Sticky Wicket

A Short Sporty Story

By Maryanne Peters

In my family there were two main principles which we drummed into us from childhood. The first was that we were Sikhs – that was our religion, both in faith and practice. My father and my brother, and me to some extent, carried the mark of Sikh men – the turban over hair never cut and the beard of a face never shaved. The second thing was almost a second religion – we played cricket. Living in the United States of America both things were difficult.

Even my father was born in this country, like the rest of us except my mother who came to America as a child. But our two religions were entrenched. So much so that I never gave it much thought. At school I was constantly having to explain that I was not Muslim, and that cricket was not slow motion baseball. But when it comes to detailed explanation of either Sikhism or cricket, any listener will tire quickly. So I will not bore you.

I said that I presented myself as a young Sikh man “to some extent” because I did not have a beard, even at 16. It was an embarrassment, but according to the family doctor (a Sikh) not unusual. It was also explained to me that the swelling in my chest was part of the same issue – late puberty. It would all be resolved when my time came – the whiskers would grow, and little breasts would disappear.

At least I had my hair, which was long and very thick for a boy, and my turban. But when playing cricket the hair is covered with a *patka* or cloth cover, so a cap can be worn when fielding or a batting helmet when batting.

We lived in Florida where cricket is quite popular – I often wonder whether we lived there because cricket was popular. Many Floridian cricketers are West Indian, who are more often of African origin. A few are white or Latino. But the vast majority of serious cricketers in my state are ethnically of the subcontinent - India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. All men in my family played, including my brother, and father and my uncle in grades for “seniors”. You can play cricket for years.

I was quite good. I was an opening batsmen and a spin bowler. I was not powerful. Both of those roles require concentration and control. An opening batsmen must meet the brunt of the opening attack and play defensively and never be impetuous. A spin bowler is brought in when the wicket (the strip batsmen occupy in the middle of the field) has lost pace and his job is use variation and guile to force a bad shot. I had concentration and control.

I wanted to get to the very top in cricket. That means playing for Florida in national competitions and perhaps playing internationally, although the USA is nowhere in sight in any world contest. But it was clear to me that I was never going to make it against real competition.

That did not stop me trying. That is the person that I am. I stick to my task as I stick to the crease – which is the area a batsman stands in. I play correctly and defensively and I don’t get out. Even when facing vastly superior odds you have to play on and stick to correct technique.

But guile is the other thing. I am also a spin bowler. Spinning the ball is a skill, but knowing where the ball should hit the wicket to jag away, or whether to spin it right or left, or over or under – that is guile. How could I use guile to achieve my ambitions?

At about this time there was preliminary discussion about an international cricket competition being hosted in America. The idea seemed crazy. We were not a cricketing nation, but we had qualified to play the sport internationally and had volunteered to host the competition the following year – in Hawaii of all places. It was the under 19 Cricket World Cup … for women.

My family was crestfallen, as they would have loved to have supported any US Cricket Team. Perhaps we would all have flown to Hawaii had it been young men playing.

But that night as I sat in my room looking at the pictures of great Sikh cricketers like Jasprit Bumrah (India), Harbhajan Singh (England) Tanveer Sangha (Australia), Ish Sodhi (New Zealand), I unwrapped my hair and let it fall and as I looked in the mirror, I had an idea.

There was a girls’ team in our area, but they were awful. However, an hour away there was another team that was the best girls’ team in Florida. Could I make it into that side? If I could do that, could I make it into the national side? It seemed to me that if I did not at least try to find out I might be robbing myself of an opportunity of a lifetime. I was the right age, and would be the following year too. I was young but it seemed that a US national team might never achieve a position in an international contest with my potential competitive playing life. This was my only chance.

What it would mean would be to drive my brother’s car across the state and try out for the team. I would have to stop somewhere and change clothing. I could produce my ID with my age on it. It did not show sex and my name - Ashbeer Singh – could be either. “Call me Ashley – I am just one of the girls”. I rehearsed a little in front of the mirror.

At this point perhaps most would have laughed and gone to bed, but that is not who I am. Control and concentration. Come up with a plan and stick to it. Do not let your guard down. Play forward stepping toward the ball, and keep your bat straight, under the eyes.

The first part of the plan is to understand women, or more particularly girls. If you want to be one, then you have to watch and learn. It is just like cricket. Watch and then play the strokes, even without a bat or a ball in your hand. Train the body so it becomes second nature.

The second part of the plan was a story for my parents. A coaching school. Won as an award for good play so no money needed, except money for gas and incidentals. If I got selected I might have to pivot on that story, but that seemed to far down the track. I was on a roll.

I researched the team that I was trying to join. I looked at their players and their record. There were to players I might dislodge – an opening batsman and a spinner – and I could do both, which is what is called in cricket an allrounder. But dislodging established players is what a spin bowler does best.

I do not want to give the impression that I was some evil force out to steal a place they deserved ahead of me because of simple biology, but plenty may think that. I prefer to say that I was convinced that if I was on this team and better yet, on the national team, we had a better chance of winning. And the sport of cricket would be better off for that. And, what the hell, sport is all about competition.

I set everything up. I called ahead and “Ashley” spoke with the coach. My brother had loaned me his car for a few affordable favors. I had cash from my father, and time to stop on my way out of town and change my clothes. I stopped by a strip mall and I saw that there was a small beauty shop offering casual appointments, so on a whim I went in. I asked them whether they could wash my hair and apply some makeup. I guess I thought that I did not look feminine enough, even though I was presenting myself as female.

The lady’s first words to me seemed to confirm it. “You’re a boy aren’t you? Never you mind honey, you just sit down here, and I will attend to that face and hair. Have you got a young man you are trying to impress? You need to work on your walk and how you sit.” I learnt a lot in that hour at the salon.

“You have such beautiful hair,” she said. “Most girls would kill for hair this long and thick and shiny. A sporting event you say? Just a nice high ponytail then, with some red slides.”

I just decided to let her do her thing.

These eyebrows need doing. With the shape of your face you need a nice arch. Oh my! There are some chin hairs here – we’ll get rid of those in the proper way.”

I have to say that the eyebrows looked outrageously feminine, but I figured that if I wore my *patka* low over my brows, nobody would notice. A turban could be worn over the top of that.

She curled my eyelashes and used eyeliner and lipstick, selling me a tube of each. My incidental money was gone, but well spent. I knew it when I walked out of there. I actually felt like Ashley. For the rest of the drive I ran through a hundred conversations out loud with me just being Ashley.

When I got to the ground I walked straight up to the man with “coach” written across his sweatshirt and introduced myself.

“I’m Ashley Singh and I would like to open the batting in your team.”

He looked at me in a way that I had never known before. I recognize what it is now, but to me then, it was very strange. I had walked out of a strip mall and straight into a car. This was the first time a man had ever looked upon Ashley. He liked what he saw in a way that perhaps a coach should not, or at least a coach of young women. But to me he just looked weirdly interested in his new recruit.

He asked me to pad up and face some balls in the nets. He himself used a throwing tool to get some pace into each delivery. Every ball I met with the full face of the bat or I let it go past. He was impressed. The other girls dribbled in an stood outside the wire fence to watch the new girl.

“Now this is what I am talking about,” the coach said to them. “Play the balls that you should and leave the rest. Rosie, this is Ashley. Send her down a few fast ones and let’s see how good she is.”

town

I already had my eye in. Everything went well from my point of view. And then the Coach wanted to see me bowl. It just so happened that the first ball I spun moved like crazy. Often in the nets the dirt in front of the batsmen gets so disturbed that this can happen, but the coach saw it, and so did the team. I knew that I had made it.

I met with all of the girls, and we got on well. Nobody suspected that I was not female. One even asked what shampoo I used, and I had to say – “I don’t know. It’s my mother’s.”

The coach wanted to put me in the team for Saturday. That was when I had to explain that I was living down in Sarasota, and it would be hard to be up for the game.

“One of our assistant coaches is in Sarasota,” he said. “She can pick you up.”

It seemed too good to be true. I drove back home as a member of a new team, a winning team. And I had already worked out that I was probably the best player in that team.

In the morning I hid my eyebrows, but my eyelashes were still curled. I looked like a girl although my father could not pick what was different about me.

I told him that I was playing in the Tampa league and that I would be playing out of town.

“We may still be able to come and watch you son,” he said. I gave him the name of a men’s team. If he did get away from his own game to watch me play he would not be able to find me, and I would have to explain then, but my entire policy was just to get on and play the ball, and if it climbed I would have to adjust my stroke and play off the back foot.

So that was how I played it. The Assistant coach picked me up from an address I had given her well away from my house. Her name was named Tabby and she was totally committed to the team. She took me to the game and took me home, so we were together for hours. It was only a matter of time before she knew things were not right, so I decided to confide in her.

As she drove I really had her captive. I told her my whole story about wanting to play for my country, but I decided to add one little thing. I told her that I was transgendered and my parents did not know.

Was it necessary to tell her this lie? That is what I worried about after I had told her, as there was no taking it back. After that I started to wonder if it really was a lie. But I am getting ahead of myself.

It was Tabby who visited my parents and asked whether I could be released into her care to trial for the USA Under 19 Cricket Team. She carefully avoided the use of the word “women’s” or any reference to the world cup coming up the following year, but she told me afterwards that I needed to come clear with my parents and explain.

After I turned 18 on the day I arrived at Cricket USA headquarters in Colorado Springs she arranged to get me hormones. It was hard for me to say no, and I figured that it made sense for me to slow the big impacts of male puberty (which had arrived) while I was pretending to be female. The hormones softened me, but with the kind of player I was, they did not badly affect me. Perhaps I lost some power in driving the ball down towards the bowler, But I compensated by developing other shots.

I performed well in the trials and the trial games played. I had become an accomplished woman cricketer, and the US cricket team selectors had to include me in the national team. It was the proudest day of my life. But it was tempered by the fact that I could not keep my selection secret from my family.

Tabby dropped me off. She said: “I would like to tell your parents how proud I am and that you are a fine young woman, but if they don’t know that is what you are, how can I do that? You need to tell them first. When you have I will come back and tell them what we have planned for you.”

I went inside. I had a turban wrapped around my head very loosely which is not how it should be worn. My plucked brows were visible, and maybe the traces of makeup from beauty sessions with the other girls. My father looked shocked. My mother just looked puzzled. My brother thought it was a joke.

“I need to tell you something,” I said, and it seemed to bring a dark curtain over the whole room. So I said – “Before I do I have some very good news. I hope it will make you proud. It makes me feel proud. I have been selected to play cricket the National team of the United States of America, but … I have been selected to play for the girl’s team.”

And with that I pulled off my turban. Underneath my long hair had been washed and condition and brushed to a shine, and had a few soft curls in the ends from the last of those beauty sessions.

There was a long silence. My father spoke first, still in shock. He said – “You have duped the selectors into thinking you are a girl?”

I could feel the accusation coming. My father was a very upright man. He disliked dishonesty.

“But I am a girl, Papa. Can’t you see that?”

I still felt that I was lying to my father, just as I had lied to Tabby, but where did this come from. It just came out of my mouth as if I was starting to believe it.

“You are going to play international cricket?” my mother said. The she turned to my father and said – “Ashbeer is gong to play international cricket. Our child is going to represent our country. I never thought this could happen.”

Even to this day I am not sure if she was as excited as she sounded or if she just wanted to arrest my father’s growing anger. However, she may have felt, that was the effect.

“Are you selected as a batsmen or a bowler?” he asked.

“Both,” I said. “I am an allrounder.” Some of the best cricketers take pride in that title. I could see him nodding his head in quiet approval.

“And so, this is who you are now?” I just felt my love for my father growing inside me.

“At least while I am playing international cricket,” I said. “They call me Ashley. Nobody knows, and that’s the way we should keep it.”

“This is deceit,” my father said. His look was scolding, but only slightly. There was growing excitement. “Where do you go from here.”

“The assistant coach will come around tomorrow night to explain,” I said.

Which is what Tabby did. She explained that to give the best chance of victory I was to go into a training camp after Christmas, which was not far off. The camp would be at the California Cricket Academy outside San Francisco, and when the weather improved, in Colorado Springs, then we would go to the tournament in Hawaii. All accommodation was by billeting, and there would be schooling and allowances.

“We are very proud of Ash,” said Tabby. “She is one of our best players and a very fine young lady.”

“We are very proud of her,” said my mother, looking at my father.

“Yes,” he said. “We are.”

For Christmas everybody gave me girl stuff. My mother gave me underwear, my father a makeup box full of product, and my brother bought me a dress.

“Something nice for you to wear instead of a tracksuit, Sis,” he sniggered. It was nice, but it was the kind of dress that a boy would buy – figure hugging and red. I still have that dress.

I spent two weeks living with my family as a sister and a daughter 24 hours a day. I had already spent some time doing that in Colorado, but that was in a track suit or playing strip with my hair braided by Tabby. Nobody expected me as a sportsperson to act in a feminine way, but my mother had other ideas.

“It is the team that is representing the country, but in the team, you represent your family,” she said. As a member of this team, you are my daughter and a good Sikh girl. You must behave in a proper way, and I will need to instruct you. In our faith we call women “kaur”. Do you know what that means? Just as “singh” means lion “kaur” means lioness. But it is much more. It is a recognition that women are special. We say - “from women kings are born”. Even if you may only be a woman for a short time, you must respect your role.”

I have always been a conscientious person and dutiful towards my parents. My mother’s words had some effect on me. I had never been much interested in the role of women – why should I be? But I came to understand that women are more important in so many ways.

Our family had no daughter, or not until now. I wanted to be a good daughter – not just an achiever but beautiful in appearance and in personality, just as my mother wanted.

I wore a dress when I took the flight from Tampa to San Francisco. I let my long hair fall down my back. I could sense the looks that I received from women and well as men. I liked to be admired. I still do.

I was a very different person from the girl who had met most of the team at the trials. I explained that I had received a lecture from my mother about presentation off the cricket pitch, and everybody seemed to understand.

I still carried a secret in my underwear, but it seemed very easy to hide. The hormones had added real volume to the swellings on my chest. I had only small breasts, but they were not the smallest in the team. Still, sports bras were part of the sponsored wardrobe, as were some casual dresses. You know the thing – “The USA Women’s Cricket Team wears Teen-Style”. There was no shortage of clothes.

Just before the trip to Hawaii the girls were sent home for a week, but instead of that my parents and brother came to California and we went down to Los Angeles and all the theme parks. I did all the girly things imaginable, sticking with my mother while my father and brother did what guys do.

I think that this was when I first started to dread going back to living as a male.

My parents would have loved to have gone to Hawaii for the tournament but they said that the knock out stage would take too much of their time.

“If you get into the semi finals we will fly to Hawaii,” my father said. He gave me a kiss on the forehead just as if I was his daughter. I felt very close to him. My older brother had always been his favorite, but that was before he had a daughter. Things were different now.

We flew to Hawaii and went into another camp, this time living in hotel two girls to a room. I needed to take precautions to hide my secret, but it never seemed to be a problem. The fact is that I could not have looked less like a boy, in particular with my long hair. My roomie loved to braid it and she was very good. Who knew that there were so many different ways to braid long hair?

The hotel was in a central part of Honolulu, so for the first time all the girls in the team had a chance to go a little wild. It did not help that there were teams from Australia, New Zealand and England, but also from the Netherlands. Some of these girls were ready for adventure in the tropics.

I was not the only Indian girl in the team, but I can safely say that I was the prettiest, and the girls had put some soft curls in my hair for the evening at the Tiki Bar. Hawaii is one of those states where you have to be 21 to even be in possession of alcohol (even though 18 year old waitresses can serve it) so we were only sipping soft drinks, but the girls picked me as the one who could line up a guy to entertain us.

His name was Tino and he was Polynesian. His skin color was about the same as mine and he had straight black hair like mine except short. The girls said that he looked like a young Dwayne Johnson. I just told them that I was not interested, but as I looked at him across the rom laughing with some surfer types, I found my interest growing.

Enjoying being a girl was weird enough without starting to get girl’s feelings for the opposite sex. It seemed to me that I could strangle these thoughts the moment that they emerged, but my teammates would have none of it.

“He must be local. He will tell us where we can have a good time. You need to talk to him Ash. We have seen him eying you up. The way you are ignoring him has been driving him crazy. We’re going over to talk to him, and introduce you to him.”

Sometimes it is said that the opening batsman is sometimes the loner in the team. That is a person who goes out when the innings starts and retreats to the dressing room when dismissed by a good ball or a bad shot. But I wanted to be a part of this team, and if that meant going along with this bit of fun, I was up for it.

“Hi, I’m Ash,” I said. I pushed my hair away from my face and ran fingers through it shaking the curls a little. It was instinctive, I think, but there was no doubt what I was doing. I was flirting. I was being a girl in front of a man.

You would have to blind not to see that he was attracted to me. It must be in the eyes. You can see, and they can see it too. Or maybe it is more animalistic – like smells or something. It was wrong, being as we were two males, but it was a mutual attraction on first meeting, and it was strong.

He was not Hawaiian. He was from American Samoa, but he was almost a local. He knew what cricket was. He was interested. He wanted to go to our first match. He wanted to watch me play. I wanted him ti watch me play.

He took us all to a place down the beach where we drank something called kava. He said it was not alcohol, but it sure seemed like it was. It made me feel good and a little sleepy. We sat by the fire – me in his arms. I could have stayed to watch the sun rise, but other teams mates had the sense to pull me away. We kissed, and it seemed as if the world had turned upside down.

We won our first game, against Zimbabwe, an African country. I played well, not least because Tino was watching and I was out to impress him. I took three wickets and scored well with the bat.

Then a few days later we played a team from Scotland. They were harder to beat, but we sneaked home. I scored quite a few runs.

I took a call from my father. He was excited about coming to Hawaii but I warned him that it would turn on the last game. I was feeling good, as if my whole game was coming together. My performance in the first two games had made people sit up and take notice.

But not just my team and those involved in the tournament. There was press there too. People were asking about me. The team management suddenly realized that they knew very little about me.

The day after our second victory I was called into a meeting of team management and I knew that something was very wrong. People on the team had done some digging. It was not hard. Social media keeps few secrets. There was an Ash Singh, opening bat and spin bowler, but he was not a girl.

I was on the back foot, but I came forward. I played the transwoman stroke - “I may have the anatomy of a boy but I am female”. The problem was that I had not joined the team as that. There were protocols. There should have been disclosure – to my team but also to the tournament organizers.

“You have made Cricket USA look stupid,” was the hardest to hear. “Perhaps the best thing is for you to just leave quietly. Personal reasons. Then it may go no further. But you are out of the team, Ash.”

I was destroyed. I ran out of that meeting in tears like the girl I had become.

Tino was waiting at the gate. I looked for another way out, but he had seen me.

“That was a great game,” he said. “I can’t wait for the next one.”

He wanted to put his arms around me but I pushed him away.”

“What’s wrong?” he said.

“I have been dropped from the team. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“They can’t drop you,” he said. “You are proboably their best player.”

“I am not eligible,” I said. I could see the confusion on his face. I had to press on. He needed to known. “I am not a girl. I’m a boy.”

It was said. I felt dead inside.”

“You mean you are fa’afine?” he said. Strangely, he was smiling.

“I don’t know what that is,” I said.

“it’s a girl with some male bits,” he said. “They are common in Samoa, and throughout Polynesia. It does not make you less of a woman if that is what you feel you are.”

How did I feel? I wanted to be back in his arms. I wanted his hands running through my long hair. I never wanted to hid that hair away ever again. I pulled the scrunchie off and let it fall across my breasts. I think that it answered his question.

If you are not training why don’t you come down to the park and plan in a game of kilikiti with me,” he said.

“Kilikiti?”

“It’s Polynesian cricket. It is played all over the Pacific.”

“Is it a men’s team or a women’s team?” I asked.

“That’s just it,” he said. “Kilikiti is played by mixed teams. Any number so long as the sides are even. Men, women, boys, girls, fa’afine. It makes no difference … not to the game and not to me either.”

I had finally found the form I cricket I like best.

The End

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