

BITS Pilani, Cricket, and Rocky Mountain High!

A hostel wing, C-lawns or the banks of Colorado, a BITSian will sniff out cricket anywhere!



VV Ramanan, Class of 71 Electronics

I walked off the cricket field on a typical Pilani spring day after my team had taken a beating at the hands of the 4th year team that played like professionals. My team was a rag tag band of final year and graduate students. The finals of the 1971 edition of the VT Shah Memorial tournament had just ended. I assumed that it was curtains for my brief and rather undistinguished cricket career. Little did I know then that my best cricketing days were yet to come.

In the intervening years I sharpened my cricketing skills by playing imaginary strokes in front of a full-length mirror and visualized tossing out well-flighted leg spinners in the manner of a Dwight Stones taking a practice jump in his head. I was passionate about cricket -- playing it, not following the exploits of the national team heroes -- but opportunities to actually hit a few balls were hard to come by.

It was the summer of 1984. I had just moved to Fort Collins, Colorado and one lazy weekend afternoon as I was driving through the campus of the Colorado State University, I came upon an incredible sight -- a full-fledged cricket match in progress. The setting was surreal -- the sky a brilliant azure, the field a verdant green, the smell of freshly cut grass and the cricketers in their whites and full battle gear. And looming large out west was the snow-capped Longs Peak in all of its 14,259 feet glory. As I stood near a boundary flag and watched, my spinning fingers started itching and I just had to get in.

It turned out I had to earn my cap. I was 12th man for the next few matches and finally a vacancy opened up. It was not that unusual for people to skip a match or two in favor of going camping in the pristine wilderness areas of Northern Colorado around the headwaters of the mighty Colorado River, the very same river that carved out the Grand Canyon over millions of years. I offered myself as a wicket-keeper batsman hoping that this two-in-one deal would cement my place even though my work behind the stumps was almost as pathetic as my batting. My offer was accepted. I was thankful for the opportunity and had every intention of holding on to my spot at any cost, even forgoing backcountry camping trips with pack mules for company.

The Fort Collins Cricket Club was made up entirely of expatriates -- Indian, Pakistani, Aussie, Kiwi, West Indian and Brit graduate students and professionals working in the area like myself. There was the occasional American baseball player wanting to know if he could try his hand at it but finding the objective and the rules of the game rather confusing.

The team chemistry was perfect. It was a curious mix of the melting pot and the salad bowl; melting pot when it came to the camaraderie and the desire to win one for the team but clearly a salad bowl as far as retaining individual national idiosyncrasies -- the Brits with their dry wit and cool demeanor, the Aussies with their biting sense of humor and intensity on the field, and the *desis* with their laid back attitude and self-deprecating jokes. Occasionally,

when wickets were hard to come by and the situation rather tense, a guy would yell to a fellow-*desi* bowler to try the *run out wali ball*. Needless to say, the non-*desis* on the team did not catch on to the joke. We would explain that this deadly weapon needed much practice and great deal of deception to deliver (much like the *doosra* these days!) but sadly the craft can only be learned on the dust bowls of the Indian sub-continent!

I made life-long friends on the cricket field much as I did at BITS. There was the Aussie Mike Riley, feared for his fast bowling and strong admonition when there was a misfield to his bowling but a fair dinkum Aussie if ever there was one and a great friend. He used his vacations in Sydney to perfect his batting technique against the bowling machine at the Adelaide Oval. Once while he was at the nets, he saw an old gentleman walk by. He thought he recognized the man and so caught up with him. Once he was sure who this gentleman was, Mike went to the bookshop at the Oval and picked up several copies of a coffee table book on this man and had them autographed. I have one of these and will treasure it for more than one reason. The front page says, "To Venki Ramanan, Best Wishes, Don Bradman"

In early spring 1998, during the waning days of my career as a club cricketer, I was laid low by an illness and spent six weeks in an ICU. During a particularly low point during this episode, Mike showed up at the hospital. My wife, who was playing gatekeeper to keep out everybody but the closest friends and relatives, told Mike he could not see me. Mike was incredulous. You have only known Venki for 9 years, he told my wife, and I have played cricket with him for fourteen! Nobody could stop him. Mike teased me about my hapless situation and mentioned that practice sessions had started now that spring had arrived. You better buck up, he told me. I had not seen daylight in six weeks but I could start feeling spring in my body – the brilliant Colorado sunshine, the smell of freshly mowed grass and the banter of my cricket buddies; not to mention the crocuses and the daffodils that I had planted with my little daughter the previous fall that undoubtedly would have flowered by now. I was out of the ICU in a jiffy.

Here I come to the *piece de resistance* of this narrative. I was behind the stumps as usual; the bowler was my wonderful friend Vinod, a brilliant all rounder. Wickets were tumbling <http://sandpaper.bitsaa.org>

like ninepins and there was a new batsman at the crease. Vinod let go a fast, rising delivery, which hit the batsman in the clavicle region. The batsman dropped to the ground. I ran forward to help him and started talking to him to calm him down. I asked him where he was from in India. He told me he was from Trichy. I then asked him where he went to college in India.

"You won't know, it is small college in the North."

I persisted.

He said, "It's called BITS".

I said, "Dang, why won't I know it, I went there too!"

He looked at me and said "I graduated in 1979, you are probably several years junior to me."

Obviously, he had not had a chance to study my face under my panama hat and had assumed that I was a graduate student. I put on my best BITS senior demeanor and told him, "If you were five years older, I would have probably ragged you and oh by the way don't ever insult BITS again by calling it a small unknown college in the north".

The batsman Lakshmipathy was a professor at the University of Denver.

All this while, the bowler Vinod was looking exasperated over the delay -- the same Vinod Malhotra, who is now a professor at the University of Hawaii and a 1981 graduate of BITS!

Little did I know in March 1971 after my team had taken a pasting that cricket and BITS would intersect with my life again. More incredibly, that this will happen in far away Rocky Mountain west of the US of A.

I was to run into a few other BITSians on and off the field. But it was a special thrill when Subbu from the class of '71 joined the team. I had played with him during our final year at BITS as well as in our high school. As I watched his familiar run up to bowl his off-spinners, it was as if time had stood still.

I gave up playing cricket in 1998 – my body could not take it any more, my wife was complaining that I was away entire Saturdays in the summer playing and my

little daughter was missing her gardening buddy. In 2006, we moved to India, the Mecca of cricket. Cricket became something I only saw on TV and I must say I saw lots of it to make up for years and years of starvation. Every time a batsman played and missed, in my mind I would go through how I would have played it – lead with the left elbow pointed, head over the ball, perfectly straight bat, bat and pad close together.

This past July, I was back in the Rocky Mountain region. I had a Saturday to kill and was aimlessly driving around Fort Collins. It was picture pretty – beautiful blue skies, trees fully leafed out, flowers in full bloom and the unmistakable smell of freshly

cut grass. This must have triggered some chemical reaction in my body and soon the car was on autopilot driving towards the cricket field.

I parked the car and was just getting out, when a big fellow got out of the car parked next to mine, flashed a brilliant smile and said, “Venki mon, where have you been all these days?” The last time I saw Neil, the Jamaican, was in 1998. I walked over to the nets with him. Mike was there to throw a few at me from about 15 yards, the full 22 looked too formidable. I played at and missed every one of them.

