

FROM BATTLEFIELD TO TENNIS COURT

Sri Lanka's army is helping its amputee soldiers find hope through sport

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Lance Corporal Upali Rajakaruna, a soldier in the Sri Lankan Army, was on guard duty in the Weli-Oya sector, a front line in Sri Lanka's quarter century civil war, when intelligence reports started pouring in to his Singha Regiment that the Tamil Tiger rebels were about to launch an artillery attack. Sweat trickled down his dark brown face and he switched off the safety on his automatic rifle. Tall, lean and with a body naturally chiselled, Mr Rajakaruna stood tense. He remembers that his legs felt very heavy and his breath became short and rapid, almost a pant.



ATHLETE: Upali Rajakaruna has found new purpose playing tennis.

Suddenly, the hiss and whistle of an incoming mortar split the air. With the adrenaline rushing and the shouts and screams of men in combat all around him, he did not feel the razor sharp shrapnel tearing into his left leg. Mr Rajakaruna buckled and then he saw it. Below the knee hung a mess of shredded meat and splintered bone. The doctors tried, but there was nothing they could do to save his leg.

Mr Rajakaruna was a casualty of what had been Asia's longest modern war, in which an estimated 85,000 people were killed. Government forces last month defeated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), or Tamil Tigers, who were fighting for an independent Tamil state in the northeast of the country. In the final weeks of the struggle civilian casualties attributed to both sides were high as the Tigers were forced into an ever-smaller sliver of land before the government's final victory.

The result of still unresolved political and social divisions between minority Tamils and the Sinhalese-dominant government, the conflict had all the cruel and nasty hallmarks of civil war - assassination of high ranking figures, child soldiers, suicide bombers, ethnic genocide, forced evictions, human shields and millions of landmines.

Life goes on even after catastrophic injury, and once out of the hospital Mr Rajakaruna joined a sports rehabilitation programme created by the Sri Lankan Army dedicated to helping its amputee soldiers through a variety of sports. He became a wheelchair tennis player, one of the few team members who was not a landmine victim.

Once a gifted athlete, for a time Mr Rajakaruna thought he would never walk again. His physical condition devastated him and he sunk into a deep depression. Incredible as it might seem, he had never heard of prosthetic limbs. Nor had he ever heard of tennis, the sport that was about to give new meaning to his life.

Lieutenant Colonel Shiran Abeyssekera is the director of the wheelchair tennis programme.

"The soldiers live at an army base and are transported in each morning to the tennis courts," Lt Col Abeyssekera began. "The programme allows them to integrate back into society and learn important life skills. In addition to learning tennis, they also learn to be linesmen and referees, which allows them to work in numerous tennis tournaments, even the Davis Cup."

Motorised rickshaws, bullock carts and colourful buses packed with passengers drive by the entrance to the Sri Lankan Tennis Association (SLTA) centre in Colombo. On this day, it is 35 degrees Celsius and a humidity gauge measures 82%. Scattered about the hard courts are prosthetic legs that have been taken off. The sound of laughter rises up over heat waves that seem to smother the courts as the men delight in hitting old balls with a variety of racquets like Wilson widebodies or Pro Kennex aluminum models. In wheelchair tennis the ball is allowed to bounce twice, and the players charge or spin around, clockwise and anti-clockwise, like they are mounted on steel-horses.

"Due to financial constraints, our players are no longer able to compete in international tournaments where they could have bettered their current ranking," admitted Maxwell De Silva, president of the Sri Lanka Tennis Association. "We have some very good players, but we no longer have the sponsors to help them with the expenses to play in tournaments outside of Sri Lanka. And the wheelchairs needed for tennis are very expensive."

In Sri Lanka the average monthly income falls below US\$50 (1,710 baht).

According to Mark Bullock, International Tennis Federation Wheelchair manager: "A standard new chair equipped for tennis would cost \$3,000. However, the ITF has been working with an English foundation called Motivation to develop a low-cost tennis chair that will soon be launched and cost in the region of \$350.

"We are very impressed with the programme in Sri Lanka," Mr Bullock continues, "both in the terms of numbers and the level of play achieved."

During a classroom session for the players' goal setting strategies are outlined on a chalk-board. Ableman Bandara Alagoda of the Sri Lankan Navy, a double amputee, enters. Trying to find a seat through the crowded room, his crutches tangle and he crashes to the floor. The other amputees erupt in laughter at his clumsiness and he sheepishly gets back up. Ableman Alagoda was standing a watch on deck of his ship at Trincomalee Naval Base when a Tamil Tiger suicide bomber in a boat packed with explosives rammed his vessel. The blast blew both his legs clean off. Like most of the others he had never seen a tennis court before he entered the army sports rehabilitation programme.

"When the soldiers came to me they had gone through an army rehab programme, but most of the guys had never seen a tennis court before," Jagath Welikala, coach for the wheelchair tennis programme, remembers. "I was given about 100 soldiers and told to pick some players. So I selected about 30 of the lot."



INTERNATIONAL COMPETITOR:
Upali Rajakaruna at the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing.

Mr Welikala began training the men in 2003 and has since had great success. His star player, Mr Rajakaruna, is ranked No 62 in the world rankings.



When asked who was their favourite tennis player in the world the group was quiet. Most admit that they have never seen a tennis match on television, as Sri Lanka does not show live matches. And only Mr Rajakaruna knows about Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal. Lance Corporal Mahanama Basnayake, a big man with a wide grin who has been teaching himself English by learning one word a day from a Merriam-Webster dictionary, lost his leg to a landmine in Jaffna. He braces himself against his chair as he stands up and says: "Rajakaruna. Rajakaruna is my favourite player in the world." Everyone nodded in agreement.

Mr Rajakaruna has travelled the Asia/Oceania region and all the way to Brazil and Sweden while competing in wheelchair tennis tournaments. The pinnacle of his young career came last year when he won his first round match at the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing. Upon his return to Sri Lanka a special ceremony was held in his hometown of Kekikawa in his honour.

"Rajakaruna is a hero for all the athletes in Sri Lanka," stated Mr De Silva. "Not only the disabled ones, mind you, but for everyone. Unfortunately, we do not have any sponsors to pay for him to continue to play outside of Sri Lanka. So, now he continues to train while waiting. And hoping that someone will give him another

opportunity."

After 26 years of armed struggle, the Tamil Tigers finally admitted defeat on May 17. While the army rejoiced over the victory, they have taken quite a beating by the world's media over the heavy-handed tactics they used in defeating the rebels, which included bombing of villages which killed many civilians and sent thousands more fleeing.

"Because of the war there are lots of amputees in the affected areas. In our small way, the SLTA is pushing this wheelchair programme and tennis in an effort to unite the people," said Mr De Silva.

"Because whether we are Tamil or Sinhalese, in the end we are all Sri Lankans."

Through the sport of wheelchair tennis, Mr Rajakaruna has demonstrated to other amputees how to deal with the injustices of life by turning despair into joy. The tennis ball may bounce twice, but that does not stop this player from chasing after it.

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