

A mere game...

MICHAEL ATHERTON



For the third time since the death of Bob Woolmer, flags fluttered at half-mast inside the Beausejour Cricket Ground and the players stood in silent reflection just before the off. The heavy rains that drenched the outfield overnight and in the early morning, resulting in a two-hour delay, eventually relented but depression remained.

Nobody I have spoken to can comprehend how it could have all come to this, how a mere game could elicit such strong emotions that one man, or men, wanted to extinguish the last breath of another. Nevertheless, the overwhelming reaction from all involved is that the show must go on. It's a good job England were playing, stoicism being our greatest quality.

Michael Vaughan, on Friday, was certain that the tournament should go ahead. He also intimated that his "gut instinct" was that international cricket was still corrupt. Since the England captain chooses his words carefully, and since the trained eye of the professional out in the middle can pick up the smoke signals of corruption, the cricket world should take some notice.

On the same day, Goolam Raja, the South African manager, who knows a thing or two about match-fixing since he was there throughout the Hansie Cronje years, announced that a bookmaker had approached a South African cricketer in 2005. Marlon Samuels, the West Indian

batsman, remains under suspicion having been overheard, a month before the World Cup, talking to a bookie called Mukesh Kochchar, a known associate of Dawood Ibrahim, the head of the largest betting syndicate in Asia.

There is no suggestion that Woolmer's murder has anything to do with corruption. Even so, it is time for the administrators of the game to take note; time to put the game's long-term interests first, rather than the need to make decisions with purely money in mind, no matter what the consequences.

Just ask yourself why we have seen so many mis-matches in the opening week of the tournament and why there are more teams, 16, than ever before, even though some of them would struggle to beat a good London club side. With Ireland and Bangladesh going through to the second stage of the tournament, the ICC should be careful what they wish for.

Malcolm Speed, the ICC's chief executive, is not a man who elicits a great deal of sympathy from the cricket community. He is a cold fish, lawfully in every respect. Nevertheless, it was impossible not to feel a kernel of sympathy for him, and indeed for Chris Dehring, the Jamaican investment banker who has put his life on hold for the last decade or so, trying to pull together this logistical nightmare, as they sat on the podium a couple of days ago alongside deputy commissioner Mark Shields, talking of murder and mayhem rather than the carnival that the World Cup in the Caribbean is supposed to be.

For once, Speed seemed genuinely puzzled, his lawyerly, forensic mind at a loss to understand. He said the show must go on, but he didn't say it with much conviction. Perhaps he wasn't sure himself.

He's right, though. If Woolmer's death is eventually linked to match-fixing, you cannot have a situation where those out to corrupt the game can feel they can influence not just the outcome but whether games take place at all. Societies soldier on in the face of threats. Cricket is no different.

Besides, it is difficult to know what would be achieved by aborting, except to serve as a mark of respect to Woolmer. But most people who knew him best are adamant that his wish would be for the tournament to go on, and no one who has spent more than five minutes in his company talking about cricket could ever doubt otherwise.

Besides, the organisers have spent the best part of 10 years pulling this tournament together. There are thousands of volunteers giving up their spare time, and thousands of supporters making their way to the Caribbean as I write. Cancelling the tournament would be a grievous financial, economic and, most importantly, spiritual blow to a region that is desperate to show that it has grown up in the world and that it can stand on its own two feet. Nor can responsibility for Woolmer's death be laid at the door of Dehring's team.

No, there is little to be gained by cancelling. Indeed, surely the whole point of sport is to act as a necessary counterpoint to the grim realities of life. We know that death is a part of life because we see it, in one form or

another, every day. Like drugs and alcohol, sport provides an escape from the routine absurdity of everyday existence - and thankfully without any of the side effects.

It gives us the chance to experience the best that life has to offer, usually without serious consequences. We win, we lose, and then we go home and get on with life.

We submit to sport's arcane rules and regulations and rituals. We recognise that we will need to show courage and skill, and we train hard for the event knowing that we are undertaking an ultimately futile task. It is this futility that explains sport's universal appeal, that and the desire to satisfy a basic human urge to play.

Sport loses its appeal when it is invested with fake importance. This is why English football engenders scant respect: the managers who snarl and spit at players and officials from the sidelines; the players who confuse competitiveness with sometimes vicious intent; and the supporters who cannot cope with the fact that in sport there must nearly always be a loser.

They have all clearly forgotten that Bill Shankly had his tongue firmly planted in his Scottish cheek when he said that football was more important than life or death.

Sport is not more important. And it won't help to bring Woolmer back, but it might help us to cope.

(Michael Atherton, the former England captain, wrote this article for www.telegraph.co.uk)

India embarrass expat fans

AFP, Port of Spain

They came in their hundreds and left in despair.

India's America-based fans were left distinctly underwhelmed by their first World Cup experience as they watched Rahul Dravid's team teeter towards defeat and almost certain elimination from the tournament.

"It was terrible," said Manish who had flown in from New Jersey.

"We were pathetic... useless. I am so ashamed."

For many USA-based Indians, the World Cup in the Caribbean represents their first chance to see their team in action.

But after years of waiting agonisingly to see the likes of Dravid, Sachin Tendulkar, Sourav Ganguly and Harbhajan Singh close-up, the fans couldn't care less if they never see them again.

Isaac, who flew in from Washington DC, told the Trinidad Express: "This was my one chance to see a World Cup and Tendulkar was extremely disappointing," he said after the star Indian batsman lasted just three balls before being dismissed for nought against Sri Lanka.

"I am supremely disappointed."

Vinay, another guest from Washington, urged Indian supporters at home to be more understanding of the team's plight when they return home and preferred to applaud Sri Lanka's efforts.

"Sri Lanka was the better team," said Vinay.

Tigers feel

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had converted many locals into Tigers fan. Three new Trinij joined us this time with all the cheering. They asked me to paint their faces red and green. If you watched the game on TV and by any chance saw a big Trini in a white T-shirt going crazy with his face painted red and green - well that was one of them. Before them I had painted the Bangladeshi flag on bunch of people, even an Indian supporter got it! Someone from the rear row shouted that I should start cheering.

The mood in the gallery was festive, but you could feel the collective tension among the Bangladeshi supporters. Everyone knew the odds were against us to win the game, but we had been spoiled by the previous experience - we wanted more. Things did not look good for the Tigers from the word go, and it continued till the end. During the rain break and the lunch our Trini friends tried to cheer us up by saying the Bangladeshi batting will take up for the first half of the game. Till our batting started I just kept telling my wife that either we will see the most exciting game ever or a real heart-breaker, either way we will remember this game. Soon among the Bangladeshi supporters we realised we have quite a few "cricket pundits" who started to express their expert opinions. I am not sure based on what experience they were making the comments, but I guess it was just their frustration speaking. On the other hand the drum kept beating till the end - for a better tomorrow.

(Taneem Ahmed has been watching the Bangladesh matches of the Cricket World Cup being held in Trinidad and Tobago)

India realise, at last

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both the occasions, India failed to make a solid start.

With Tendulkar making just seven (against Bangladesh) and a duck (against Sri Lanka), the pressure was soon on the middle-order batsmen who failed to show the resilience to rise to the occasion.

India's seamers and spinners failed to defend a total of 191 against Bangladesh, but looked impressive in patches against Sri Lanka which was simply not good enough. The fielding also left a lot to be desired.

India were aware they just could not afford to have an off-day in group matches as each side played three games, with the top two advancing

to the next round.

Unfortunately for them, it came on the very first day.

"The lead-up to the tournament was pretty good. The confidence was quite high and the boys were playing good cricket. We had a bad game against Bangladesh where we did not really bat well upfront," said Dravid.

"That put pressure on us. Again (against Sri Lanka), we did not play well enough. The way the tournament is structured you have one banana skin game and you can be out of the tournament quite quickly." Millions of fans back home had been expecting their team to complete just a formality in group matches as Sri Lanka were the only

team which could have seriously tested Dravid's side.

They were in for a shock when the star-studded Indian team went down to Bangladesh after putting in one of their most dismal performances in the tournament history.

India had three batsmen -- Tendulkar, Ganguly and Dravid -- with more than 10,000 runs each. The entire Bangladeshi side had fewer runs than the Indian trio, but raised their performance when it mattered most.

The big guns did not boom, with Tendulkar contributing seven and Dravid 14. Only Ganguly (66) and Yuvraj Singh (47) managed to score more than 20 in the match which put India under tremendous pressure.

Bangladeshi teenagers Tamim Iqbal, Mushfiqur Rahim and Saqibul Hasan upstaged the Indian stars with impressive half-centuries to help their team pull off an upset five-wicket victory.

Just one nightmarish day at the office pushed India on the brink of elimination and pressure became the name of the game as they had no option but to beat in-form Sri Lanka in their final match.

And it was expecting too much of a team playing much below their potential.

Hayden, Gibbs

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Both the big-hitting batsmen were also made life members of the local golf club.

Hayden's spectacular innings laid the foundation for the winning Australian total of 377 yesterday. The towering left-hander smashed four sixes and 14 fours on his way to completing 5000 runs in ODI cricket.

Hayden said Australia's unbeaten run in the group stages, despite being plagued by injuries before the mega event, was because the side had the experience to cope with tough situations.

"I felt this time that we are much more experienced cricketers. We have seen the highs and lows that a World Cup can bring. This time I'm really confident knowing how the tournament progresses. I know we have a big job to do at this World Cup, the top four in the side have to do the majority of the batting," he explained.

One week on, no clue

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expose the extent of the practice in a forthcoming book or because of sins lost by Ireland's win.

Shields, who leads the investigation took up the issue with Jeff Rees, the chief investigator of the International Cricket Council's anti-corruption unit, who is currently in Kingston.

The officer separately told the London-based Observer newspaper: "One aspect is, what were the odds on Ireland if Ireland won? I understand that they were extremely good if you bet on Ireland."

But he said he was keeping an open mind, and stressed that investigators had not yet identified any "clear suspects" or made any arrests.

Authorities in Jamaica said Woolmer's body would remain on the island until the conclusion of a



PHOTO: AFP

POSTMAN LOSES HIS HAT: Brad Hogg dives to save a boundary successfully during Australia's Group A World Cup match against South Africa at Warner Park in St. Kitts on Saturday.

Dhoni home gets more guards

AFP, Ranchi

Police were deployed outside the home of Indian wicketkeeper Mahendra Singh Dhoni on Saturday as angry cricket fans staged nationwide protests against the team's probable exit from the World Cup.

Police were posted as a precaution after disappointed fans attacked another house belonging to Dhoni, currently being built, last Sunday when India suffered a shock defeat against Bangladesh.

"Four policemen have been posted outside his house. Another two are at the other house under construction, which was attacked earlier," said MS Bhatia, police superintendent in Ranchi, Dhoni's home town in eastern India.

Armed police were also guarding team captain Rahul Dravid's residence in the southern city of Bangalore.

India were virtually eliminated from the World Cup after a 69-run loss against Sri Lanka on Friday in Port of Spain, Trinidad, upsetting legions of fans in this cricket-crazy nation.

Only an unlikely victory by first-timers Bermuda over Bangladesh on Sunday will ensure India's backdoor entry into the Super Eights. Posters of Dhoni were burned in Ranchi as protesting cricket fans took to the streets across the country, staging mock funerals and beating pictures of the Indian team.

"We had great expectations from Dhoni, but he scored zero in two matches," said protester Amit Kumar in Ranchi.

In the southern city of Hyderabad, a 32-year-old man died of a heart attack after watching the match slip out of India's hands.

In northern Lucknow city -- where Hindus and Muslims had organised special prayers for India's victory -- protesters blocked roads and burned effigies of players and coach Greg Chappell.

Police spokesman Surendra Srivastava said irate fans blocked roads and shouted slogans against the team.

An angry mob pelted stones at a restaurant owned by bowler Zaheer Khan in western Pune city. Headlines Today television network reported.

In India's financial capital Mumbai, home to star batsman Sachin Tendulkar, protestors strung up effigies of the Indian players on a tree and then conducted mock funeral processions, the United News of India news agency said.

coroner's inquest to be held as soon as possible.

The Woolmer family, as well as Pakistan Cricket Board chief Naseem Ashraf, have rejected suggestions the coach may have been killed over fears he would expose match-fixing in a book he planned to write.

Ivo Tennant, the co-author of the proposed autobiography, also dismissed that theory, saying Woolmer had no intention of writing about "any such detail."

A former England international, Woolmer had coached the Pakistan team since 2004.

Before that, he was coach of South Africa when their former captain Hansie Cronje was bought off by bookmakers in 1996, but was never alleged to have been involved himself.

Eng captain concedes

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figure to many current England players.

However, England -- with Flintoff back in the side -- bowled out Kenya for a modest 177 in a match reduced by rain to 43 overs per side and then knocked off the 178 they needed to win with 10 overs left.

Dublin-born Ed Joyce top-scored with 75 to set up a Super Eight opener against Ireland, the team he helped reach this World Cup before qualifying for England, in Guyana on Friday.

"It's been a week as an England captain you don't want to have," said Vaughan. "It's been tough for everyone."

James Anderson led England's attack with two for 27 but fellow Lancashire quick Flintoff wasn't far behind with two for 35.

And Vaughan said he was happy to have Flintoff, one of England's standout match-winners along with batsman Kevin Pietersen, who made 56 not out against Kenya, back concentrating on cricket.

"When you have your premier all-rounder back in your team we look a better team for that. He'll be happy with the way he bowled."

Joyce, who scored 66 in the 51-run win over Canada after a nought against New Zealand, made his England debut against Ireland in Belfast in June.

And he said that experience

would help him come Friday.

"It's obviously a bit of a strange one, being an Irishman," the left-hander admitted.

"My first game for England was against Ireland so hopefully I've got that one out of the way. I'm just pretty happy with the way I'm playing at the moment."

The defeat by New Zealand means it is the Black Caps and not England who carry two points through to the Super Eights.

England have never won the World Cup although they have been the losing finalists three times -- in 1979, 1987 and 1992.

Vaughan, asked about England's chances at this World Cup, replied: "We are just looking at playing some good cricket over the next few weeks, trying to surprise a few teams and seeing how far we can go."

England undoubtedly caused a surprise by beating world champions Australia 2-0 in their own backyard in the final of last month's triangular series.

However, Vaughan insisted Ireland -- who knocked Pakistan out of the World Cup with a three wicket win the day before Woolmer's death -- would not be under-estimated.

"They deserve to be there. They've won a big game and look a professional, well-organised unit."

But Joyce said Ireland could struggle if England started strongly.

"With all the minnow sides their

biggest strength is that if they get on top of you they can create a lot of pressure. But if you get on top of them, they haven't got much to come back with."

LOCAL SNIPPETS

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out for 147 in 40.5 overs.

In the day's other matches, Surjo Torun (281-9) thrashed Lalmatia Club (169-10) by 112 runs at BKSP for their seventh win in nine games, Sadharan Bima (232-5) edged Prantik (229-10) by three runs and CCS (233-4) recorded their first victory in their last group match after beating Wicket Pegasus B (232-9) by six wickets.

NAT'L CHESS QUALIFIERS

Minhazuddin Ahmed Sagar, Mohammad Javed and FIDE Masters Abu Sufian Shakil, Sheikh Nasir Ahmed and Taibur Rahman secured seven points each after the eighth round of the 33rd National Chess Championship qualifiers to share the lead. FM Mehdi Hasan Parag, FM Syed Mahfuzur Rahman Emon, Abdul Maleq, Mohammad Ali, Saifuddin Lavlu and Shamima Akter Liza followed the joint leaders with 6.5 points.

WATER POLO

Bangladesh Navy clinched the title of the Independence Day Exhibition Water Polo meet when they beat Bangladesh Air Force 14-4 in the final at the Mirpur National Swimming Complex. The winners dominated the first half 7-1.

Chief of the Naval Staff Rear Admiral Sarwar Jahan Nizam, also the president of Bangladesh Swimming Federation, distributed prizes as chief guest.

VOLLEYBALL

Eight teams will take part in the daylong Independence and National Day Volleyball Tournament at the Volleyball Stadium today. The teams are Bangladesh Navy, Bangladesh Rifles, Bangladesh Police, Titas Club, Power Development Board, Water Development Board, Uttara SC and Fleet Club.

Leaving

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plane 40 yards away, waiting for them on the tarmac.

Only two of the World Cup backroom staff were missing. Assistant manager Asad Mustafa remained in Kingston and will accompany Woolmer's body home eventually after the inquest.

South African fitness trainer Murray Stevenson also remained to assist the police in their investigation on behalf of the Pakistan team.

Joyce steers

FROM PAGE 20
Vaughan c Obuya b Ongondo 1
Bell c sub (Bhudia) b Odoyo 16
Pietersen not out 56
Collingwood not out 18
Extras: (lb-2, w-7, nb-3) 12
Total: (For 3 wkts in 33 overs) 178
Fall of wickets: 1-12, 2-52, 3-155.
Did not bat: Flintoff, Bopara, Nixon, Mahmood, Anderson, Panesar.

Bowler	O	M	R	W
Odoyo	6	0	27	1
Ongondo	4	0	31	1
Onyango	2	0	14	0
Suji	3	0	15	0
Varaiya	6	0	39	0
Kamande	5	0	24	0
Tikolo	4	0	18	1
Obuya	3	0	8	0

Result: England won by seven wickets.
Man-of-the-match: Ed Joyce.
Toss: Kenya
Umpires: Rudi Koertzen (RSA), Peter Parker (AUS)
Match referee: Mike Procter (RSA)