



BACK IN TIME

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Grace Under Pressure

Sports have always been important at the British Schools. In the Centennial history book the chapter on Sports opens with these three paragraphs:

For the British community in Uruguay practicing sport was of paramount importance and an integral part of the personal and social life of its members. The many sports clubs and activities in which they engaged laid the foundation for sport in Uruguay. To name but a few: Montevideo Cricket Club, Montevideo Rowing Club, Firefly Club, Lawn Tennis Club, Montevideo Golf Club, Central Uruguay Railway Club, Albion Football Club. The Founders of The British Schools were no exception and, since the beginning, sport was considered a fundamental and integral part of the students' education.

"We shall also pay careful attention to the physical side of education (...) and every pupil will be expected to take part in the organised games. In addition to the small field which is attached to these premises, we are allowed the use of an excellent ground outside the city. We have therefore every opportunity of promoting this branch of School life, which helps so much to create that healthy moral tone, and that feeling of *esprit de corps* which are the essential characteristics of a British school." (H.W. Jones)

In addition to simple enjoyment, sport allows the students to learn its inherent key values such as fair play, teamwork, trust, discipline, resilience, sportsmanship, grace under pressure, as well as an appropriate attitude towards both winning and losing. These character-building codes instil essential life-long values and habits in young men and women which are often acquired more easily on the games fields than in the classroom.

There were some fine athletes when I was there, but a few boys and girls stood out from the rest. They jumped vertically or horizontally, sprinted solo and in relays, played field hockey, threw cricket balls, and were mostly veterans of an earlier life spent running the egg-and-spoon race, the three-legged race, or the sack race. All these events took place at the annual Sports Day, with its pomp and ceremony and its orderly, traditional rituals carried out on carefully groomed playing fields arranged like a green checkerboard in front of the Carrasco school.

But there was another sports ground too: the boys' playground at the Pocitos school where informal, spontaneous, chaotic soccer games were played on the cement surface during break. A ragged old tennis ball would appear from somewhere and there'd be a lot of shouting and jostling. Somehow,

I'm not sure how, players took sides and soon there'd be two teams of about twenty or so boys trying to keep control of the ball and score. Some of us never got anywhere near the ball but a few were able to keep it at their feet as they dribbled and wove their way through the opposing hordes. One of them, in my memory, was head and shoulders above the rest: Johnny Arlington. Once Johnny got the ball, he usually kept it for a while. His dexterity was extraordinary. He was slightly built, not burly or tall; he ran with his shoulders hunched over, his arms swinging loosely at his sides like a boxer's, his dark fringe hanging halfway down his forehead. He was always smiling, his eyes bright and full of the joy of the game. He was good at it and he knew it, and he loved it. He moved like a cat. While others pushed and shoved each other Johnny danced around them, dodging and weaving, tapping the ball this way and that until he broke clear and then: *Gooooooooo!* You always wanted Johnny on your side.

Just as you always wanted Russell on your side if you were playing rugby on the field between the Carrasco school and the MVCC club house. He was the fastest boy on the field, and the strategy in any game boiled down to someone yelling, "Pass the ball to Russell!"

Russell Pae was in my class in senior school in the late 1950s and was already at least six feet tall. He was built for speed, with long, powerful legs. One Sports Day he showed us something we'd never seen before, a display of speed and determination I've never seen since. It was late in the afternoon and the parents and other visitors had already witnessed quite a few impressive performances by young runners and jumpers, too many to mention here. The next race was announced, a 220-yard sprint. A handful of boys gathered at the starting line and took their positions, leaning forward on their hands like tightly wound springs, their knees bent, calf muscles bunched, the toes of their spiked shoes pushing back against a small dent in the turf. The starter called: "On your marks!" Each runner slipped into his second position, straining to be off. Then something happened that wasn't exactly as it should have been. The starter called: "Get..." but instead of saying "Get set" and then firing the gun, he fired the gun prematurely. Everyone leapt forward and ran. Russell did too, but then he stopped, expecting to hear the signal for a false start. No further shots were fired, however, and Russell was the only one not running. Quickly assessing the situation, he sprang into action and raced off down the field. By that time the pack of runners was already fifty or sixty yards ahead of him.



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The crowd gasped when everyone realized that Russell wasn't going to abandon the race; he was going to challenge the field. We watched in amazement as he gathered speed and streaked down his lane. Spectators got increasingly excited and vocal as he approached the back of the pack and gracefully wove his way through it to emerge in the lead. Against all odds, after a fumbled start and a few seconds delay, he had overtaken the other runners and blazed his way across the finish line to win the race. The applause was deafening.

Half a century after the British Schools opened its doors a steady stream of young athletes was still embodying the qualities outlined by the founders. All those girls and boys showed grace under pressure and inspired their fellow students in all sorts of ways: in my case, to write this poem.



Sports Day

Come all you runners to the field
let's see who'll take the gold
Whoever doesn't win must yield
so come, be fleet, be bold

The time has come, the starter's gun
propels you on your way
You athletes who were born to run
will meet your fate today

Within the scrambling jostling pack
one runner fights for space
To bolt like lightening down the track
and win the vaunted race

With pounding heart and lungs aflame
you cross the finish line
To take the trophy and the fame
that oh! I wish were mine

