

FORGOTTEN HERO



This Sri Lankan track hero is now a UAE security guard

Suresh Pattali

Lalith Prasanna Galappaththi, the famed Sri Lankan athlete driving a cab in the UAE, isn't a lonely star. The Kandian is just one of many impoverished former heroes who have left Sri Lanka to eke out a miserable existence elsewhere.

When *Khaleej Times* broke the heart-warming story of Lalith, Sri Lankan social media forums were inundated with stories of neglect and apathy meted out to national heroes. They weren't obviously exaggerating. And here is why.

Cabbie Lalith Galappaththi had just dropped a passenger at the Yas Marina Circuit during the last Grand Prix. He watched as the passenger had a word with the security guard at the entrance. Then their eyes met. Memories of his childhood and track life zoomed through Lalith's brain faster than the Formula One race cars. Yes, it's him! Lalith got off the car and raced to the guard, his childhood friend and former record holder, DW Prasantha from Kandy. They were meeting after 15 years.

What on earth are you doing here would have been a misplaced question. They both have the same predicament. They hugged, shook hands, took down each other's phone numbers and parted.

Hailing from Nawalapitiya, Prasantha started off as a judo player in the '80s. After passing his O Level, he joined the army in 1987 and continued as a member of the army judo team up to 1989. Athletics was not his cup of tea until Brigadier RP Liyanage, a national coach, convinced Prasantha to give up judo as he was blessed with the physical attributes for an athlete.

"He promised to train me, so I changed my event from judo to long-distance running," reminisces Prasantha. "I started to train in the 10,000 and 5,000 metres events, and the turning point came in 1991 when I won gold in 5,000 metres."

In 1991, Prasantha changed his event to 3,000 metres steeplechase and came out with flying colours in the event in 1993. "It was a national record. I won gold in 3,000 metres steeplechase in a dramatic 09:05:07 time."

Prasantha's performance started to go downhill in 1994-1995 as civil war raged in the country's north. Training was stopped and athletes were dispatched to the war front. The steeplechase hero found himself in the battlefield instead



NATIONAL RECORD: In 1993, Prasantha won gold in 3,000m steeplechase in dramatic 09:05:07 time.

of running on a track. Military boots replaced running shoes. The pop of starting guns at the track's start line gave way to real artillery fire. And Prasantha was critically wounded in a barrage of shelling in 2001.

In recovery two months later, the war veteran was posted to the admin section of the army regimental offices in Panagoda, some 20km from Colombo, where Brigadier Liyanage caught up with him again. The top brass called him back to the army athletics team. "Don't give up athletics. You have great knowledge. I will give you all the support," Brig Liyanage told him.

"So I took up coaching army athletes. I sharpened my knowledge through various courses," Prasantha said, tabulating some of them: "One-year diploma in coaching, Level-1 Coaches Training, Certificate Course in Sprint Coaching, etc. I even attended the Sprint Coaching Course arranged in Patiala by the Sports Authority of India."

Based in Colombo, Prasantha continued to coach the army team and also temped in the evening at Royal College as assistant athletics coach. Life wasn't easy with a paltry remuneration of 35,000 SL rupees. And retirement from the army as Warrant Officer in March 2009 was a double whammy. Left with no choice, Prasantha went back to Kandy where he took up coaching jobs in two schools, earning a salary of just about 10,000 SL rupees.

"My Kandy stint was quite successful as I produced 12 junior national-level athletes in such a short period. But it was darkness ahead for my family with no money coming in. The country wasn't giving enough support to sports. There is no dearth of qualified coaches in Sri Lanka. But cricket takes undue preference as it's run like a business."

"Applying for the present job in January 2013 through a manpower agency was a half-hearted effort. Looking back, I think I was lucky to get the job in April. In a way, I am happy, because I am now able to feed my family with whatever little I manage to send home," said Prasantha, 51.

"There is hardly any off day, but I am OK with that because it's my commitment and responsibility to provide good education to my children," he said. Prasantha's spouse Inoka Shyamali is a housewife.

"My future plan is: to go back after two years and take up coaching again to produce good athletes for the country. There is still a desire to live my passion again. I am not sure if I can find such an opening here," he concluded.

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The artillery barrage that shattered his career, life

IT WAS THE civil war that drove the final nail on DW Prasantha's career as an athlete. Training had been stopped and all athletes moved to action zones. It was 6.30pm on May 5, 2001. The sky was getting darker when guns suddenly boomed in the distance. Prasantha and 19 other sergeants, who were chatting around in a camp in Jaffna's Nagercoil war front, were taken aback when shells started to rain down.

It was an attack on their camp by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Seven artillery shells slammed into the camp, killing five of them and injuring six. It was blood everywhere. Prasantha was soon knocked out as artillery shrapnel pierced his chest. A bleeding and unconscious Prasantha was immediately removed to a bunker.

"The injured were initially attended to in the bunker by surviving colleagues. Reinforcement arrived 45 minutes later and shifted the casualty in a truck to the Palali Military Hospital in Jaffna.

"I regained consciousness a week after I was operated upon in the Jaffna hospital where I spent 15 critical days in the ICU. The artillery piece damaged my liver," Prasantha said. The



WAR WOUNDS: The long scar that stretches from the chest to beyond the navel is a testament to the horror and agony he lived through.

long scar that stretches from the chest to beyond the navel — as if the body had been slit open — is a testament to the horror and agony he lived through. He was later airlifted to the Army

General Hospital in Colombo where he spent one month recuperating. "That's when my journey as an athlete ended and life as a coach started."

"I still have a half-inch piece of shrapnel lodged in the right side of my stomach, as a souvenir from those days. Doctors advised against removing it as the operation might paralyse my leg," he added. "It's just there, without giving any trouble."

Friend Lalith Galappaththi was sad to find a diploma holder from the National Institute of Sports Science working on the road as a security guard. "I was happy to see him after so many years. At the same time, I was so sad to find him in that situation."

"We studied in the same school. We also competed in the same events. When we ran a cross-country race, he was already a national athlete while I was still at the district level. Yet I was able to beat him to take gold because cross-country wasn't his event. He was a steeplechase runner," said Lalith.

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KT photos by Ryan Lim

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— DW Prasantha

HEROES TO ODD JOBS



LALITH GALAPPATHTHI
Field
Former Sri Lankan athlete and coach
Present status
Taxi driver in UAE



ARSHAD KHAN
Field
Former Pakistani off-spinner
Present status
Uber taxi driver in Sydney



CHRIS CAIRNS
Field
New Zealand cricket all-rounder
Present status
Driving trucks and cleaning bus shelters in Auckland



RASHMITA PATRA
Field
Former Indian footballer
Present status
Running betel shop in her Odisha village



EWEN CHATFIELD
Field
Former New Zealand opening bowler
Present status
Cab driver in Wellington



DAVID MURRAY
Field
Former West Indies wicket-keeper-batsman
Present status
Mired in poverty in Barbados