

*International sports*

# A year of contrast

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2009 was a year of contrast in international sports, a year of controversies and excellence. From Thierry Henry's Hand of God Part II to Usain Bolt's amazing record-breaking sprints; from Diego Maradona's angry outburst at the press to Roger Federer's surpassing of Pete Sampras's 14 Grand Slam titles, 2009 was truly a remarkable year in sports.

Talking about excellence it has to start with the all-conquering Barcelona. Barcelona dominated the football world like no other in a very long time. They won everything there was to win playing a brand of football which Pele's Brazil of the sixties and seventies would be proud of.

Barcelona under the guidance of young coach Pep Guardiola have a simple footballing philosophy which is to keep possession of the ball under all circumstances (even if they are down to 10 men due to a red card) and to regain control of the ball as soon as it is lost by pressing their opponents. Barca play a pass-and-move game where their players love to keep the ball by receiving and passing it around and move on with the play. And the most impressive part is that Barca can play this kind of football with the likes of Xavi, Iniesta, Busquets, Pique, Messi -- all home-grown players.

In total Barcelona won six trophies (Spanish: La Liga, Cup, Super-Cup; UEFA: Champions League, Super-Cup and the Club World Cup). So much success was bound to make eternal rivals Real Madrid jealous who suffered an astonishing 2-6 defeat at the hands of Barca in May. Real responded by electing the flamboyant Florentino Perez as their new president who is a firm believer in the term "money can buy success".

Perez quickly flashed the cash with the world record signing of Portuguese superstar Cristiano Ronaldo from Manchester United for a mind-blowing 94 million euros. He

also bought Brazilian ace Kaka from Milan for 65.8m euros, Liverpool's Spanish stalwart Xabi Alonso for 35.4m euros and French rising star Karim Benzema for 35m euros from Lyon.

Only time will tell if spending over 250m euros is worthwhile as Real Madrid are trailing Barcelona in the Spanish Primera Liga going into the New Year. Barcelona are also looking like the team to beat in the Champions League.

The success story of Barca won't be complete without a special mention for the Argentine wunderkind Lionel Messi. The 22-year-old was an integral part of Barcelona's accomplishment scoring an astounding 38 goals with numerous assists which earned the little man the Ballon d'Or and the FIFA World Player of the Year accolades.

International football also had its fair share of controversies. France forward Thierry (Le Cheat) Henry controlled the ball with his hand not once but twice to set up teammate William Gallas for the goal that shattered Ireland's World Cup dreams in Paris. The Irish cried foul and asked for a replay. Even Henry offered a replay but it was not to be and the Irish were left heart-broken as the French rejoiced.

In another part of the world, Argentina struggled all the way to qualify for the World Cup and the world's media heavily criticised football legend Diego Maradona. After the last match in Montevideo where Argentina confirmed their participation in South Africa with a scrappy 1-0 win over Uruguay, Maradona let all his frustration out on the journalists present at the press conference by using obscene language with a rude gesture.

FIFA took notice of the incident and subsequently banned Maradona from all football related activities for two months. Maradona is currently serving his punishment.

Controversies also touched other

sports like golf which was quite a shock and especially when a US icon like Tiger Woods was right in the middle of it. Woods admitted to infidelity and announced an indefinite leave from professional golf to focus on his marriage. Several companies including Gillette suspended big money endorsement deals with Tiger Woods.

In stark contrast to the lows, Jamaican sprint king Usain Bolt took athletics to unbelievable heights. 'Lightning' Bolt bettered his own 100m world record to an incredible 9.58s. He followed that up by breaking his 200m world record in an equally impressive 19.19s at the World Championships in Berlin.

Similar to Usain Bolt, Swiss master Roger Federer took tennis to another level. Federer regained the Wimbledon crown fighting off the stiff challenge of American star Andy Roddick in an epic five set battle winning the final set 16-14. Not only was it Federer's sixth Wimbledon title, the Fed Express broke Pete Sampras's all-time record of 14 Grand Slam titles. American great Pete Sampras never won a single French Open. In 2009 Federer managed to capture the French Open (the only Grand Slam that was also missing from his trophy cabinet) on way to his new world record 15 Grand Slam singles titles. It is safe to say that for now Roger Federer is the greatest ever men's tennis player.

2009 is ending on a high for the fans of Formula One. Only on 23rd of December German legend and seven times world champion Michael Schumacher confirmed his comeback for the 2010 season. Schumi will drive alongside teammate Nico Rosberg for Mercedes.

From the highs to the lows, from the controversies to the excellence, all in all 2009 was a contrasting, memorable and an unforgettable year in the international sports calendar.



Shakib Al Hasan has to go farther if Bangladesh has to progress further.

BISHWAJIT ROY

Is there any scope to honour someone else other than Shakib Al Hasan as Sportsman of the Year? The answer is a resounding 'No'. The 22-year-old Magura lad was head and shoulders above everybody in the country in 2009; a world-beater indeed. And it's for the second successive year that the ever-smiling but unwavering young man made the headlines on numerous occasions to bring joy to the faces of the success-starved sports lovers of the country. If Shakib made known his arrival as a new cricket star in 2008 then his success stories in the just past year gave a clear indication that he is not here to live with the past success only. It had been a remarkable year for Shakib

and his story is all the more special given that it has happened less than four years into his international career. And he had achieved something which none could even dream about in the country before and to some extent he has opened new windows for the cricketers in the country.

Not only has he captained Bangladesh to successes at home but also to unprecedented victories in Zimbabwe and West Indies. He also cemented his position as the world's best ODI all-rounder and was named by Wisden Cricketer magazine as their Player of the Year 2009. Besides he became the first ever Bangladeshi to sign for a county cricket club -- Worcestershire to establish himself as Bangladesh's first global star. (Don't forget he is also the 'most

eligible bachelor').

The game's governing body inexplicably ignored him otherwise he might have been an ICC award winner also.

But he was still a champion and it will not be exaggerated if someone says that 2009 was Shakib Al Hasan's year.

Why is he so different from his other colleagues? The answer is: consistency as a performer against any opposition, home and away and the toughness in his character, be it on or off the field. The world cricket lovers have already noticed the young man's on field toughness, even as a stand-in captain.

Shakib's performance chart spiked during the historic tour to the West Indies. The young man had to take the

responsibility of leading the team in the Caribbean after Mashrafe Bin Mortaza had injured his knee during the first Test, and he grabbed the opportunity with both hands. It's not so common in the country that someone gets an opportunity and takes it in positive stride. Shakib showed rare quality of leadership albeit against weakened opponents in response to the sudden added responsibility. It was true for Shakib as said: a leader should lead his team from the front.

An unprecedented success marked the year for Bangladesh cricket as the Tigers won two Tests out of three and won 14 ODIs out of 19 and a major part of the credit must go to the southpaw batsman cum spinner.

But Shakib was a team man and he

always distributed credit for his success among his teammates as he said (after winning the Wisden Cricketer magazine award): "As a team, this award will only take us forward. I never thought that I would receive such lofty recognition. But this is a reminder of what hard work gets for you. Hopefully this will inspire my teammates, including myself, to work even harder for the development of Bangladesh cricket."

And after all that success the obvious question was what's next? There had a reply only the champion can say and set it.

"I don't know because I have never been set any target but I would be happy if I could achieve the 40 average both in one-day and Test."

If this is Shakib Al Hasan's vision, then the golden summer of his life may continue.

However, amidst all of this, Shakib's strongest quality that shines through is his ability to put things in perspective.

"Things are good today, but they can just be as bad tomorrow. Therefore I try not to get carried away [with awards]. And I think neither do my teammates. Collectively, at the moment, we are just concentrating on improving."

In the most successful Year, Shakib also experienced how the other part of the World is for a sportsman after his club Abahani dethroned by Mohammedan in the Premier League in the fag end of the Year.

So, in the end it's an all-inclusive journey for the Sportsman of the Year.

**JANUARY**

David Beckham is the most recognizable footballer off the field and as such his performances on it are often viewed as secondary to Brand Beckham. In January all eyes were on him as he made a shock loan move to AC Milan during the American off season in a desperate bid to get into Fabio Cappello's 2010 World Cup team and for the most part he hardly put a foot wrong. A few months later he would be greeted back at LA by jeering fans who felt he tried his best for a move away from the LA Galaxy, but by the end of the season he had won them over again. He seems to be in Capello's mind and with another loan spell looming, his World Cup place looks assured now.

**FEBRUARY**

The Australian open always offers up a few surprises, but this year seemingly everything went to plan. The top two seeds met in the final and for the third grand slam final they faced in row Nadal was the one who walked away with smiling. But that was not to be the case for the rest of his year. 2009 was to be a frustrating year for Nadal as injuries forced him from defending his French Open and Wimbledon crowns and by the end of the year when he was fit again, his competition seemed to be running circles around him, and that is a feat.

**MARCH**

The new age of terrorism attacks mainstream sport, with cricket the unfortunate recipient. 12 gunmen, near the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore, Pakistan, fired upon a bus carrying Sri Lanka cricketers. The cricketers were on their way to play the third day of the second Test against the Pakistani cricket team. Six members of the Sri Lanka national cricket team were injured. Six Pakistani policemen and two civilians were killed. These were the first attacks on a national sports team since the Munich massacre of Israeli athletes by Palestinian militants in 1972.

**APRIL**

Ryan Giggs has won every medal there is to win in England a few times over and as a consummate sportsman he is a role model for any young footballer. In April he added to his medal tally with one he had never won before, the PFA Player of the Year award. After only starting 12 games in the qualifying period many thought the award was given as a sort of lifetime achievement medal. Even if that was the case it was inspiring to see a genuine hero get the reception he deserves that too voted in by his peers.

**MAY**

The month of May only ever belonged to Barcelona, after streaking their way past Chelsea into the Champions League final they set up a date with the holders Manchester United and set about dismantling them in a way only they can make artistic. It was to be their year as they collected 6 trophies along the way to cap an inspiring and probably unrepeatable year for Messi and the boys.

**JUNE**

With the football leagues finally over the transfer window went into over drive with Cristiano Ronaldo finally making his long awaited and much hinted at move to Real Madrid. What was not expected was the mind boggling 80M GBP price tag on him, making him the not only the world's first \$ 100M football player but also by far the most expensive footballer ever. He has lived up to his price tag well by scoring more goals than games played, but that is also mainly due to his chronic injuries since late September that have kept him out of Action.

**JULY**

There are many things one can say about Rodger Federer, he is cool, calm, sophisticated and suave, by the way he is also a damn good tennis player. In July he finally over took Pete Sampras as the most successful Grand Slam player of all time winning his 15<sup>th</sup> at Wimbledon. It was to prove to be another successful year for Federer as he became the 5<sup>th</sup> man to win a Grand Slam on all four surfaces after he finally conquered the clay in Paris. Featuring in four Grand Slam finals with two victories would probably be considered a failure by Federer's standards, but then again who needs standards like that.

**AUGUST**

The PGA championship was a sure shot for Tiger Woods. In 14 previous majors he entered the final day in the lead he has always gone on to take the victory, but someone spoiled the script. His name to be exact was YE Yang, the first Asian to win a major. South Korea is known for its female golfers, but Yang broke the mould and in an astonishing last day stole the show and the title from Tiger. Not too many people can claim to have done that, but I guess it just wasn't Tigers year.

**SEPTEMBER**

It was truly the mother of all sporting comebacks. Kim Clijsters of the Belgian fame made a stirring return in her second career in tennis. The new mother beat a host of seeds and left the Williams sisters in her wake as she sewed up a Grand Slam title in sensational circumstances. She celebrated with her baby girl, in an iconic image from Flushing Meadows this year.

**OCTOBER**

Rio de Janeiro is elected as the host city of 2016 Summer Olympics by the IOC session in Copenhagen, and becomes the first ever city in South America to stage the Olympic Games. Rio de Janeiro beat Madrid by 66 votes to 32 in the third round of voting, after Chicago and Tokyo were eliminated in earlier rounds.

**NOVEMBER**

Not since Maradona has a hand been so revered by one nation and hated by another, but Thierry Henry forced the world to relive 1986 again, just this time trying to qualify for a World Cup and not during it. His infamous hand that helped France qualify for the World Cup may have been one of the low points of his stellar career, but in terms of Irish football it was a body blow. They may not have qualified for the World Cup but they showed spirit and character like no other team. They should be saluted.

**DECEMBER**

The biggest sports story out of December actually had nothing to do with scores and results, but the return of a champion. Michael Schumacher's eagerly anticipated return to F1 was announced at the perfect time for the sport. Since he left the sport has never quite been the same even after three drivers were famously involved in the final race last year for the title. With his return, the sport has regained its image after the race fixing allegations and the nefarious activities of Max Mosely. He is truly the sport's knight in shining armour, the saviour, the messiah, the one and only Schumi.



PHOTO: STAR FILE

Messi didn't let anything go out of his way.



PHOTO: STAR FILE

'God's' or Thierry Henry's hand?

## The very best cricket year

ATIQUEANAM

The cricketing world has been abuzz with matches, performances and on-and-off-the-field incidents throughout 2009. The last twelve months has seen plenty of excitement, controversy and talking points.

Australia retained their Champions Trophy title and remained the team to beat in one-day cricket. But their supremacy in the Test arena has been reduced by India and South Africa who have performed consistently. The most recent and lucrative format of the game, Twenty20 cricket has flourished so much in the past year that cricketers and cricket pundits around the world have started to question the viability of all the three formats. Twenty20 has fascinated cricket lovers to such an extent that domestic cricket has gone way beyond borders.

The cricketing world had its fair share of controversies too. The ever-present turmoil of Pakistan cricket was heightened by terror attacks on Sri Lankan cricketers in Lahore, its aftermath took Pakistan's rights to host the 2011 World Cup. While Zimbabwe cricket seemed to have resolved their troubles, new troubles and more complex ones have sprung up and threatened to tear down West Indies cricket. Differences in opinion or authority have counted for top jobs in England, New Zealand and Pakistan. Cricket's allegiance with a corrupt Texan billionaire has tarnished the game's image to a great extent.

Amidst all these excitement and controversies, Bangladesh have enjoyed a very successful year. Fourteen one-day victories out of nineteen and two Test wins in three is by no means a mean achievement. And when that feat is achieved by a 'cricketing minnow', it becomes all the more praiseworthy. Yes, that is what Bangladesh have achieved in the international cricket scene in the last calendar year, which, by any criteria, marks itself as

Bangladesh's best year in cricket. After the cricketing doldrums in 2008 when Bangladesh won only five ODIs out of 26 and lost some of their best cricketers to a rebel cricket league, the year 2009 brought many occasions to cheer about for Bangladesh cricketers and fans.

The highest point of the year was arguably the away series victory at West Indies. Albeit against a weakened West Indies side, it was a moment to cherish when one considers that Bangladesh have managed only one Test win prior to that in its nine years. On both sides of that Test and one-day series victories in the Caribbean, are two resounding 4-1 one-day series wins against Zimbabwe. It won't be an overstatement to say that Bangladesh have, at long last, started to discover the art of winning. Judging individual performances, one name comes to the fore in a big way: Shakib Al Hasan. In fact, it was Shakib's efforts that were reflected in all the glories of the Bangladesh cricket team. His achievements and accolades have been something that adorned the sports pages of newspapers around the world. One black spot for Bangladesh cricket in the last year was their poor showing in the Twenty20 matches, playing three and losing all of them. The lowest point was probably the defeat at the hands of Ireland, who have developed a habit of getting the better of Bangladesh each time they meet. Apart from the disappointment in the Twenty20 World Cup, Bangladesh cricket has been through a rosey pitch. Enthusiasm for the game has reached new highs at home with the success of the national side. Domestic cricket has drawn packed crowd to the stadia after a long time. The reintroduction of rebel ICL cricketers into the mainstream has undoubtedly been a factor behind this turnout. And now that some of them are qualifying themselves for the national side with performances, it all bodes good omen for cricket in the coming years. And all that is good will be called for, for Bangladesh will face much sterner tests in a very busy cricket calendar this year.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Football and fans were ever present.