

By ALBERTINA ALMEIDA




## The Race Was Well Run: A Tribute to Floriano Almeida

The day was 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2018. Floriano Almeida, who was Goa's athletics champion for around a decade and a half from the mid-1960's, breezed out of this world. Floriano had won every medal and cup for 1500 metre, 5000 metre, 10000 metre races and mini marathons in Goa that he participated in from 1965 onwards. He had even represented Goa at All India athletic meets at Madras, Uttar Pradesh, Bangalore, Punjab and Rajasthan and the Mormugao Port Trust at All India Ports athletic meets at Madras and Calcutta and by 1977, at Madras, he secured first place and the gold medal in the 5000 metre race category, and was awarded a bronze medal in the 10000 metres the following day.

Aged 70 when he breathed his last, Floriano did not look his age, and was up and about and active, so much so that the news of his death came as a shock to those who saw him here, there, at every commonplace. His death was in fact the beginning of the end of an era of sports, where sportsmen ran for fun, for the love of it, and in a sporting spirit. On a personal note, I would say he was a caring uncle and yet a strict disciplinarian. When I spent my summer vacations at Taleigao, he made sure I didn't court trouble with my adventures of exploring the old house, the well, the trees, and the village.

The village of Taleigao has produced many an athlete who brought honours to the village. Why does one say the village has produced? Because Floriano himself was encouraged by another athlete from Taleigao, before him, that is, Bento Dias, and Floriano in turn encouraged and coached many others. It was like a relay coaching in the village from one generation of runners to another, irrespective of social or economic status – an important marker that, when these differences are surmounted, a village can prosper, and yet not be absorbed by fast track urbanisation. The *Adro* was the Square which was the meeting point. In giving one receives and it is possibly this spirit of coaching others that made the village felicitate him again and again, and even more recently through the Centro Social Cultural Sao Miguel de Taleigao at the 4<sup>th</sup> *Konkani Kantaranchi Sanz* on the Harvest Feast Day of 21<sup>st</sup> August, 2016.

That Floriano wouldn't flaunt his past glories is evident from the fact that even his own



immediate family of wife Estefania and three daughters Delilah, Tatyana and Chikita, and two sons-in-law Savio and Rohan, knew little about his athletics apart from his cupboardful of cups. They did have a feel of his sportsmanship spirit though in the many random acts of kindness to others without any expectations of return, and from his active life, with his meticulous attention to detail in preparing for anything.

A Midnight Child (born in 1947), though far then from the effects of the Midnight destiny of India, Floriano was the youngest of six children and lost his mother when he was barely three years old. He grew up under the tutelage of his father, who both mothered and fathered him, besides his two sisters one of whom was soon to fly out of the nest, and his three brothers, of whom the eldest (my father) was his godfather. This made him an all-rounder who had the potential to perform both the perceived feminine and masculine roles in the house. He would cook, and clean the house, with as much elan as he would shop and fix things.

Floriano was lean but not lanky. Lean and lank is well known to be the combo for an athlete, but what surprised the world was his big strides despite his short stature. During the long distance races, the giant leaps after a set of short strides would give him the breathing space to recover the energy expended and to refuel himself. It was also part of his strategy as his close friend and later to be co-runner Luciano Fernandes avowed, “His long strides were more than a metre. He shared his finer techniques with me.”

Sheikh Abdul Ahmed, now retired Superintendent of Customs and Central Excise, reminisces, “He was a wonderful coach, he had a slow-fast-slow-fast approach when running races, and would pick up and make that triumphant final dash in the last leg of the race, leaving all of us way behind at the winning post.” Sheikh recalls how he was encouraged to meet and follow Floriano. Sheikh was participating in cycle races and wanted to be an athlete as well, and was practicing on his own for the same at Campal, close to Muslim wada where he then lived, and the then Chief Minister Dayanand Bandodkar stopped him one day and asked him why he was practicing alone, that he should take a leaf from Floriano who was an unbeaten long distance runner.

Floriano himself often recounted with his typical mirth and laughter (which was often



contagious) that Bandodkar was in awe of him and on one occasion when he was the Chief Guest for a race, he stepped down from the dais and came and sat next to him and literally had a feel of his legs to see what type of muscles he had, that enabled him to be so fleet footed. As a matter of fact, the spirit of mirth and laughter, is even evident, as Torres Martins, also retired from the Department of Customs and Central Excise, remembers how they laughed and recalls teasing each other as they practiced. “After Floriano would come and wake me up by whistling outside my house at 5 a.m., we would run to the Church Square and then with others there, I would run upto Miramar after which he would still run further. Floriano would tease me, ‘You cannot run long distance, hahahahaha’, and I, as a 100-200 meter sprinter, would on the next day challenge him ‘let us see who comes first upto Miramar’.” His colleagues at MPT where he worked and which he represented nationally also recall him as being full of laughter. It is another thing that till his death, there were no wrinkles yet on his face.

Sportsmen, and sportswomen, walked hand in hand for the love of sport. There were Dr. Susana de Souza, Elma D’Cunha, who I remember as his friends as I was growing up. “Floriano had a signature whistling tune to call out to all of us as team Goa and we would whistle back, he started this trend and we continued it. It was fun having Floriano with us. He was a real good runner and very hard working too. We really will miss him”, athlete Elma D’Cunha nostalgically remarked as tears welled up in her eyes.

“There was no monetary help – today athletes make lakhs of rupees within four to five years, we ran for paper certificates and cups, and we were happy with that”, says Luciano. This sentiment is echoed by Sheikh and Torres. Says Sheikh, “We would run for name, not money”. “We ran in true sports spirit, we never got any money, we practiced hard, and yet it was more fun than anything else,” remembers Torres. “The most we would get is a *bhaji puri* and tea at Bhonsale’s.” The athletes enjoyed no formal State support or training. On the contrary, they even experienced a denial of their hard work from the Director of Sports then headed by deputationist officers from other parts of India. This writer herself recalls a so-called motivational speech delivered by the then Director of Sports in her school, where he actually derided the Goan athletes’ practicing habits, including those of Floriano. It may be recalled that Floriano ran on track, on the road and cross country, because he embraced each and all of these, and he ran bare-foot.

“Floriano was such a gentleman and generous person, he tried to bring young boys from Teregoao into sports”, Luciano fondly remembers, “I am grateful to him for encouraging me. Thanks to him, I went places. I went to Delhi, Madras, Bombay, representing Goa for races in the 70’s. I stayed loyal to him, I ran wherever he ran, until employment took me to Saudi”.

Sheikh minces no words. “I am what I am thanks to Floriano.” The volley of words from his co-runners, and protégés could indeed be the best stole of gratitude in his memory.

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