

Sri Lanka Trip Diary – March 2010

by Alex Bassan

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Alex and other Cricket for Change staff were in Sri Lanka as part of a sustainable cricket development programme commissioned by the ICC along with ICC partner charity Peace and Sport and UNICEF, Sri Lanka Cricket Board and the British High Commission. The main aim of the programme is to identify 24 former child soldiers from the three Child Soldier Rehabilitation Camps in Sri Lanka and give them the opportunity to train as Cricket Peer Leaders.

Monday 15th March

After an uncomfortable long plane journey we had a gruelling drive to the hotel. Despite everyone feeling the flight and tiredness, spirits were high and everybody was looking forward to starting the project. It was 05:00 when we arrived at the hotel and with a few people managing to get a few hours sleep in, we were then up and ready to leave at 07:15.

With a 45 minute drive to the Hindu College we had time to take in the surroundings of Sri Lanka for the first time. My first impressions of Sri Lanka were that it was an untidy and busy place to be and there were a million things going on at once. I am sure my view would change on the place as the week went on. We arrived at the College and as we pulled up we had 25 smartly dressed young people smiling nervously at us. As we got out of the mini bus we greeted the young people with hand shakes and a sense of joy and liveliness and which rubbed off on them very quickly.

We started off with introduction from UNICEF, the general of the Hindu College and then Cricket For Change. After this we took the kids onto the field and started to do some ice-breakers. We got them to pair up and then with a tennis ball do 5 catches each. Then after the 5 catches we got them to say to their partner their name, where they were from and what their age was. After they did this we got them moving around and finding new partners. When we felt that they had started to interact more with each other we got them moving around again but when then we shouted out numbers and so if we called out '4' they would have to get into groups of '4'.

After this we went inside to ask the young people their hopes and dreams. We did this by putting an A3 piece of paper up on the wall, gave them 'Post-it' notes and then got them to write what that they hope they would get out of this experience and then we got them to write about their fears about the project. A lot of the young people put down that they wanted to improve their cricket skills and for their fears a lot of them put down that there wasn't enough time.

We discussed these hopes and fears with them and explained how we there to turn them into young leaders. Even though we played some cricket we were not just there to improve their cricketing skills but most importantly their social skills. After this we had lunch.

Following lunch and to get them going again we played a game of Street20. After the matches we brought them back inside to go through the rules of Street20. They picked up the rules quickly and this helped us out massively as it meant we could move on to discuss about umpiring and why it is important to have umpires. Once again we got the flipchart out and some more 'Post-it' notes and the young people wrote down why it was important to have umpires and what would happen if we didn't. A lot of the answers were based around why we have umpires; to keep the game running smoothly and to keep order in the game and if we didn't have umpires then there would be conflict if people didn't agree with a decision.

After this we finished up with asking them what their 'trigger' is that makes them angry and how it affects others around you. We used cricket as an example, if you hit a 6 how do you feel? But if you get out the next ball how do you feel about letting your team mates down and what could you have done? The young people responded well to this giving good answers, such as; it's important to have a good team bond and not to let your team mates down, you all have a role in the team and everyone must do their best to complete that role.

After a long day's work it felt good and we all felt we have achieved a lot on the first day. From the young people being very refined at the beginning to when we were leaving having smiles on their faces and opening up to us more. After a long day we retreated back to the hotel for a well deserved rest.

Tuesday 16th March

Another early start and with the drive ahead of us we had a chance to talk about the day ahead. When we arrived the young people seemed happy and excited to see us and straight away the bond we made yesterday had a clear effect. We started off the day with a quiz on the day before. We would do 6 questions about Street20 and the day's events. Splitting them into teams of four we had a good response with all the teams getting full marks and explaining why they put the answer down that they did.

After the quiz we headed on outside to show them a few games. We played an awareness game called 'Car Park'. 'Car Park' is simple; we make an area called the 'Car Park' which they can't go out of. They have to roam around the 'Car Park' making sure they don't crash into anyone, if they get close they have to beep their horn and try and dodge. We stressed the points of safety and asked questions about the safety and why it is important to keep game environment safe. Then we split them into their four teams to do four different games.

Andy Dalby-Welsh (DW) played a 'Catching Tennis' game. There was volleyball net and the aim was to throw the ball over the net into the opposing teams' half and see if they can catch it. Andy stressed the safety issue and asked the kids the main safety point and why it is important.

Adam Hall (AH) played a game called 'Catching Snake'. This involves players standing in a zig-zag facing each other, they have to pass the ball down the line and when thrown run around the side to continue the line. If they drop it they have to go back to the start. Adam once again asked about the safety point and why.

Danny Baker (DB) played a game called 'Catch Until They Drop'. The groups split into 2 with a small area to work in. The group starts off with 4 balls and have to keep the balls in the air by passing to each other. If the ball is dropped it is left out and then they continue. Danny asks about the safety point and why it is important.

Then I (Alex) played a game, 'Catching By Numbers'. This game consists of labelling up the players, in my case 1-8 and they have to move around the grid throwing the ball to each other in numerical order. If they are showing good progression then another ball is added and so on. Once again I stressed about safety and why it is important. We also used this opportunity to try and get them to adapt the games. They were very positive about it and came up with some good ideas. After these sessions we broke for lunch.

I always enjoyed the lunch break, not just because we had the 'buffet of all buffets' (we were never disappointed with the lunch that we had) but it gave us a chance to communicate with the other kids around the college and to get out of the intense heat. I always found this time a reflection time for me to look around and see what they have and how lucky I am to have what I have. I would interact with the younger kids who are not involved in the project and just give them catches and do silly handshakes with them; something that would put a smile on their face for the rest of the day.

After we finished lunch we split them into 2 teams for a game of Street20 as an energizer. We also picked 2 scorers and 2 umpires, to umpire and score the match. After the matches we would reflect and ask questions about how the game could be improved and how the umpires and scorers found the experience and what worked and didn't work for them. We then ran a dummy run of the launch of the project (*due to take place on Friday 19th March*) with splitting everyone into the roles of umpires, scorers and leaders.

We got them into school groups and got them to right down all the processes that will happen on the day what they will need, who will be doing what and when and also how they will act on the day. They all came up with the right ideas of everyone always doing something no one sitting around, everyone sticking to their jobs and helping one another. This activity went on for the rest of the day and then at the end as always we would all reflect on the day and finish up.

At the end of today, we decided to take a 'tuck-tuck' back to the hotel. This was my first experience in a 'tuck-tuck' and there was no one I would rather have this death defying experience with than Danny Baker. As AH and DW jumped in one, Danny and I went screaming off in another. As we were holding on for dear life, another 'tuck-tuck' comes screaming passed us and all I see is the fear in Adam's face, with Danny and I laughing it quickly turned into a loud scream. Our 'tuck-tuck' driver was heading for a large group of cyclists crossing the road, as we approached them it was only a loud shout from Danny that made the driver whack a right and missed the group by inches. It was the most frightening, exciting but best journey I have ever taken.

Wednesday 17th March

We started the day with a good old quiz as this is always a good time to get them working with people that they do not normally work with and to get them to interact with each other more. After the quiz we moved onto the importance of fielding and talking in the field. We played some simple fielding games with them and got them to explain the games to each other and why it is important to talk during the games and help each other out. I enjoyed this because it gave me a chance to show them what I would do and it gave me a chance to see what ideas they had and gave me a chance to learn from them. After playing these games and then coaching them to each other we had a hand hockey competition with 4 teams and 2 pitches.

We ran the first set of games and they ran the second set of games. When the games had finished we got them back into the class rooms and decided to have a group discussion about the games and how we could improve on them and how they felt they could demonstrate the games better.

This gave me a chance to search for a bottle of water and in doing so I bumped into some students from the college. I managed to find out some stories from them, they spoke very little English but with a lot of hand signs and willingness to see what each other had to say the communication came through in the end. It really opened up to me how these people had nothing all they had was what was around them and how they coped with it, they didn't know anything else but this.

After lunch we moved more into their emotions. We got them playing a few games and got them to understand that if they used offensive language against each other or if they where to ruin a match how would they feel and how they would effect everyone around them. In this drill I took a back seat and let Danny and Adam do their thing. In a way, I really wanted to get stuck in and do it myself but also it was good because I got to watch the way Danny and Adam worked but also I got to see people's reactions and managed to engage in what they were saying. It was hard for them because a lot of them opened up to us about their experiences. This is big for them because we have only known them for 3 days and they are already telling us of their raw experiences. This was big for me as well as them because once again it has opened up another world to me and the problems they have had to face.

Before we finished off the day we played a game of Street20.

As the day finished, Tom (Rodwell) came up with the idea of getting the train back to the hotel. As Adam, Tom and I made are way to the train station the others chickened out and chose to take their life into their own hands and get a 'tuck-tuck' back. Tom already found a 'tuck-tuck' driver who let's just say.... wasn't all there. He spoke good English but he liked the sound of his own voice and ended up taking us through lots of back roads.

As Tom wanted to go into a shop to grab some books Adam and I wondered into a church. The church forecourt had kids playing in the front of it and they where astonished to have us walk in but they all waved and smiled at us. We went to the front doors of the church and greeted by a lovely old man, he took us around and showed us all the art work and the statues. As we got around one of the sides we noticed a coffin. Intrigued by this, Adam and I asked what this was about. It was a full sized model of a man with a thorn from Jesus' crown in his head. I was freaked out by it but once again it shows the culture and how they respect religious views as well.

As we finished up looking at the church we got back into the 'tuck-tuck' and made our way to the station. Tom kindly bought us our tickets which averaged out, at about 30p each. As we waited for the train to come we had a look around the station it was unbelievable. It was right next to the sea and there was palm tree after palm tree with white sand - it was unbelievable.

When the train turned up, I didn't really know what to expect but it was like a massive metal container on wheels. As we got on we noticed that people where sitting out of the door as it was moving. I thought to myself I wanted some of this, so we made our way to the door and just sat there whilst it was moving. As we where going along there were loads of different huts along the shore line with all different people sitting outside these shanty huts. As we went along the train was slowing down and these three guys where sitting outside this hut and put the thumbs up at Adam and I, so we chucked them a tennis ball each. Their expressions were like they had won the lottery. They where so grateful, it was things like this that made me feel good about what we where doing and grateful for what I have.

As we went to get off I stood up and felt this massive slap against my face, what I didn't manage to see what the massive palm tree that was in front of me. Adam and Tom where in hysterics as we got off and

had a few minutes walk back to the hotel where we all had a well deserved lie down and relaxing beer by the pool.

Thursday 18th March

Once again we started off the day with a quiz from the day before. As soon as the quiz was finished we started the day with a Street20 game. In this game, the young leaders did the umpiring and scoring. As I was walking around watching the different games, I was thinking to myself how much everyone has achieved in the time we have been here. Watching the young leaders take over our role was a brilliant to see and what an achievement for them. And for me, to come to a new country, to manage to get through the heat and the tiredness to work with these young leaders and then to watch it all develop so fast. The hard work paid off on a whole new experience.

After the match we gave a few of the players some roles so the matches didn't run smoothly. We do this, so we can see how they can control the situation and what they do if it all kicks off or someone doesn't agree with the decision that the umpire has made. We had players fight on the pitch, shout abusive language and had an injury on the pitch. The leaders dealt with these roles and situations really well. They defused the fighting and arguing, calmly and sensibly; and with the injury cleared everyone out the way and made sure the injured person had space and did everything in their own time.

This showed me and the other C4C members of staff how much they had matured and listened to us as teachers. I think this also shows how much they play and react to us as coaches as well. If someone fell over (not hurting themselves badly of course) we laughed and just got on with it and they would react in the same but by us showing and reacting in a responsible way this reflected onto them. Adam and I then went through basic first aid with them, when to move someone, when not to move someone and what to do in emergencies. After this we broke for lunch.

As I have mentioned, I always loved lunch apart from the amazing food we got served up every day it gave us a chance to talk to the kids around the college and interact with them. Something from just teaching them a silly handshake to playing catch with them would put a smile on their face. This started me thinking, that if someone came up to me and tried teaching me a silly hand shake I would think they have been on the jazz woodbine too much and probably ask them to leave me alone. And playing catch that's something I do everyday, whether it is when I'm coaching or just at the cricket club mucking around I do these things not even thinking. But for them it will stick with them for a long time and it will be with me for a long time too.

After lunch we played a counting game where we had to count to 12 starting from 1 – 12 but no one had a number so they could shout out whenever they wanted, but if 2 or more people shouted out the same number they would have to go back to the start again. This lasted a good 20 minutes with them getting up to 10 and 11 but someone always saying 12 together. With them starting to get really into it we split them into teams to compete against each other. Team 1 managed to get to 8team 2 got to 8then team 1 got to 9..... then when team 2, with a speedy count got to number 12, they jumped up out of their seats running around the room like they had just struck gold!

This was the moment for me that I realised we had made a change.

You go back four days and these kids didn't speak to each other, hardly made contact with us as coaches. It was a very quiet first day compared to now with all the smiling, laughing and being young leaders together.

With the day drawing in it got closer to the Launch Day of the project. With C4C being positive and some of the leaders nervous we ended the day with the leaders playing the staff in a game of Street20. I will leave it at that because the leaders showed the staff how to play the game!

Friday 19th March – Launch Day

Friday morning came and it was another boiling hot day perfect to get some early rays on the already suntanned Bass-man (that's me – Alex!). After a cheeky dip in the pool it was time to leave with everyone all ready for the fantastic day that was ahead of us. We had a long journey in an unconditioned fridge... sorry I mean van. We were kept together by Danny's quiz which always makes me look like the plum I am. Turning up at Colombo Cricket Ground I looked out of the fridge door (van) and seeing... well a field... I looked at Danny as to say is this it? And he said just wait and see. As we turned up we got our bags and looked for the ground.

We found a reception area and made our way through. As we walked through the walkway the saying 'never judge a book by its cover' came to me. As I walked along the path, there were these rivers of golden coo with palms and waterfalls. It was amazing. At the end I walked through an arch onto the ground. As I waked onto the ground it was massive, the amount of seating and standing area was unbelievable. As soon as we turned up the leaders were already there and were more than happy to see us.

As we brought all leaders in to explain what they were going to do and explained that this was part of what we had all worked for these past few days. In a way, if it was a shambles and didn't work it would be us in the dog house it wouldn't be them so we where more nervous than they were. As we turned up there was also the Sri Lankan Cricket Board and UNICEF. This was a big deal and everything had to look spot on. As it all kicked off, it was running really well the music was blaring the matches were flowing and the sun was shining.

As I walked around the stadium taking it all in, it was then I thought this is exactly what it was all about. They had achieved so much in such a short space of time and how I also have achieved so much in that time too.

When the games were all done we had a presentation along with a speaker from each organisation. Now I'm not very good with sitting and listening so I was happy to sit there and read a magazine that was left on the chair.

But, then two of the young leaders got up to say a few words. First, was a young lady who had worked really hard during the course of the week. Her words just rolled off her tongue and everyone was listening to what she had to say. The praise she gave to us was out of this world, we have turned her life around and gave her a new chance in life. Then a young man came up to speak, he was head and shoulders above others in learning that week and had really put everything into it. He was thanking everyone, including UNICEF, the Sri Lankan coaches and C4C.

But then he said 'C4C always remember the glass is never half empty, it is always half full' and as soon as these words came out of his mouth we all looked at each other as if to say, this is what it's all about. This saying took them a while to understand and even when we finished we weren't even sure whether they understood it or not but this had concluded everything that we were on about it was such an amazing moment.

After the speeches had finished there was a lot of pictures and a lot of signing of books and bats that we had to do, it felt like I was a sports star and everyone just wanted to know what we were doing, who we were and how amazing we were. The camera crew that turned up all wanted to interview us and know everything about us. I'm not going to lie I loved every moment of it, some people don't enjoy that sort of thing - but me I loved it!

As the day wound down and we said our goodbyes' we had an excited but tiring journey back. We had a quick look out the window and saw a cricket bar. So we stopped and had lunch in there. It was the nicest and most well deserved beer I think I have ever had.

I took 5 minutes to myself to go outside and have a look at what was going on around me and to have a think over the week that had just been. It was a real eye opener at what I have back home and what these people dream of. I knew coming out to Sri Lanka would be an experience in itself but what I had experienced and what I have witnessed couldn't have been better. I couldn't have imagined what I experienced and the memories will always stay with me.

The memories of trips in vans, in 'tuck-tuck's', going on a train and sitting out of the door of the train and in particular the impact of helping change these young leader's lives will always be with me. I couldn't have done it without the support of the rest of the C4C staff. So I would like to say a massive thank you to; Tom Rodwell, Andy Sellins, Andy Dalby-Welsh, Danny Baker and Adam Hall. This experience couldn't have happened without you guys thanks for the support and the laughs on this once in a lifetime trip.

Later that evening the group of Cricket for Change staff then made their way home from Sri Lanka.