

CORRUPTION IN CRICKET

AS OLD AS THE GAME ITSELF



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM: Mohammad Aamer throws down the no-ball of ignominy during the Test match against England in 2010; A photo of S Sreesanth is burned after his arrest for spot-fixing last month; and Mohammad Ashraful breaks down in tears after admitting to spot and match fixing earlier this month.



SAKEB SUBHAN

THE question should not be how betting came into cricket but how it has been kept out of the game for large stretches of time. In fact the now revered laws of cricket came into existence, in 1744, primarily as a means of maintaining uniformity of the sport and its rules in order to facilitate betting.

As unpalatable as it may sound in the current climate, a large part of cricket's growth into a professionally run sport owes to the practice of gambling. For much of its early existence cricket was a game for the English proletariat, but in the mid-17th century cricket emerged

mainly as a gambling sport, after gambling became legal in England in 1664. During that time coverage of cricket matches in the newspapers focused more on the betting aspects than on the play. It will surprise modern readers to know that the county sides cricket followers know so well are believed to have been formed by gamblers to further their chances of winning bets. In the 1730s there is documented evidence that the Prince of Wales and the Duke of Cumberland arranged matches for 500 guineas each.

Even then there was discontent that the sport was being tarnished by

commercial interference. In 1774 the Morning Chronicle noted that: "This sport too long has been perverted from diversion and innocent pastime to excessive gaming and public dissipation; cricket matches are now degenerated into business of importance."

Gambling is as old as the game itself, and so are gripes about the practice interfering with the sport. It does not take long to realise that if monetary considerations were the very creative force behind the game, then those very forces would attempt to influence the outcomes.

Fast forward to Test times, and there is a recorded instance of a match being disrupted because events on the field displeased the gamblers. In a match between England and New South Wales at the Sydney Cricket Ground in 1879, punters' favourite Billy Murdoch was run out and at the instigation of the gamblers there was a pitch invasion. The Sydney Morning Herald condemned the "impunity with which open betting was carried out in the pavilion" as NSW and Australia skipper Dave Gregory was accused of inciting the riot, reportedly refusing to send out a new batsman on the insistence of the gamblers.

On the next tour by England, the visiting team were given the long odds of 30-1 of beating Victoria in a tour game -- the odds suggesting that the bookmakers were unduly confident of an international side being beaten by the domestic one. Three English players were allegedly offered hundreds of pounds to throw the match, and the story goes that when they tried to rope in a teammate he spilled the beans to skipper Alfred Shaw, which in turn resulted in a dressing-room punch-up. For his part, Shaw placed money on England and made a small fortune when his side won.

But perhaps the title of 'forefather' to modern cricket crime would sit well on Surrey wicketkeeper Ted Pooley. In 1873 he was the first man to be suspended from cricket because of gambling -- namely betting in a match against Yorkshire in which he was taking part.

Yorkshire won the game in which Pooley scored 10 and 0 and took only one catch.

There were to be more indiscretions in his future, eventually leading to his incarceration in Christchurch in 1876. After being sidelined from a match against Canterbury XVIII in the New Zealand leg of the tour of Australia, Pooley stood in as umpire for the match. Pooley bet a shilling on each Canterbury batsman registering a duck -- eleven of them did, and it can only be assumed that Pooley helped the process from his privileged position as an umpire. It seems that Nadir Shah's misdeeds had a precedent going back 136 years. The man he wagered with refused to pay him the 36 pounds which led to a scuffle and eventually to assault charges, resulting in the wicketkeeper missing out on what would be the first ever Test match in nearby Australia.

After 1900 gambling related cricket crime was all but ironed out through strong leadership in England and Australia, and the fact that cricket graduated from a gambling exercise to a sport of some prestige. Even so, Australia skipper Herbie Collins was accused of fixing a Test in 1925.

There have been known instances of cricketers thereafter placing bets on matches they were participating in. Dennis Lillee of Australia, on the 1972 Ashes tour, pooled his teammates' money and bet on Australia taking five wickets before lunch in a county game. Australia took six, and Lillee was horrified to learn that the bet was for exactly five wickets. In the Headingly Test in 1981, Lillee and Rod Marsh bet on England when the odds were stacked against England to the tune of 500 to 1. England all-rounder Ian Botham went on to put in a defining performance and England won a thriller by 18 runs after following on.

Cricket's current corruption crisis in the IPL and BPL is not a new challenge; it is much like the one faced by Australia and England in 1900, and it will be interesting to see how a much more diverse cricket world responds this time.

Betting in BANGLADESH

While it is true that in cricket's current crisis bookmakers from India and Pakistan play a sordid role, it would be naïve to assume that betting on sports is not present in Bangladesh. Betting on the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) T20 was seen to be rife in the first edition, with a betting ring in Sirajganj taking bets over the phone from punters all over the country. It was mostly match results that were wagered upon for the BPL, but spread betting was prevalent too. Spread betting is a form that has bettors placing money on smaller outcomes within a cricket match -- how many runs will come in a particular over, how many wickets a particular bowler will take, etc. It is spread-betting from which the practice of spot-fixing takes form.

While betting is still seen as not much more than a pastime for the financially adventurous, there are certain exclusive groups who take it very seriously, placing bets of more than Tk 10,000 at a time on outcomes of matches and spread-bets alike.

More than the BPL, the biggest windfall for the person organising the bets -- who generally takes a 15 per cent cut -- comes during the Indian Premier League (IPL). Widely televised sporting events like the Spanish La Liga and the English Premier League also attract gamblers, but are not nearly as lucrative as cricket matches.

There is also a much more basic and therefore pervasive form of betting that goes on whether it is a first, second or third division match. These bettors can be seen most commonly at the Dhaka University Cricket Ground. For them, the match is secondary to the activity of placing bets on small outcomes of the game in progress.

They are mostly lungi-clad commoners who take great joy in placing myriad bets on a single match. Near the end of the match they place bets on the result, but they are completely impartial in their betting, as the sport for them is the betting itself and not the game of cricket.

They are a throwback to times when the sport emerged as an adjunct to the addictive habit of gambling. They also provide a window into how betting leads to fixing, as they sometimes sneak behind fielders positioned at the boundary to tell them to let some balls go or tell bowlers to bowl badly in order to further their monetary cause.

This report is a condensation of two earlier reports written by Mohammad Isam for The Daily Star on September 3, 2010 and April 14, 2012.

Match-fixing might seem like a new issue in Bangladesh, but as our very own secret cricketer reveals in this intriguing first person account, it is prevalent in local cricket.



I played in a fixed game

In 2008, I was playing Premier League cricket for a smallish club with modest ambitions. During the end of that season, we were playing against one of the giants of Bangladesh sport, who were still in with a chance of winning the title, while we were almost in no-man's land. It was the first time I played in a fixed game.

Usually preparations before playing against such a big team would be meticulous and organized. This time though, we were asked to report to the field almost an hour after normal. If that piqued my interest, what aroused suspicions was the laid-back nature of preparations. There were no warm-up sessions or training drills and we were advised to just relax. Even the toss was fishy. We usually batted first, but in that game the captain surprisingly chose to field first. Our premium fast bowler usually had good line and length and was playing a feisty season. In this game, he kept serving up half-volleys and full-tosses to the batsmen. Even more interestingly, our wicketkeeper, usually so reliable, dropped three cast-iron chances. By the time the innings ended, the opposition had scored 240 and my suspicions were overflowing.

It turned definitive during our innings. We lost a few wickets early, but as opener I stood firm and kept the score ticking over to the end that a victory did not seem impossible. But at the fall of the third wicket, a senior player came in and completely changed the momentum. He blocked half-volleys, rejected singles, and showed no urgency whatsoever. By the time he was out, the match was over and I was left with a bitter feeling. I knew that I had experienced my first taste of corruption in cricket.

Over the next few years, I learned how these things happen.

The architects are not the players but the officials on the field. And it usually happens at the end of the season when the bigger teams have to win. When playing against sides like the side I played for four years ago, officials of these bigger sides have a backroom arrangement with their counterparts.

On the field, four players in the officials' pockets are enough to pull off a successful heist. Generally these four are made up of the captain, the wicketkeeper, a senior batsman and a pace bowler. Although it's hard to say for sure, the amount handed under the table is usually in the region of Tk 5 lakh, only a bit of which filters through to the complicit players. For example, the captain may get up to Tk 50 thousand. Captains of the lesser sides generally earn about Tk 2-3 lakh per season, so a payday of as much as one-fourth that amount is understandably tempting.

The Secret Cricketer has played in the Premier League and age-group cricket for Bangladesh.



TIMELINE OF SHAME

DECEMBER, 1998

Journalist Malcolm Conn of The Australian uncovers the story of how star players Mark Waugh and Shane Warne had accepted money from a bookmaker in return for providing pitch and weather information.

APRIL, 2000

South Africa's Hansie Cronje, and several other Proteas players are charged by the Delhi police for fixing South

Africa's ODIs against India in March for money. Cronje later confesses.

MAY, 2000

Pakistan players Saleem Malik and medium-pacer Ata-ur-Rehman were found guilty of fixing matches by a report prepared by Justice Malik Mohammad Qayyum. These players were hence banned for life.

NOVEMBER, 2000

India skipper Mohammad

Azharuddin was found guilty of match-fixing, while Ajay Jadeja, Manoj Prabhakar, Ajay Sharma were found guilty of having links with bookies.

MAY, 2008

West Indies batsman Marlon Samuels was banned for two years for allegedly passing on match-related information to an Indian bookie during West Indies' ODI series in India in 2007.

AUGUST, 2010

Rajasthan Royals pace

Bookie Mazhar Majeed revealed in a sting operation by British tabloid News of the World that he bribed Pakistan bowlers to bowl no-balls on demand during the fourth Test against England at Lord's.

Skipper Salman Butt, pacers Mohammad Asif and Mohammad Aamir were all given varied bans and faced criminal charges.

MAY, 2013

Rajasthan Royals pace

spearhead S Sreesanth and two other players -- Ankeet Chavan and Ajit Chandila -- were arrested on charges of spot-fixing.

JUNE, 2013

Bangladesh batsman Mohammad Ashraful admits that he was involved in spot and match-fixing during the Bangladesh Premier League.

WHAT IS SPOT-FIXING?

Spot-fixing refers to an illegal activity within sport where a

specific part of a game is fixed. This can be something as minor as the timing of a no-ball or wide delivery in cricket or the timing of the first throw-in or corner in football.

SPOT-FIXING SIGNALS

1. Rotate your wrist watch
2. Pull your T-shirt up and down
3. Time wasting by trying to set the field
4. Tuck a towel into your pants
5. Remove your chain or locket