would the upshot have been had young Chris demurred? 'Nah, Pa,' he might have said, 'I think I'll go practice my chip shots at the Royal Neapolitan.' Columbus the Explorer would not have got a lot of exploring done if he spent all his time smacking a little white ball hither and thither with a stout stick in the outer suburbs of Genoa, would he? Why, America might never have been discovered. No double cheeseburgers. No ketchup. And Osama Bin Laden would be on social security.

But not everyone subscribes to the view that sailing is the sport of kings. I heard a golfer once, after it was pointed out to him that golf is not an Olympic sport, pouring scorn on us yachtsmen. Sailing, he said, was the only sport in which you stay seated throughout the event. It was, he said, much the same as chess except you don't need any brains. You don't have to be paraplegic to be a sailor, he said, but it helps. Funny, he thought he was. Criticism we yachtsmen welcome, but this surely is mere calumny, and from a golfer, to boot. The only time a golfer breaks into a sweat is when the income tax returns arrive. There's simply no comparison between sailing and golf. Sailors do not practice their art while trading stock

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\* When I submitted this little piece to the Editor, I omitted to explain what *buz khasi* was. Readers of this journal, after all, have not an *ignoramus* among them. The Editor rang me up, however, and pointed out that *The Sunday Leader* has among its subscribers also a number of golfers; there could be demand from among them for elaboration of this point.

For the benefit of our golfing friends then, *buz khasi*, an Afghan sport, was the precursor of polo. It was much the same as the present-day game, in fact, except that in place of a ball, the protagonists employed a goat's head (the goat having previously been detached from it). As a Saturday afternoon pastime, everyone found it most diverting except, of course, the goat. The late Genghis Khan, history records, had a scratch handicap and played an impressive innings, modestly attributing his success to his deft follow-through, though contemporary sports commentators thought it had more to do with his topspin, 'Bend it like Khan' having been a household phrase throughout Outer Mongolia and the eastern steppes at the time.

market gossip. They do not require the services of a caddy to tell them how to play—and to carry their umbrella for them in case it rains. They do not yell ‘Fore!’ at one another. They do not have handicaps in the 20s. And they certainly do not have ridiculous names like Tiger (why not Hippopotamus, Aardvark or Ivory Billed Woodpecker?).

Sailing is a dignified sport. We sailors are not called upon by the rules of our art to place our feet 18 inches apart, bend our knees to 120 degrees and wiggle our bottoms in the manner popularized by hens laying eggs. We do not ramble on about birdies, eagles and other assorted avifauna. And we do not wear preposterous tartan caps with woolly pompoms on top.

At just 400 years of age, golf is, beside sailing, a mere infant in pampers. It hadn’t even been invented when the Vikings were *sailing* across the North Sea and sneaking the Sunday roast off the tables of The Royal and St Andrews. The result of golf’s embarrassing youth is that, apart from ‘Fore!’, the game has no vocabulary of its own. Sailors, on the other hand, possess a rich and eloquent lexicon. ‘Starboard’, they croon to one another. ‘Water at the mark’, they call cheerily. ‘Windward boat, keep clear’, they advise politely. There’s none of the reckless aggression of golf. The very idea of doing violence to a little white ball would fill a sailor with horror.

Golf is fine, of course, for those too old to sail. But when it comes to repelling an invasion or fighting off an enemy, it isn’t much good, is it? Think about it. When Good Queen Bess needed the Spaniards kept off her shores, was it to a golfer she turned? Right silly Francis Drake would have looked, standing on the cliffs of Dover waving a nine iron at the Armada. And if it was a Monday, he would not have shown up at all: that’s when they replace the divots.

Perhaps the most important difference between sailors and golfers is that sailors have pretty wives (and we all know that it’s sailors, not golfers, who’ve got a girl in every port). I met a golfer’s wife once. She had a face like a walnut run over by the Orient Express. Why do you think they take to golf in the first place? It can’t be fun, can it, wandering aimlessly into bunkers and water hazards, and roasting in the burning sun for hours on end? Remember, it was a sailor’s wife—not a golfer’s—who had a face that launched a thousand ships. It is but rarely that a golfer’s wife owns a mug that would launch a kayak.

Ah, but I digress. My commission, from the committee of the Ceylon Motor Yacht Club, was to write a story informing you, the public, that the club is now 80 years old. They want that sung from the rooftops (they also wanted that bit in about sailors having pretty wives, I have no idea why). So, pray be informed that the Ceylon Motor Yacht Club is indeed 80 years old. Now that I’ve got that off my chest, they want me to tell you something about the history of the club.

On October 7, 1929 (they wanted me to say), a group of well-meaning citizens gathered together in one place and decided to found a boat club. The name first proposed was Ceylon Cruising Club, which idea was dropped after some of the founder members pointed out that they were married men. Given that the club would be devoted primarily to sailing and not to motor boats, it was duly decided to call it the Ceylon Motor Boat Club. There were still members however, who entertained delusions of grandeur. ‘Motor boat’, they argued, doesn’t quite convey the illusion of actually doing anything other than turning the wheel and pushing on the throttle to the accompaniment of lots of grunting; besides, it sounds common and squalid. So, within a month of the club’s creation, its name was changed to The Ceylon Motor Yacht Club. Hoity-toity and ever so U. That done, the club hasn’t looked back since.

Today, we have almost 200 members, and there is a sailboat race every Sunday. Sadly, only about 40 people in the country know how to sail, the bright side of which is that that's more people than can speak Latin. We have the best of both at the club, actually, because after a couple, many sailors actually find they can do Latin. Shouts of 'Dextra!' and 'Aqua!' are not uncommonly heard on our shores.

The club bar serves some of the best beer south of Bombay (it is also fully licensed, VAT number 4090 88791 7000, in case those zealots at Inland Revenue happen to read this and get ideas). So well is the bar patronized that a former Commodore (we do not have a president, we have a Commodore, a Vice Commodore, a Rear Commodore and other such nautical appellations) — Now where was I? Ah, yes — A former Commodore had made, not a little astutely, the observation that the CMYC was a drinking club with a sailing problem. And so indeed it is. The residents of Bolgoda, our local pond, maintain that on full moon days, when the bar is shut, the water in the lake goes down by a whole foot.

And talking of Commodores, there is every chance that umbrage will be taken should I not mention the incumbent, Joe Kenny. Joe works for a major purveyor of intoxicants and so is a natural choice for Commodore. No mean sailor, he has secretly taken up golf, honing his skills in preparation for his retirement and declining years. As head of the club, Joe runs a tight ship (the committee are nearly always tight).

Ah, an interesting mob, our members. There's our Trustee, David, who rears donkeys. There's our Oldest Member, Ray who, when not crash-landing a flying object, spends hours digging up his front lawn. Then there's our rabbi, Hans O Svendsen, who maintains order in the club (he isn't Irish: he adds the 'O' purely for effect). And of course, there's our Bar Secretary Mohan, whose job it is to keep the bar amply stocked with laryngeal liniments. Together they make sure the club operates strictly as a meritocracy: everyone's eternally merry.

And for those of you easily impressed by rank and title, the club has had its share of big-wigs. Their majesties the king and queen of Nepal have visited, though that was in 1956, so they are now the late king and queen of Nepal. Then there was Prince Philip. Not only was this a great honour to the club, but it also set a record as yet unbroken: His Royal Highness became the only sailor to grace the waters of Bolgoda in a GP-14 correctly attired in long-sleeved shirt, long trousers, Argyle socks and Bally shoes. No one got to see the royal knees.

The committee wanted me to tell you also about the young Optimist sailors. They are called Optimist sailors not because they are romantic idealists, but because the class of boat they sail was named Optimist, evidently by a designer who knew he was coming into a lot of money. There's 24 of them now, eager beavers all. The Brats (which is what we call them when they aren't within earshot) are causing a certain amount of dyspepsia among the older membership because they are sailing so well. After all, who wants to be beaten by a stripling whose voice is yet to break?

Let us then with one voice sing the praises of our beloved art: To sailing!

Rohan Pet