Home and Away

As a child in Luton, I was liked well enough and had friends from different backgrounds and cultures. Childhood worries like feeling lonely or being bullied were hardly ever a problem for me. Sometimes though it felt that the things I was passionate about were not valued. In my youth, difference in the UK Black community was not always celebrated, whether from outside or within. Sometimes that was the effect of stereotyping, and sometimes it seemed that the pain of constant rejection and discrimination meant that we felt more strength gathered behind a single shield, a collective way of being.

Often I felt that I stuck out and was the odd one for jumping on the train to go and explore galleries in London ('What do you want to go and do that for?'), strange for choosing to go to university ('Are there any Black people there?') and, later, weird for choosing to travel to Aotearoa ('Black people don't go to those kinds of places.').

In the sports I played, I also felt different from many of my peers. Although I played a little football and rugby, my chosen game was hockey. Once, as a teenager, I broke a finger playing hockey just before I attended a socialist conference in London, and when a stern, left-wing lady saw my injured hand in a cast and heard my explanation, she told me off for playing the game

of the oppressors. I wanted to reply that I played in a team with the sons of migrants from the Indian subcontinent; that their fathers were car workers like my dad, not businessmen from leafy shires. But I am not sure she would have heard me any more than the other people who thought there was only one way I should be, look or sound.

I wanted to feel comfortable in my skin and to be validated by all my influences and connections. To be accepted whoever I was with, even though the orange of my first-ever Luton Town top laid out on my bed thrilled me far more than the white shirts of the England team when I watched football on TV. I had to travel to shores far away in miles and memory to find out that it was alright to do things differently from those around me.

Being with the boys and men I played hockey with was another kind of homecoming. Pure happiness for me was driving back to Luton with three or four others, all of us chatting loudly the whole way. Along the A-roads, we told and retold the story of that afternoon's game, reminiscing about the sprints, tackles, shots and sometimes red cards and confrontations which were the highlights of our latest endeavour. Sometimes we would laugh about our experiences of urban Brown culture colliding with attitudes in more rural and less diverse settings as we drove out eastwards each week from Luton. We won titles and leagues in our own right, travelling to places like Boston and Bury, Maldon and Spalding – places we had only known before from an AA atlas index or heard on About Anglia or in weather reports.

We giggled for ages about arriving in an eastern county hours before a game and asking for directions from the first random stranger only to be told straight away, 'You'll be that lot from Luton for the hockey match, won't you?' Our reputation and the colour of our skins preceded us. But that could not dim our glow as we relaxed with each other and chatted rubbish on the way to our games or when we drove home in the autumn sunshine after winning 4–3 away.

Back in my parents' house in Biabou, on the cabinets and low tables and amongst the pictures of our family and cousins, nephews, nieces, weddings and anniversaries, there nestled signs of sporting glories achieved a long way away. There were my father's small darts trophies, usually the gold-plated figure of a man poised in mid-throw. But also my hockey trophies, circular medals emblazoned with crossed sticks on a green background. Hockey, the game of my youth, had travelled all the way to be with me here in the Caribbean. It had so often been a refuge for me, an anchor of familiarity and a way to meet people when I left home for university or to work in Aotearoa.

But the hockey medals brought back other, less positive memories too. Memories of reactions and anger whose origins had perhaps been seeded in the trauma of separation on Saint Vincent decades before. I remembered the boy my age who I punched at an annual six-a-side tournament – I was taller than him, but we had squared up to each other and inside I had a dread fear that he was going to hit me first, so I made sure that could not happen. I recalled too an opposition player who

grunted monkey noises at me and who I chased around the hockey pitch, unable to catch him despite my longer legs because of the simple scientific advantage that fear and adrenaline gave him. That was almost cartoonishly funny, but when in another match the monkey noises came again from someone unidentified this time, I remonstrated with the opposition captain in their half-time huddle for him to control his players. But no sympathy, confession or apology came.

Throughout my teenage years and twenties, I could not trust my reactions. I would readily intervene to stop other players fighting, but if the umpire misinterpreted the situation and brandished his yellow or red card at me, I could be transformed into a human tornado of swear words and fury, other teammates having to pull or push me off the pitch. And then after the tsunami of anger came the guilt and the labels, the ones that others used to damn me, and the ones I was more than ready to stick on myself.

But I was held by family and friends and by a team of brown-skinned men who saw more in me than my anger. Men who understood that a Black man being angry did not automatically mean that I was being aggressive. They never condoned my outbursts, but they did not write me off as a thug either – they saw the man I was and the man I could become and tenderly cradled both. With these teammates, it was safe for me to be me. In that club I knew I belonged.

Our roots were in faraway places: our families were sprung from the soil of India, Pakistan, Uganda, Kenya, Sri Lanka,

South Africa and the Caribbean. Our parents, uncles and aunties had crossed wide oceans to do their bit, to make a better world, a better Empire, and were proud of all they had to offer the new country they would come to call home. They dreamt of their children becoming teachers, lawyers and engineers, architects and doctors. Dreams which through perseverance and diligence often came true, even though all our parents had to swim through a sea of challenges as their children became 'first-one-in-the-family-to'. They had to make sense of an educational and examination system which had diverged widely from the standards and rigour colonialism had imposed on the Commonwealth before the Empire retreated.

Our fathers and mothers toiled day and night, in shops and factories, driving and delivering, walking echoing warehouses to pick parts and make cars. But for the men at least there was an escape. As well as endeavour and hard work, they brought a passion for sport and skills honed on dusty fields playing with coconut-palm cricket bats and battered, plastic footballs. They took on the British Empire's old games and blew new life into them, bringing flair, speed and athletic splendour to the sedate playing fields of Home County towns and villages. Or in my dad's case to the midweek pub darts leagues of Luton.

Our fathers formed clubs of their own to join the local domestic leagues, teams where there was no judgement for them not drinking alcohol or if they slipped into their mother tongue in the changing room. They were not trying to feel separate or superior; all they wanted was to relax and enjoy

themselves in this new land and to find their own way to settle into life here. Hoping that in sport, at least, there would be at last a level playing field to occupy with their workmates and neighbours: people with whom they shared the same workplaces and shopping centres, whose children attended the same schools, but whom society gave greater status to because they had been born in England, and their passports and papers did not have the caveats of registration or naturalisation.

By the 1970s, Asian and West Indian cricket clubs had become renowned sporting institutions in their respective towns. In the south of England, hockey clubs such as Slough, Ramgarhia and Indian Gymkhana, and works teams like Ford and Vauxhall, broke records and created legends. Dark-skinned men who were overlooked or insulted on weekdays gained grudging respect for their dazzling stickwork, tenacity and commitment as they blazed through the weekend. And when the Windies cricket dished out a 'blackwash' or Olympic hockey medals were won, that generation allowed themselves to express a raucous support, which implied no lack of loyalty to the land they had migrated to. They were simply demonstrating their bond with and fierce pride for internationally renowned brothers who had emerged from the same cradle which had nurtured their own humbler skills. Skills and achievements they tried to practise and display themselves, on small local grounds on cold rainy Saturdays with barely anyone to watch, but with the promise and warmth of the stories they could share in their cars on the journey home.

My teammates and I matured and grew up together. High-school kids became sixth formers and then university students and doctors, bankers, builders, managers and social workers. As our fathers retired and the factories closed, still their sons played on, even though official recognition and county or regional selection were hard to achieve.

As we grew older and our waistlines thickened, we still huffed and puffed each weekend, but now as proud parents ourselves, we would bring along our children to watch, although usually they simply ran along the sidelines playing with each other. Eventually some of the young ones would cross the white lines themselves and fill the gaps created by domestic responsibilities and weekend work shifts for their parents. Now in the team there were teachers and leaders, healers and makers, energising the hearts of our town and our workplaces. We helped where we could the communities around us and overseas, not waiting to be asked to go to the aid of those in need. Just as our parents aspired to, we achieved.

Once I tried to engage the attention of a prominent journalist who also came from Luton to ask them to write about how some of my clubmates had organised their own relief response and expedition to their families' homelands in Pakistan after devastating floods there. I wanted to reverse the usual narrative that people in those distant places could only be rescued by powerful, European-led NGOs or that the only thing which came out of Luton was trouble. I wanted to help the sharing of this untold story of a diaspora not waiting for governments to step in but

organising their own response instead. That journalist and I exchanged a brief flurry of emails and then their interest died away because other priorities were thought more newsworthy.

We could shrug off the small hurts and even smile back at the stares in those rural towns, where on matchdays everyone for miles around seemed to know we were on the way. But the racism and wounds could sometimes cut deeper: just-muffled-enough taunts of 'wog' and 'Paki' on the field of play, insults which the umpires never seemed to hear or think important enough for the game to be halted. When they came the monkey noises behind our backs from opposition players were not punished, and those who made them were never brave enough to stand and do it to our faces because they knew we would not tolerate it or back away. Not all games were like this. But there were enough for us to remember that we were seen as the 'other' and as the outsiders.

The time came when we seemed to lose as often as we won and were relegated as well as promoted. We were battered in farming outposts as agricultural tackles flew in but caught each other before we fell and held out a hand when we stumbled. Despite the spite and tensions that could sometimes be there in our games, the sense that everyone was against us, we could offer that hand to opponents too. I only ever once saw a player helped off limping by two from the other side, his arms draped across their shoulders, and when it happened, it was my team-mates doing the carrying.

I once overheard a player at a previous club saying, 'He only tackles well cos he's got long arms, and he only gets out

fast at short corners because he's got long legs! That's all he's got!' That was all it took to shrink my self-esteem and rob me of my confidence. From then onwards, I internalised that I was just a tall bloke with long legs and that any of my athletic achievements could only be the result of luck and genetics. Somehow that skewed attribution never seemed to happen for white players, whether amateur ones or for the footballers we watched on Saturday nights on *Match of the Day* – they were allowed to be gifted.

It took me a long time and the validation of my new team-mates to unlearn that nonsense and to take pride in what I could do. I had to be told by more supportive voices that the reason I was a good defender was because I knew how to tackle legally and cleanly without fouling people (mostly) and that I was fast because I could see situations developing and get there first. The men in this club taught me that the way of the world is that some people are going to get upset about anything you do with passion and commitment, and that might lead to flare-ups. But their discomfort or dislike of my interventions did not automatically mean that I was doing anything wrong any more than it did when I made a crunching but fair tackle on the playing field.

We took a quiet, smiling pride in each other and were all the validation that we needed. From others, the judgements which stuck were never about all we had given – to our town, our community and our sport – but instead described how we did not fit in or follow the rules. Or set out the need to bring us

to heel. Despite that, my club represented for me many, many wonderful things. I realised that we were a good team because we had each other. Our skins were black and brown, our home was Luton, and our strength was in our togetherness.

Although I loved being with my teammates, after my parents had moved from Luton and with my weekend family commitments in London, the distance to travel back for games gradually became too much for me to get to see them more than once or twice a season, let alone play. I fell out of touch with the club as my life for a while also seemed to lose its anchors and security. My visits to Luton only became frequent again when my parents came back from Saint Vincent, and I accompanied and took my mother to hospital appointments. I usually drove up and stayed overnight, but sometimes I got the train from London and then my mother and I would book a cab for the next day.

On one of these midweek trips, I caught the slow stopper train up from Kentish Town after work and, disembarking in Luton, began my slow walk over the railway bridge into Hightown. It was slow because my heart was heavy, and my shoulders sagged with the weight of worries about my mother and my whole life changing. A voice had to repeat itself twice to shake my minds' attention out of its gloom.

'Alex! Alex! Hey, mate!'

It was Yas, one of those old teammates and a good friend. Yas was one of those who was usually the first to calm me down and support me when I got into an on-pitch squabble, to get between me and the player I was seeking a fight with or to usher

me off the pitch. Yet afterwards in the changing room or in the bar where we drank tea and munched sandwiches, Yas and the others would talk with and look at me with the same friendship, regard and affirmation.

We exchanged the usual work-related pleasantries and then Yas asked me a question.

'How you doing, mate?'

And because we were close, I told him, and he listened silently.

'Sorry to hear that, mate. Really sorry. Hey, we're still playing, you know. All the old guys. Me and Amjid and Brajinder, Imran and Saj. We've got a match at home this Saturday. What are you up to? Fancy a game?'

'Yes,' I said, my heartbeat quickening in my chest. 'Yes I'd really, really like that.' And all of a sudden I felt not quite so alone. I felt like part of something bigger again. Part of a team.