

An Interview with Wilfy

Interviewed by Devdip Ganguli

Wilfred Pinto (better known as Wilfy or Goof ! to the children) is one of the oldest captains of the Department of Physical Education. We recently took an opportunity to ask him about his experiences and recollections regarding his association of four decades with physical education in the Ashram.

Q. When did you come to the Ashram, at what age and why?

Wilfy: I came to the Ashram in 1947. I was 33 years old at that time. I used to visit Pondicherry when I was studying in Bangalore in St. Joseph's College. Udar was here and I used to visit him quite frequently and people from the Ashram used to visit his house very often and I found it very interesting. I went to the Playground and the thing that struck me most was that Mother used to distribute groundnuts, and one day I was not there in time and I was walking past Her. "Stop!" She said in French, "I haven't given you groundnuts!". Now how the dickens could She remember a thing like that! You see it was really amazing, it struck me!

And the second thing that struck me very much was that I used to attend Her French translation classes in the room upstairs next to Sri Aurobindo's Room. She was going along and I told Her, "Mother, I should be leaving Pondicherry in the next four or five days."

She said, "In that case we will try and hurry up our translations and finish what we are doing."

I was really amazed because She knew I didn't know very much French and just for the sake of one person, She was willing to hurry up Her program. These two things struck me very much and I thought there is something very wonderful about this place so I came back here on August 15th, 1947 for good.

Q. What was your background before you came to the Ashram?

I was studying in St. Joseph's college in Bangalore and then I went to Bombay and studied B.Com. there. And then I started a small hosiery factory. Now the amazing thing is that at that time we were selling banians at the rate of Rs. 2.50 a dozen and just now it is about thirty rupees each! You see how prices have gone up and the rupee value has gone down. So that's what I was doing.

Q. What was the Physical Education here like when you first came?

It was just the beginning and I thought we should introduce hockey (I was living at the Tennis Ground at that time). Mother had not seen hockey before, so we arranged a match. I was on one side and on the other side was Someshwar, who was the only one who had played hockey before. Just after the bully-off, by some chance I stepped on his stick and broke his stick and that was the end of the hockey match. And then we used to go to play cricket to some place miles out and Mother used to come and watch it. She was really shocked to find that we took so much time to put on pads, wear gloves and all those things, get out first ball, come back and take out all the things again! "What a funny game this is!", She had remarked.

Q. How did you get involved with the Physical Education Department in the early days?

I knew something about basketball, so I started teaching it to Tara and the others. There was a ring put up in Playground against the wall and I showed them the fundamentals of dribbling, passing and scoring. That's how we started basketball. I looked after basketball and cricket.

Q. So that was the first time the Mother saw basketball?

She saw hockey and cricket, I think, for the first time. And She was quite disgusted with cricket!

Q. What were your responsibilities at that time?

Well, I was looking after basketball and cricket and therefore I had to make teams and arrange games and various things like that. We used to play some outside matches and once we went to Chidambaram to play the college there. It was very interesting playing these games because we were allowed to play against outside teams which is not allowed now.

Q. Why do you think this (playing with outside teams) has been stopped now?

There is a reason for that. We used to play football against outside teams on the Police ground and there were a lot of very bad feelings and bad injuries to our players and we inflicted injuries on the other side also and the whole thing took a very nasty turn. Mother therefore decided that we shouldn't play with outside teams again and therefore we restricted our games to amongst ourselves only.

Q. Did you receive any direct guidance from the Mother during your association with Physical Education?

Yes, very often. She would advise me on how to handle things with the players because it was something new to me, I didn't have this sort of experience before. So Mother used to tell me now and then what to do and what not to do. That's the guidance I received.

Q. So you had hardly any experience with Physical Education before you came to the Ashram?

I used to play some games. I used to take part in basketball, cricket and hockey. These were the three games along with tennis that I used to play before I came to the Ashram.

Q. You were amongst the first to introduce games like cricket and basketball in the J.S.A.S.A. Could you take us through a bit of the history?

Rudiments of basketball were already here and cricket was looked after by Norman Dowsett, so I didn't start these games. But I did start hockey which didn't last very long because at that time we had no sticks or ground. But cricket and basketball were already in progress here. I joined in and became an instructor of sorts.

Q. When did you become a captain and why? Who selected you?

Pranab selected me. It was about 1950 or so that I became a captain. Automatically they asked me to become a captain and they gave me the uniform.

Q. In your younger days, did you take active part in Physical Education? What were your favourite sports?

Games were my favourite item; basketball, cricket and tennis. I was not very interested in Athletics; but when Athletics was started here I became a timekeeper.

In those days each timekeeper at the start started his watch at different times and we never got the correct time. So Udar made a little box which contained all the stop watches with a spring attachment and I had to press the thing the moment the race started off. So at least the watches started all together. The finish was timed by the individual timekeepers.

Q. Your association with the game of cricket in the Ashram is since its inception. Could you tell us how the game has evolved, how the standard of playing has varied and what are your suggestions for improvements in any aspect of the game?

I think it is going on very well in all departments and there is no need to suggest anything. The progression is going on by itself. The people who are now in charge of the organisation of cricket are very forward looking people and they have introduced a number of new schemes which is really good for the game.

Q. How did your association with the Ashram Band come about?

I was fond of music and the Mother had made Sutapa and me in charge of western music at the Library. Mother then asked me to see if I could do something with the Band. At that time we had someone called Selvanathan, who was the band master. He was really an exceptionally fine person and he taught me the rudiments of conducting and gradually I took over as conductor of the Band.

Q. What are your comments on the dwindling number of band players at present?

Playing instruments requires a lot of concentration, dedication and time which our boys don't seem to have. Therefore we loose numbers especially when they pass out of the Higher Course and leave the band. And to get new people is very difficult. I must say that Behram is doing a really marvellous job. He's training these people and helping the band to progress.

Q. What improvements can be made in the organisation of the band?

Whatever instruments we need we get. People are very generous in that respect. We used to get instruments from France before but now I think they are available in India. Regarding the dwindling numbers, that depends on the people themselves, because they have to come forward of their own accord. We can't push them into this thing. Whoever joins of his own will, we accept him. There's no question of improving the organisation!

Q. What is the role of a conductor in the band?

It is a very important role, although people don't seem to think so. If the conductor is not there, each fellow would play at his own pace. So while watching the music sheet, by peripheral vision, the players also watch the beat of the music which the conductor indicates. And if that is not there it all lands up in a mess. Once we tried to play without a conductor and it became a really terrible mess. There must be a conductor to synchronize all the players.

Q. Do you really enjoy conducting the band or do you continue it merely as a duty?

I do it because Mother had given me the job and I really enjoy it. But now I am beginning to find it a little difficult because with advancing age my hearing has gone down, my sight also is going down so it's going to be difficult. I may have to pack up sometime.

Q. At the ripe age of 84 you still come to the Sports Ground and exercise and have by and large maintained very good fitness. What is it that keeps you going? What is the source of your youthful energy?

Well, one has to keep a good physical health and at 84 I've been advised not to do any jogging but to do fast walking and that's a fairly easy exercise. I try to do it as regularly as possible and sometimes I do it at the Sports Ground, sometimes on the beach.

Q. Is the interest in Physical Education in the Ashram still as high as it was, say thirty years ago?

No, I am afraid not. People are not interested in Physical Education as much. They like to chat. Especially among the girls, you find bunches of them sitting and chatting. There are some very dedicated persons who do physical education with a great amount of enthusiasm but by and large, I find that people are beginning to withdraw from physical education and they don't do it as seriously as previously.

Q. What do you have to say about the current organisation of the P.E.D.? What are the changes, in your view, that would be beneficial to the progress of the Department?

It's extremely well organised and the people who are running it are very dedicated people. The Captains are really marvellous people and they put in a lot of effort and energy, sacrificing their own chance of practising games and athletics. I've seen some Captains who do their

work very systematically and with love and dedication; our group of Captains is really a marvellous bunch of people.

Q. Considering the effort that goes behind the students, what could be the reasons for the declining interest in Group?

I suppose people don't have the same attitude to Physical Education as they had before. Physical Education is a very important part of ones life and nowadays they don't seem to think it to be as important as all that. They just do it because they are forced to do it. Not everyone, I must say, there are some very dedicated people who do things really well. But by and large there are a number of people who don't do physical education with the right attitude.

Q. What will be your message to today's youth in the field of Physical Education?

We must understand that Physical Education is a very important part of ones lives because it keeps the body healthy and with a healthy body a lot of other things automatically come in. So a healthy body is the first necessity of every person and they must understand that this can only be done by dedicated Physical Education.

I have spent very many happy years here in the Ashram and also in the Physical Education Department, and I have had very good support from the authorities and I find it very easy to handle our children because they respond to good teaching and good training.