

BEYOND THE BOUNDARY

Mediocrity Rules, Ok

SHAKIL KASEM

Another bubble burst again, the resounding crash as loud as the one heard when the stock market collapsed. But the two had so much in common; a total disregard by all and sundry stakeholders of the fundamentals of the stocks, and in the case of the significant other, our national cricket team. The meltdown was waiting to happen, if we had just cared to be a little more attentive we should have seen it coming a mile away. But impressionable millions chose either to ignore the signs or were simply incapable of distinguishing silly point from serious short leg. By piling on unwarranted expectations on themselves, the general public put themselves on board for a ride which transpired to be the biggest scam of them all. What it did provide in the end was an easy way out for the beleaguered captain of our side to pass the proverbial buck. Pressure, did we hear him say? Of course there was, and plenty of it. If the debacle is unacceptable, let us be man enough to admit it was as much a failure of countless millions to understand the true worth of this team, as it was for the players to have been so inept and incompetent at this level of the game.

The team and all connected with it had set inordinately high targets for itself, namely beating two minnows in the group and for some inexplicable reason wanting to pick on poor West Indies too. In the end Ireland panicked before a partisan crowd baying for its blood and lost rather than Bangladesh win that contest. Netherlands did not offer a contest, but that was expected. Yet in the final analysis the Dutch still managed to have one of their own walk away from the competition weighed down by the excess baggage of two tons under his belt. Ireland managed to chase two scores of 300 plus. More positives than what we might have achieved. England of course have only themselves to blame for being unable to take the two wickets that mattered most in the end. But it was the only match that we were seen to have been functioning as a team.

Which brings us to the million dollar question? What exactly were we trying to achieve in this World Cup, and how were we expected to do it? On the face of it did not appear much was done in the way of homework as a tool of methods employed. Sadly, every other team seemed to have our team sussed out. Each and every batsman in the side was stripped to the bare essentials and made to look less than ordinary. Scores of 58 and 78 do not happen by oversight. The opposition employed methods that were thought of and implemented clinically. There was method to our madness and to a large extent the team management must take the responsibility of answering to the powers that be why the unspeakable had happened. It would not be cricket to play the blame game with the players only. In fact it would be criminal to do so.

This columnist had been harking on and on about the team going back to the drawing boards ever since the first match. Quite apparently there was not a single drawing board in Mirpur, judging by what has transpired since. It is time now for some hard questions to be asked about the role of those in charge of the team. The team batted in 6 matches, in at least three they were unable to last the full complement of 50 overs. Of the 66 times our batsmen had walked out to bat, only four times had they been able to post a fifty against their names. Apparently, batting is the forte of the head coach. Really? The quintessential problem with this team is quite simple and obvious. For over four years this team is on a perennial Echternach procession, one step forward two steps back. Inconsistency has been its middle name. A win or two coming as it does with the frequency of Haley's Comet is not enough to justify the tenure of those connected with the task of showing results. What we have on view is not good enough. Simple. Period.

For far too long we have been rewarding mediocrity. Time now to put an end to this nonsense of wishy-washy muddled thinking and slapdash coaching methods that now have been proved to be wholly inadequate for the purposes of international cricket. This is the time to wipe the slate clean, think afresh, employ minds and bodies who are knowledgeable and committed and willing to take pride in doing and achieving. We have travelled far too long down the road to be considered as Clown Princes of the game any more. There is a World Cup in four years time. Today is the time we start thinking about it, yesterday was the time we should have started working towards it. Tomorrow will be just too late.

Tuffey comes in for Bennett

CRICINFO, New Delhi

Hamish Bennett, the New Zealand fast bowler, has been ruled out of the World Cup due to an injury to his ankle and Achilles tendon. Seamer Daryl Tuffey, who had been called up as a standby for an injured Kyle Mills, will take Bennett's place in the XV. Bennett injured himself during New Zealand's previous game against Sri Lanka in Mumbai after bowling just 4.1 overs, and limped off the field. He played four games this tournament, picking up six wickets including a four-for in his team's opening game against Kenya.



Australia captain Ricky Ponting (L) stands his ground after nicking a ball to Pakistan wicketkeeper Kamran Akmal during their match at the R Premadasa Stadium in Colombo on Saturday. Ponting has reiterated that he will continue to wait for the umpire's decision.

PHOTO: AFP

Learn from defeat, cautions Ponting

AFP, Colombo

Ricky Ponting warned Australia on Sunday that the defending champions must learn the harsh lessons of their shattering defeat to Pakistan if they want to stay in the World Cup. Australia lost by four wickets to Shahid Afridi's men, a defeat which ended their 34-match unbeaten streak in the tournament stretching back to the 1999 edition.

It could also mean they face a titanic struggle against India in the quarterfinals.

Australia went down by four wickets in a hard-fought Group A clash, bowled out for just 176 against a spirited Pakistan bowling attack which was led by Umar Gul who took 3-30.

Paceman Brett Lee raised hopes of an Australian victory with four wickets but Pakistan pulled off the win, and took top spot in Group A, with nine overs to spare.

Umar Akmal, with an unbeaten 44 and a gritty 46 from Asad Shafiq, laid the foundations for a Pakistan win.

"We have to learn from the defeat and we have to learn quickly," said Ponting, whose team finished third in Group A behind Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

They seem likely to face title favourites India at Ahmedabad on Thursday.

"If we play India in Ahmedabad, then you can guarantee the same situations are going to pop up again, and we'll have to handle them a whole lot better than we did against Pakistan," said Ponting.

The Australian captain, whose team are chasing a fourth successive world title, believes the loss of the 34-match unbeaten

record will not hurt his team.

"I know for a fact the guys haven't been thinking about the streak at all, because it hasn't been mentioned around our group," he said.

"I think the fact that we've played a good Pakistan team and we've come up short will get all the guys thinking just exactly what they need to be thinking about and the way they need to play to win World Cup games."

Ponting believed Australia failed to put up a fighting total on a two-paced R. Premadasa stadium pitch.

"It's a disappointing loss for us. We won the toss and batted on a reasonable wicket, a wicket that certainly had more than 170 runs in it for us. The bounce was a bit inconsistent but it didn't spin much and the ball came on at a reasonable pace.

"At one stage we were 70 or 80-1 and it looked like we were going to post a 240-250 total.

"We had a big collapse in the middle of the innings and that allowed us to only make 176," said Ponting whose team lost their last seven wickets for 59 runs.

Ponting made 19 before being caught behind off spinner Mohammad Hafeez.

It went to a review after he had initially been given not out.

Ponting said he knew he had edged the ball. "There were no doubts about the nick, I knew I hit it, but as always I wait for the umpire to give me out. That's the way I've always played the game.

"That's right, the umpire gave me not out," said Ponting of umpire Marias Erasmus's decision.

Waqar credits Gul

AFP, Colombo

Coach Waqar Younis hailed Pakistan's hard-fought four-wicket win over Australia as a major achievement on Sunday and picked out seamer Umar Gul as the star of the show.

Gul took 3-30 and Abdul Razzaq claimed 2-8 as Australia were bowled out for 176 in 46.4 overs -- their lowest total since the 1992 World Cup -- before Pakistan foiled Brett Lee's 4-28 to chase down the target with nine overs left.

Saturday's defeat ended Australia's 34-match unbeaten streak at the World Cup, a run stretching back to Pakistan's 10-run victory at Leeds in 1999.

"Definitely it's an achievement to beat Australia," said Waqar, whose team finished top of Group A with 10 points from six matches and will face the fourth-placed team in Group B in Dhaka in the first quarterfinal on Wednesday.

Australia ended up with nine points, third behind Sri Lanka on net run-rate, and are likely to play India in Ahmedabad on Thursday.

Waqar praised 26-year-old paceman Gul who now has 13 wickets in the tournament.

"Gul is improving day by day. He's found his right length and he's not only bowling straight but with some pace," said Waqar. "He's attacking and I think he's getting

better and better, which is great for the team.

"The bowlers deserved a bit more credit than the batsmen. It was not easy out there, it was difficult when we were batting, but we pulled it off," said Waqar.

The coach hoped his team keeps the momentum going into the quarterfinals. "After what we have achieved against Australia, now it's a knockout system so we've got to really start building up again," he added.

"We have to make sure we enjoy this victory, forget it and go to the next one fresh and think of the team we are going to face," said Waqar, whose side is now likely to face either the West Indies or England in the last eight.

Waqar said the R Premadasa stadium pitch was not an easy strip.

"It wasn't the easiest pitch to play cricket overall because it was a used pitch. We played a game here and the ball was turning and it was up and down a little bit," said the coach.

"The total of 176 was gettable but the way we got it was maybe a little scratchy at the end but overall it was a superb performance and gives us much needed confidence for the quarterfinals."

Pakistan were cruising along at 98-2 before Lee dismissed Younis Khan (31) and Misbha-ul-Haq off successive deliveries.

Mitchell Johnson removed topscorer Asad Shafiq (46) to raise hopes of an Australian win.

But Umar Akmal (44 not out) and Razzaq (20 not out) steered Pakistan to victory.

Ricky not the one to walk

AFP, Colombo



Australia captain Ricky Ponting reignited the walking debate at the World Cup after admitting he stood his ground despite knowing he had been caught behind in his team's defeat to Pakistan.

Ponting had made 19 when he edged off-spinner Mohammad Hafeez to Kamran Akmal in Saturday's game at the R Premadasa Stadium.

When on-field umpire Marias Erasmus gave the Australian captain not out, the decision was reviewed and overturned.

Ponting admitted he knew he had edged the ball.

"There were no doubts about the nick, I knew I hit it, but as always I wait for the umpire to give me out. That's the way I've always played the game," he said.

Pakistan coach Waqar Younis said it would be a boost for the sport if players walked.

"It's nice to see people walking but that doesn't happen now I guess," said Waqar.

Ponting's admission came just a day after a similar controversy in Mumbai when Sri Lanka vice-captain Mahela Jayawardene and Kiwi off-spinner Nathan McCullum clashed over a 'clean' catch.

McCullum took a brilliant, one-handed diving catch off Jayawardene but TV umpire Amish Saheba was called in and he ruled it not out.

Afridi thanks bowlers

AFP, Colombo

Pakistan captain Shahid Afridi praised his bowlers for his side's momentous World Cup win over Australia, but admitted shamefacedly that he got out to an irresponsible shot in the run chase.

The defending champions were dismissed for just 176 in 46.4 overs with Brad Haddin top-scoring with 42 and it never looked enough despite a wobble from Pakistan, who slipped to 142-6 at one stage in their reply.

The result ends the defending champions' unbeaten 34-match World Cup run and means Pakistan capture top spot in Group A.

The bowling star for Pakistan in their four-wicket win was Umar Gul, who took three for 30 in 7.4 overs. Fellow paceman Abdul Razzaq took 2-8 in his four overs.

Umar Akmal then made an unbeaten 44 to see his side to victory.

"We made some good plans against these guys and I think the boys, they all stuck to the plans," said Afridi, thanking his bowlers for limiting Australia's batsmen.

"I think Gul and [Abdur] Rehman [1-34] started really well and all the bowlers did a great job and credit goes to the bowlers."

Questioned about his own dismissal, when he holed out to Brett Lee in the deep off Jason Krejza for two, Afridi held his hands up.

"Don't ask. That was an irresponsible shot as a captain at a stage like that."

Afridi was pleased to top the group, which means they will play the fourth-placed team in Group B but he said there were no weak sides in the tournament.

England, the no-go team

AFP, New Delhi



Ian Bell believes England's unpredictability means they are a side none of their rivals will want to face in the knockout stages of the World Cup.

England have been involved in several thrilling matches at the tournament. They tied with co-hosts India and beat a highly fancied South Africa yet lost to both Ireland and Bangladesh in the group stage.

And the Ashes-winners and World Twenty20 champions were on the brink of elimination from the World Cup when the West Indies, chasing 244 for victory, were 222 for six at Chennai's Chidambaram Stadium on Thursday.

Yet England took four wickets for three runs to stay in the tournament and now face a quarterfinal against either Sri Lanka or Pakistan.

"In the last 12-18 months, when we've had matches we've got to win we've come out well," England batsman Bell said on Sunday.

"I'm sure there are a lot of teams around that don't really want to play England -- because they don't quite know what they're going to get at the minute."

Bell admitted England had not played to their full potential at the World Cup but warned their best was yet to come.

"If we win all three matches, we'll be able to look back on one of the best (northern hemisphere) winters of all time," the 28-year-old said.

"Three games, and we can win a World Cup."

"It's been pretty incredible, tiring and a little bit frustrating that we haven't quite put it all together. We've played six games here and still haven't got it all right at the same time."

Bell said the Ashes winners had shown a huge desire to win their crunch match against the West Indies and believed they could beat anyone on their day.

Ever since England lost Kevin Pietersen to injury early in this tournament, Matt Prior has reverted to opening the innings alongside captain Andrew Strauss.

There are many who feel Bell, currently in at number four, would be a better option and he said: "One-day cricket is a great place to go up at the top of the order, with the field up."

"It's a good place to go out and bat, so I'd be really desperate to do that."

"But if I had to stay at four and keep to my role for the team, I'm happy to do that as well."

Bell, who has so far managed two fifties at this tournament, said: "I feel in great touch. But it's been hard work scrapping for runs coming in in the middle when it's been turning a lot."

"My role has been to play spin well, and it hasn't quite happened. But I still feel very confident about my game."

"I don't want to die wondering at this stage of the tournament. I want to be as positive as possible."



IAN BELL