

A deep-rooted malaise that must be cured

BISHWAJIT ROY

Spinner Sanjit Saha was suspended for an illegal bowling action during the ICC Under-19 World Cup in January this year and the loss of an important bowler was a big blow for the Bangladesh team. That saga was however forgotten, but now the topic of illegal bowling actions is on everyone's lips after Arafat Sunny and Taskin Ahmed's suspension for the same reason has seriously hampered Bangladesh's ICC World Twenty20 campaign in India.

Ask Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, it's simply unbearable. The suspension of Taskin has engendered a lot of protest and wringing of hands, from the cricket community both home and abroad. There was however hardly anybody who raised a question about Sunny's suspension. There will be enough time to discuss the International Cricket Council's (ICC's) process regarding the reporting of and judgement of illegal actions, but perhaps it is time to look deep into our own cricketing culture and whether it sets up sufficient deterrents to keep young bowlers from developing bad bowling habits. Unfortunately, an examination of our

domestic cricket reveals that far from being discouraged, bowlers with improper actions are actually encouraged.

"Everybody knows what is happening in the domestic scene. There are huge numbers of bowlers who simply throw the ball. Chucking has spread like cancer. There are some rules but it's not for implementation. You even find some teams who possess three left-arm spinners with suspect actions," said former cricketer cum club official Tanjeeb Ahsan Saad.

Umpire Nadir Shah has long been officiating matches at deferent levels and he has had a bitter experience regarding this issue. "If I am not wrong, we the umpires had submitted a long list, maybe in the year 2003 or 2004, and asked the officials to look into those suspect bowlers but nothing has come of it. It is very sad that we lost bowlers in the middle of such a big tournament but it's the consequence of our bad domestic culture regarding illegal bowling. I have seen lot of bowlers whose actions were illegal even viewed with the naked eye. Some may have even crossed the 50-degree mark [the ICC tolerates a maximum of 15 degrees of elbow flex], but they continue playing.

"It has been happening for a long time but we have to stop it," continued Nadir Shah.

Another umpire and former national pacer, Anisur Rahman, has had the same experience. "Our duty is to give the report on suspect bowling and we submitted a lot but eventually saw those bowlers continue bowling in the same manner. Everybody knows what is happening and it is no secret," said Anisur.

Former left-arm spinner turned cricket writer Mohammad Isam also portrayed a sordid picture. "There is a shadow encouragement for illegal bowling in the domestic leagues; that is the reality. From my personal experience what I have seen is that some club officials encourage the bowlers to take the advantage. And nothing has changed in domestic cricket but there are some bold initiatives in the age-group levels. Everybody is actually relaxed regarding the issue of illegal bowling actions."

On condition of anonymity an umpire who officiates in second division and first division matches said: "Sometimes we don't dare give any report because we don't want to go against the powerful officials. Now, many umpires are not interested to do their duty as they know it will bring no result."

Another umpire quipped: "Brother, I gave reports against a bowler several times for his suspect bowling action in domestic cricket but nothing has happened. Instead that bowler, now an international player,

teased me saying 'you may have reported me but see, I'm still playing top-level cricket without any problem.'"

And thus the umpires became fed up.

A former cricketer on condition of anonymity revealed that an established spinner once advised him to wear full-sleeved shirts to avoid detection, and that underlines the extent of the malaise of illegal bowling in the country.

Sharif Mahmud Palash, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) umpire's manager, also has no idea about what happens after they submit the report of the umpires to the respective committees that run different domestic competitions.

There have been whispers over the bowling action of young spinner Sanjit but still he made the cut for the World Cup team. "Yes, there are problems in domestic leagues and a bad culture has developed but in age levels everything is scrutinised. I think the Sanjit case is an exception. We didn't learn anything before he was reported during the world cup. And you cannot always reach conclusions after watching something with the naked eye and we don't have labs where we can check it," said former national player turned junior selector Ehsanul Haque.

Nazmul Abedin Fahim, the national game development manager, echoed

this sentiment but said that the time has come to change the culture. "I think everybody now can understand what consequence we will face if we don't change our culture. We don't have time to waste and we should give the message to all levels that there is no place for illegal action. There are two aspects -- we should create a new culture in our domestic cricket and we should improve technologically and I am sure the board [BCB] will do everything to deal with this new challenge."

National selector Habibul Bashar also asked for a new beginning. "It's not as if we are the only country who are facing this kind of problem but many countries have already started to identify the suspect bowlers in their domestic competitions after ICC's recent crackdown. We should come out from our age-old practices and show respect to the umpires' reports. The umpires should have the freedom for the greater interest of our cricket. I talked with [former India batsman] Rahul Dravid during the Under-19 World Cup regarding this issue and we thought that the ICC and the respective boards should take the initiative from the early stage so that one can pursue another profession if he is not fit."

There is a review committee but it's non-functioning. More than two years

ago the umpires committee gave a proposal to the board regarding how they can deal with this problem, but the board high-ups did not take any action.

BCB CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury however promised a solution this time. "Yes, now we are regularly facing this kind of problem as our bowlers have been suspended at a crucial time, so we must take initiatives regarding this issue. We don't think it would be wise to make a routine committee to deal with this matter; rather we are in the process of making an effective review committee and setting up a system so that we can create a new culture."

The club officials' involvement with the board always creates problems in solving this kind of issue. When Chowdhury's attention was drawn regarding this issue, he diplomatically said: "This is the right time for us to do something effective and I believe nobody will try to oppose it."

Time will only tell whether he will be able to bell the cat or whether he will come up with the same old diplomatic answer if the problem persists but we must create a cricketing culture where one should not encourage an illegal practice to gain an unfair advantage. Otherwise such disappointments on the world stage will keep happening.

Booters up against Jordan today

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh national football team will be looking to better their performance against Jordan as they play their last match of the World Cup qualifiers at the Amman International Stadium today.

The match, which begins at 6:30pm (Bangladesh standard time), is virtually a dead rubber for the visitors, who lie at the bottom of the five-team Group B with one point from seven matches. Bangladesh have little to lose apart from pride and they would be looking to salvage some of that after their disappointing campaigns in SAFF Suzuki Cup and Bangabandhu Gold Cup.

Already out of reckoning for qualification, Bangladesh were hit by bans to some of their key players, and a 1-6 drubbing at the hands of United Arab Emirates in an international friendly last week didn't help their confidence at all.

Jordan, on the other hand, are desperate to make it to the 12-team final round of the qualifiers, and they have appointed former Tottenham Hotspur and West Ham United

coach Harry Redknapp to achieve that target.

Jordan, who handed a 4-0 defeat to Bangladesh in the first leg match in Dhaka last year, are on 13 points from six matches, and sit just two points behind group leaders Australia, who they will take on on March 29.

At the official pre-match press conference yesterday, Redknapp stressed on the importance of winning both matches and asked his players to give their best.

"I don't underestimate anybody, we have to beat Bangladesh first and then prepare for the Australia game. In football you can never take anything for granted! We have to prepare for the Bangladesh game like we are playing against Australia," Redknapp told reporters.

Admitting the supremacy of Jordan, Bangladesh coach Ganzalo Sanchez Moreno said: "Bangladesh need to play serious and hard match as Jordan are a very strong team."

"Though we had a bad performance against a strong UAE side, we want to play a good game against Jordan and we are ready to give our hundred percent against Jordan who are a strong side too," said captain Rezaul Karim, who will be playing his first match of the qualifiers.

Brussels tie moved to Portugal

REUTERS, Brussels

A friendly international between Belgium and Portugal has been moved to Portugal from Brussels over security fears after Tuesday's Islamic State attacks in the Belgian capital.

The Belgian football association said the match would be played instead in the Portuguese city of Leiria on Tuesday at 19:45 GMT, the same time and date as originally scheduled.

The move came a day after the triple blasts that killed some 30 people and left around 250 injured.

Earlier, a communication from the Belgian Football Union had said: "For security reasons and also as a measure of precaution, the Brussels City hall asked us to cancelled the March 29 home game with Portugal."

The move came a day after the triple blasts that killed some 30 people and left around 250 injured.



(L-R) Ezequiel Lavezzi, Angel Di Maria, Lionel Messi and Javier Mascherano take part in a training session in Ezeiza, Buenos Aires on Tuesday, ahead of Thursday's World Cup qualifier against Chile. PHOTO: AFP

Messi, Suarez return for qualifiers

AFP, Montevideo

Barcelona teammates Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez will make a long-awaited return to World Cup duty this week when South America's marathon qualifying competition for the 2018 finals in Russia resumes.

Suarez has not kicked a ball for Uruguay since he was slapped with a global ban after chomping on the shoulder of Italy defender Giorgio Chiellini at the 2014 World Cup finals in Brazil.

Messi meanwhile missed the opening four matches of Argentina's 2018 qualifying campaign earlier this season after suffering a knee injury while on club duty for Barcelona in September.

The five-time FIFA World Player of the Year could not be returning at a better time for Argentina, who face a demanding trip to Santiago on Thursday to face reigning champions Chile in a rematch of the Copa America final.

Argentina made a shaky start to qualifying, suffering a shock home defeat against Ecuador in October, before draws against Paraguay and Brazil.

However the 2014 World Cup runners-up breathed life into their campaign with a 1-0 away win against Colombia in November, a crucial victory that lifted them from near the bottom of the table to within striking distance of the automatic qualifying positions.

Messi's return however has been offset by a wave of injuries that has deprived Argentina coach Gerardo "Tata" Martino of a slew of foreign-based stars, most notably Juventus's in-form striker Paulo Dybala, Paris Saint-Germain's Javier Pastore and Benfica's Nicolas Gaitan.

With Carlos Tevez dropped, Martino has turned to unheralded Argentina-based forward Lanus to bolster his attacking

options for Thursday's clash.

The 28-year-old was a team-mate of Messi's in the Argentina squad that won the gold medal at the 2008 Olympics but is yet to win his first full international cap for the two-time World Cup winners.

Argentina will face a Chile side more or less at full strength, with Bayern Munich midfielder Arturo Vidal (suspension) the only significant absentee.

Arsenal's Alexis Sanchez, Barcelona goalkeeper Claudio Bravo and Inter Milan's Gary Medel are all available for newly appointed Chile coach Juan Antonio Pizzi, who took over in January following the abrupt resignation of Jorge Sampaoli, the Argentine who masterminded Chile's Copa America triumph.

Uruguay striker Suarez meanwhile is relishing the prospect of being reunited with his international team-mates for the first time in nearly two years when La Celeste travel to Recife to take on Brazil on Friday.

"Obviously after a long time without seeing them (Uruguay team mates and staff) it will be a strange feeling, but there is also the pleasure of seeing them all again. I haven't seen them for nearly two years," Suarez told Spanish newspaper El Pais in a recent interview.

"There is pleasure and satisfaction that (the ban) is all over and now I can enjoy being with them again," added the 29-year-old, who has scored 37 goals in all competitions for Barcelona this season.

Suarez meanwhile said Uruguay's solid start to qualifying -- three wins in four games -- showed that the team were more than a one-man band.

"I am quite calm because these days the national team works as a group, it is not about the individual," he said.

"I am just going to work together and do my little bit for what Uruguay is doing in these qualifiers. I am not under any pressure, on the contrary I am just there to contribute what I can with my football."

Busquets to miss Spain friendlies

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona midfielder Sergio Busquets on Tuesday withdrew from the Spain squad for upcoming friendlies against Italy and Romania with a hand injury.

The 27-year-old had played wearing a cast in his past two matches for Barcelona, with his departure from the Spain squad announced on the national team's official website.

"Two weeks ago, Sergio Busquets suffered a fracture and dislocation to a finger on his right hand," said the head of Spain's medical staff, Oscar Luis Celada, in a video post.

"We were aware of the injury and given the tests recently carried out and taking into account that they're two friendlies, we think pulling (him) out of the team camp maximises any chance of preventing a relapse," the doctor added.

Busquets didn't train with the rest of the team on Monday and will not be replaced in the squad by Spain coach Vicente Del Bosque.

The two-time defending European champions face Italy in Udine on Thursday before travelling to Cluj to play Romania on Sunday as they step up preparations for Euro 2016 in France.

'Capello safest for Italy'

GOAL.COM



Fabio Capello is the safest and best qualified option to replace Antonio Conte as Italy head coach after Euro 2016, according to Mauro Tassotti.

The former Milan and Italy defender feels 69-year-old Capello -- who coached England and Russia at international level, while being known for his club spells at Real Madrid, Juventus, Milan and Roma -- would be a sound selection.

"I do not know what the choice can be, however if you want to play safe, there is

Fabio Capello," he told Omnisport.

"Capello is available, without a team and nobody would have more credentials than him to manage the national team.

"The decision is up to the Italian Federation. I believe there are a lot of managers that could take over. There are rumours about Capello, or [Torino boss] Giampiero Ventura, I do not know.

"I believe though we have several coaches that can lead the national team. It depends if the Federation wants a younger coach, or someone coming from the Federation itself, like Luigi Di Biagio, who is in charge of the Under-21s."



STAR ECONOMICAL BOWLER: Liam Plunkett bowled a crucial spell of none for 12 as England defended a low total of 142 against Afghanistan in New Delhi yesterday.

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