

2007 - of scandals, failures and glory

QUAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM

In Greek mythology, Pandora was the first woman to grace the earth.

Each God helped create her by giving her unique gifts and she is most famous for carrying a jar (pithos) (or box) containing all the world's evils. The jar in question contained "burdensome toil and sickness that brings death to men", diseases and "a myriad other pains".

In 2007, Pandora really did let loose the contents of her box into the world of sport. Crime, punishment, scandal, sadness and despair all seeped into sport along with death (minutes silence for Bob Woolmer, Antonio Puerta and Phil O'Donnell).

Morality reigned low, confessions were made but at the end of it all, like in the box that Pandora unleashed, there was inserted hope.

However, records fell too and it is there we go first.

RECORDS TUMBLE (OVER MID-WICKET)

Stuart Broad could count himself as one unlucky chap. But he would find consolation from the Dutchman Daan van Bunge. When Yuvraj Singh and Herschelle Gibbs laid into each from the first ball of their respective over's it was

Kaka was named World and European Player of the Year. But if Kaka was the dominant figure this year, were another 'little known' Argentine. For if what Lionel Messi has done this year is something to go by ... we could be watching history in the making.

TRIO BIDS BYE

At varying moments of the year, three of the game's greatest stars bid bye to the sport of cricket. Brian Lara, Glenn McGrath and Inzamamul Haq three players who had stood out for their physique, achievements and grit (in no particular order) quit the sport that had made them famous. Fans may have lost individuals but cricket lost great battles. No more shall the fiery McGrath come steaming down to bowl at an imperious Lara. No more shall the burly Inzy cut and pull his way to a century or let fans expel gales of laughter at his comical run-outs.

All three left indelible marks on the game. Lara left behind innings that will never be forgotten. McGrath and Inzy left behind legacy and boots that will never be filled. Cricket will be poorer without them.



hardly out of the ordinary. This was Twenty20 cricket after all. But six balls and 36 runs later, while Gibbs and Yuvraj emerged triumphant, Broad and Bunge also ensured that they too would be remembered in the history books.

Also, the brilliant Sri Lanka spinner Muttiah Muralidaran went past Shane Warne as the highest wicket-taker in Tests after snapping the wicket of England batsman Paul Collingwood in Kandy on December 3.

In Formula 1, little known Briton Lewis Hamilton played the best rookie season by a driver since the dawn of time and only tragic circumstances saw him lose out the title to Kimi Raikkonen.

Roger Federer and Justine Henin also proved their supremacy over their rivals notching up three and two Grand Slam wins respectively and both reaching the brink of tennis history.

Finally, Bryan Habana not only kept pace with a cheetah but he also equalled the legendary Jonah Lomu with six tries as South Africa (Springboks) were crowned the World Champions in Rugby.

And also worthy of note, Brazil trumped Argentina for the 64,000th (!) time by thrashing them in the Copa America final and yet managed to finish behind them in the year-end rankings.

KAKA (HARDLY A JOKE WORD)

AC Milan established their credentials as the greatest club side in the world lifting a record eighteenth international crown after beating Boca Juniors in the final of the Club World Cup. Inspirational was the Brazilian Kaka, revelling in his own brilliance as he tore apart the Argentines in a majestic display. It was something you had come to expect of the 25 year old Evangelist his faith in God and his 'I belong to Jesus' T-shirts. Six months prior, Kaka had fired Milan to their seventh Champions League crown making them both European and World Champions in the same year. For this small achievement

ENGLAND'S 'GLORIOUS' FAILURE

England also bid bye but they did so to the European Championships missing qualification after failing to hold on to a draw at the famed (for failure) Wembley. The Three Lions, could not manage to get a result against a committed Croatia team leaving a bunch of over-hyper superstars to lick their wounds and pride and at the same time putting Steve McClaren and his broly to international (dis)repute.

CRICKET'S NEW BABY

Perhaps the most abiding (non-retirement) moment in an eventful cricketing year was provided in the pressure cooker atmosphere of the Wanderers in Johannesburg in September.

The Wanderers is always electric but here was something that had not been experienced there, or anywhere else ever before.

Three balls remained of the inaugural Twenty20 final.

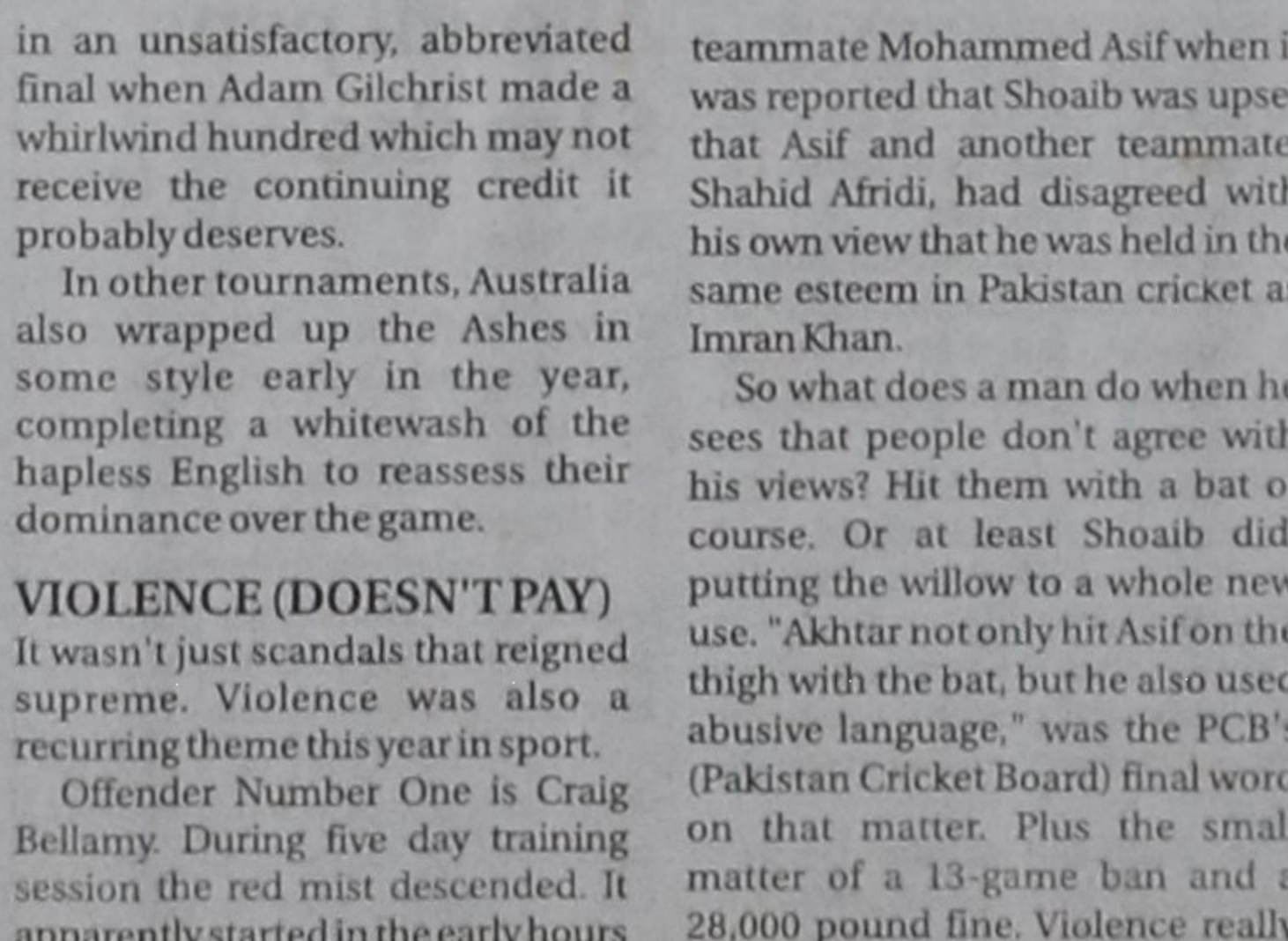
India were playing Pakistan. Nerves were shredded, nails even moreso.

A virtual unknown, the unsung Pakistan batsman Misbahul Haq who had played an almost lone hand in his side's pursuit of 158, attempted what has been decreed by the parlance of the times as 'an Ashraful' - an outrageous scoop shot over fine leg off the bowling of a defeated-looking Joginder Sharma.

It could have been a motif for the tournament and the form of the game. The shot however, was marginally mistimed and looped to short fine leg, where the catch was held.

India were the champions. The International Cricket Council (ICC) were in desperate need of this after the arduous and trying World Cup in the West Indies. It was a month and half long, contained too few attractive matches (barring Bangladesh and Ireland's wins on St Patrick's Day) and was irrevocably marred by the tragic death of Bob Woolmer. Australia looked winners from a long way out and crushed Sri Lanka

PHOTOS: AFP FILE
1. Iraq captain Younis Mahmoud (centre) holds aloft the Asian Cup after beating Saudi Arabia in the final in Jakarta on July 29. 2. India's Twenty20 captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni displays the World Championship trophy after their thrilling four-run victory over arch-rivals Pakistan in the final at the Wanderers in Johannesburg on September 24. 3. Pictured is Bob Woolmer, the late Pakistan coach, who died on March 18 following his team's shock loss to Ireland the day before. 4. West Indies legend Brian Lara waves a final goodbye to adoring fans after being run-out against England in their World Cup Super 8s match on April 21. It was Lara's last international match. 5. Australia captain Ricky Ponting (L) and his deputy Adam Gilchrist (R) are all smiles after winning the World Cup for the third consecutive time beating Sri Lanka in the final in Barbados on April 28. 6. Pictured is McLaren-Mercedes driver Lewis Hamilton, who drove the best-ever rookie season in Formula-1 history. Hamilton looked all set to win the drivers' championship but sadly lost out to Kimi Raikkonen in the final race in Brazil. 7. Atalanta captain Cristiano Doni tries his best to control rampaging fans from breaking the plastic barrier to get onto the pitch. The fans went wild following the death of one of their numbers from stray gunfire in Rome on November 10. 8. Victorious AC Milan players pose for photographs after winning their seventh Champions League crown beating Liverpool in the final in Athens on May 23. Milan also went on to win the World Club Championship on December 16. 9. Barcelona and Argentina sensation Lionel Messi (C) rounds Getafe keeper Luis Garcia to score what was easily the goal of the year. Eerily reminiscent of his countryman Diego Maradona's strike in the 1986 World Cup against England, Messi too proceeded to run past five Getafe players before slotting in. 10. Swiss world number one Roger Federer is ecstatic after winning the US Open, his third Grand Slam of the year, beating Novak Djokovic in the final at Flushing Meadows.



doesn't pay. Sadly, the way the players showed the fans followed. Italy for one was overrun by violence after the tragic death of a Lazio fan in November. For the second year in a row, football took a back seat as the fans descended with all their fury. It was indeed a pitiful scene and added weight to the hooligan tag the Italians are often capped with.

OH THE SCANDALS!

McLaren-Mercedes and Marion Jones put in exemplary performances in this category.

The former, a Formula 1 team were deemed to have access to "highly sensitive" Ferrari data about brakes, weight distribution, aerodynamic balance, tyre inflation and even strategy over a three-month period in the 2007 season. The McLaren drivers Fernando Alonso and Pedro de la Rosa knew this, and when the FIA, the governing body, found out, it fined McLaren 100 million dollars (50 million pounds) and stripped them of all their constructors' points for the year.

That would take some outdoing but the American sprinter Marion Jones arguably put up an event better performance.

Seven years ago, she regaled the world an athlete at the peak of her powers running with all the grace of a gazelle.

Jones, now 32, was the premier female athlete of her generation

whose career peaked at the Sydney Olympics of 2000, when she won three gold medals and two bronze.

But her efforts were long shrouded in doubt and in October this year, it was proved that there really is no smoke without fire. She admitted to past steroid use and lying to federal agents a felony in the US.

Jones could consider herself lucky to get away with only a two-year ban and forfeiture of all prizes, including Olympic gold medals. But the saddest part of it was the lack of sympathy that came in for the disgraced athlete.

In the truest sense of the word, Marion Jones was disgraced.

GLORY GLORY IRAQ!

So, in a year where crime and punishment topped the agenda, where scandals were commonplace and violence not too far behind, what was the saving grace? Where was hope, that all important ingredient that Pandora managed to keep locked inside the box? In 2007 it came in the form of Iraq.

In a country torn apart by strife, where death is dealt everyday, where living through the next day is still unsure, Younis Mahmoud and his band of merry men gave the country something to smile about lifting the Asian Cup amidst the longest odds in history.

They say that sport has lost its morals, it's lost the sheer joy for which it is really played, but then along comes something like Iraq and you are forced to reassess your views.

For what Iraq achieved transgresses the boundaries of reality to extend into a fairytale.

It is the enduring story for 2007. It is the hope, that for all her vagaries, Pandora managed to keep in this world.

