

# CLIFFORD CUP

## The Blue Riband of Sri Lankan Rugby

By Neil Wijeratne

The history of the Clifford Cup is virtually the history of the island's rugby history. The first news item introducing the Clifford Cup, appeared in "The Ceylon Observer" dated August 12, 1911 under the caption "Lady Clifford encourages Rugby Football - Interesting match suggested - United Services vs Ceylon."

According to "The Ceylon Observer" report "Her Excellency Lady Clifford was extremely interested in the great annual rugby football fixture, Colombo vs Up Country, and has shown how much she appreciates the way in which the game is contested in Ceylon by expressing a wish that a match may take place in Colombo on the 26th of this month, between teams representative of the United Services and All Ceylon. Lady Clifford has also generously consented, we

understand, to provide two cups, which will go, in the event of the Services winning, one to Army and the other to the Navy. If Ceylon win, one cup will go to Colombo, and the other to Up Country."

Originally, the Clifford Cup was awarded to the winners of the match between All-Ceylon and the United Services. United Services team led by Lt. O'Sullivan won the inaugural match in 1911 and again in 1913. It is said that during the First World War the original trophy was lost or misplaced. It also marked the first phase of history of the Clifford Cup.

In 1926 Sir Hugh Clifford was back in the island with Lady Clifford who was keen to revive the Clifford Cup tourney in the British Colony, donated another trophy. This time the Clifford Cup was awarded to the winner of a quadrangular tourney commenced in 1926 and participated by four teams; Low-Country, Up-Country, Ceylonese and the United Services.

Twenty Four years later, came the most noteworthy change that made the country's rugby league more competitive and official. In 1950, the Ceylon Rugby Football Union decided to grant official status to the league rugby tournament thus converting the Clifford Cup competition to an inter-club affair.

In early March 1950, a newspaper predicted that "Possibly this year's inter club and district matches may assume a new role - competition on a league tournament basis for the Clifford Cup. This Trophy was formerly played by the winners of the Capper Cup (Up-Country vs. Low-Country) and the winners of the United Services vs. Ceylonese fixture. At the moment the Ceylon Rugby Football Union is awaiting a decision".

The 1950 rugby season, being the country's first official league season for the Clifford Cup, commenced on April 29, with Dickoya hosting CR & FC at Darawella. CR was led by Archibald Perera whilst D A Cook was the skipper of the Dickoya team. The match turned out to be a thriller and at the long whistle of referee J. M. Stewart, the score was Dickoya 6 - CR & FC 5. The Last two matches of the season were played during the first weekend of July but by then, unbeaten Havelocks team under the captaincy of Ian Labrooy had their hand on the Clif-

ford Cup. The other teams that took part in the inaugural official league competition in 1950 were CH & FC, K.V., Kandy, Uva and Dimbula C & AC.

"The Times of Ceylon" in its issue dated July 9, 1950 reported the details last match for the season by the Park Club under the caption "Havelocks capture Clifford Cup". It read "Beating Dimbula at Radella by 13 points to nil, the Havelocks won the Clifford Cup for the inter district rucker tournament with a 100 per cent record. What is more, they maintained their fine record of not having their line crossed this season" and added that "It was the grandest match witnessed at Radella".

Havies retained the title for the second year in succession in 1951, keeping their goal line intact throughout the season once again. Under the captaincy of Mahes Rodrigo, CR & FC won the trophy in 1952, followed by Dimbula in 1953 under the leadership of Lyn Simpson thus becoming the first outstation club to lay hands on the Clifford Cup. Kandy SC's maiden appearance in a Clifford Cup final was witnessed in 1954 when they went down to CR & FC led by Summa Navaratnam 21 - 5, under the captaincy of S B Pilapitiya.

Over the years, there were new participants joining the top eight. Who could forget the day that Air Force team led by Jeff Ratnam stormed into the final in 1965, the Army team's skippered by Bertie Dias entry to the final in 1962, the Police team's (Capt. S Sivendran) dynamic entry to the final in 1967 as a Lower division team or the Navy SC's sensational cup final appearance in 1976 under the captaincy of Ilex Perera.

History shows that in 1959 the custody of the Clifford Cup was shared for the first time when Dimbulla and CR & FC figured in a 11-all drawn match with Lionel Almeida (CR) and Ralph Gauder (Dimbulla) excelling for the respective clubs.

Although the tournament pattern changed from time to time, the Clifford Cup tourney was the ultimate decider of the island's rugby supremacy. Anyhow, in 1985 the "Gold Leaf Cup" replaced the age-old Clifford Cup for the league tournament and thereafter it was presented to the premier division knock-out competition champs, which trend continued to date.



# FINAL SHOWDOWN:

## Formbook Favours NAVY; HAVIES Can Upset

All roads will lead to the picturesque racecourse grounds this evening for the final showdown of what has been an enthralling rugby season replete with some high quality rugby the likes of which have not been seen for many decades.

T.M.K. SAMAT reviews what is sure to be a block buster of a match

If the outcome of a Cup Final is determined by the formbook, then league champions Navy should run out winners today. They overcame Havelock Sports Club, the other finalist, twice in the league tournament this season, and the psychological advantage accruing from that proven superiority over the opponent could well be the decisive factor in deciding who takes the Clifford Cup, a relic of British colonial rule and so, rugby's oldest prize.

The Navy's established supremacy over Havelock SC apart, their overall record this season is awesome: sixteen straight wins so far, including their 14-match winning sequence in the league. By comparison, Havelock's record is modest: 13 wins, 3 defeats. A closer scrutiny of league's statistics puts the Park Club's prospects today further behind Navy; the sailors have scored 66 more points and conceded 45 points fewer than Havelock SC in the 14 games each played in the league. What these statistics convey is that Navy is equipped with an attack more potent and a defence sturdier than the Havelock's.

The one equality between today's combatants is in schools-pedigree of the captains: both are led by former Thomians - Havelock SC by Sudharshan Muthuthantri and Navy by Rohitha Rajapaksa. The first time that two former Thomians have led the contesting teams of a Clifford Cup final

But in the matter of school pedigree too Navy's leader has the edge over his rival. Rajapaksa led S. Thomas in 2008 and Muthuthantri never did - in fact the Havelock's captain made his first XV debut the year after Rajapaksa's captaincy.

Where Muthuthantri might claim one over his rival is that he is National player, representing the country at last year's Asian Sevens series and was also a member of the 2013 ASN national squad. However, though Muthuthantri might have national team seniority on his side, Rajapaksa has been a better hand dealt to him - an invincible team, as well as two elder brothers, Namal and Yoshita, both former S.Thomas' captains and the latter the a former skipper of Navy as well.

atmosphere prevailing out there in the middle as the battle waxes furious throughout the eighty minutes. After all, it's the season's last game and players will be willing to lay bodies on the line - knowing that the next season doesn't dawn till next November, there's time enough to mend broken bones and bleeding wounds.

Where the Havelock SC might want to take less seriously their opponent's superior record this season is their own experience as league champions last year. It will be remembered that the Havelocks, under the leadership of Terence Henry, won the league quite handsomely, handing the then defending champions, Kandy SC, their worst defeat in more seasons than one can recollect. The two met again in the Knockout Cup Final, and the popular expectation was that the Park Club would complete the double, just as Navy are expected to do today. But things didn't work out in the way it was expected for Havelock SC - roundly beaten by Kandy SC. The Cup final is that sort of occasion - it

makes a mockery of popular expectations. So, where Havelock SC failed last year will the Navy go out today and complete the double? The league statistics, as aforementioned, says they will, but cold statistics don't speak of the grating tension and suffocating pressure of a Cup Final, and what they do to players' nerves. "It was Kandy SC's umpteenth Cup final (last season) while it was our first in, I think, two decades - that explains the result," said Havelock's coach of last season, Thushitha Pieries, after the last knockout final. "A Cup final match is quite another experience."

Whilst Havelock SC might be wiser after their Cup Final involvement last season, it will be Navy's first appearance since their return to tournament rugby in 2009, after the war. But the manner in which they have stormed to the top in just a few years speaks of a depth of determination that defies conventional thinking - this is first Cup final, and that is all the more reason why they want to win it; just as they had set their minds, in 2009, on winning the more difficult league trophy, and won it in five short seasons.

But the sailors themselves might admit, if not publicly, then privately, that Havelock SC is a difficult hurdle before their ambition of completing the double. Both their league encounters with the Park Club were anything but strolls in the park. The first was won by a four-point margin and the second, by seven points - which means one try would've meant victory in the first league meeting and a goal, a draw in the second round meeting.

"It was mistakes that cost us both our games against the Navy - and not their superiority. I think our players have the potential to beat them, if we can minimize our mistakes," said Havelock SC skipper, Muthuthantri. "We've been working hard on eliminating the mistakes in our play and hopefully achieve perfection in the final."

Words and deeds are far apart; Havelock SC will have to show dramatic improvement not only on their previous performances against the Navy, but also, improvement on their shabby showings in the quarters and semi final, in both of which they were subjected to more than a few defeat-threatening moments by the Army and Kandy SC respectively.

Navy, though, has to be considered the favourites today. Should the outcome be different, Havelock SC, you can be sure, will celebrate like never before. The night will be tackled, high and low.

