

A mere game...

MICHAEL ATHERTON



For the third time since the death of Bob Woolmer, flags fluttered at half-mast inside the Beauchamp Cricket Ground

and the players stood in silent reflection just before the off. The heavy rains that drenched the outfit 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

the 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 as 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, lawyerly 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 putting 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 they 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)



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.

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

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

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.

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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.

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

India realise, at last

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both the occasions, India failed to make the cut.

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

Hayden takes poll position

AFP, Basseterre

Fastest World Cup 100s after Australia's Matthew Hayden set the new record at Warner Park here on Saturday (finishing score, balls required to reach 100, player, team, opponents, venue, year):

	R	M	B	4s	6s
101	66	M Hayden	Aus	SA	St Kitts
111	67	J Davison	Can	WI	Centurion
175*	72	K Dev	Ind	Zim	Turbridge
114	81	V Sehwag	Ind	Ber	Trinidad
102	82	C Lloyd	WI	Aus	Lord's
123	82	B Hodge	Aus	Ned	St Kitts
111	83	B Lara	WI	SA	Karachi
140	84	S Tendulkar	Ind	Ken	Bristol
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