

# SPORT

## NON CONFORMIST BLOCKBUSTER conserves charm

KHALID HOSSAIN

Bob Woolmer, the late South African coach renowned for his cricketing insights and innovation, once said, "Football is a game of space, whereas cricket is a game of time," in his book 'The Art and Science of Cricket', shedding light on the trials and tribulations a cricketer goes through on the battlefield.

Woolmer's book, a decade in the making and published in 2009, emerged at a time when the shortest format of the game – Twenty20, designed to draw a wider range of audiences for the sake of making cricket a global sport – had already found its footing and threatened the status quo of its elder siblings – Tests and the 50-over format – in terms of mass appeal.

Much like how fast food has surpassed fine dining in popularity in this millennium, the intimidating T20 cricket proved to be an unstoppable force as the cash-rich franchise leagues reshaped the sports' landscape, leading the game's global governing body ICC to hold the T20 World Cup in every two years.

Eventually, when it came to the 20-over format, cricket matches became less and less about the element of time and more about the initial conditions: the nature of surfaces, playing conditions, which had become predominantly batting friendly, and about the number of power-hitters a team possess.

However, the ninth edition of the T20 World Cup, an expanded version featuring 20 teams from the last edition's 16, disproved the existing consensus and went on to preserve the timeless charm of the game.

At the same time, the 2024 instalment churned out almost everything



that makes it an undeniable blockbuster, meeting the ever-increasing demands of modern times.

From even contests between the leather and willow, negating extrapolations made from recent performances in major franchise leagues, to perennial underachievers and minnows having their moment in the sun, the marquee event held in West Indies and the USA has ticked all the boxes for a truly memorable global tournament.

The associate teams disproved the notion of being pushovers, as former champions Pakistan and England found out.

Pakistan fell prey to the USA in one of the greatest upsets in the history of the tournament, setting the ominous tone of the last edition's finalists' eventual exit. On the other hand, England were forced to edge past a driven Scotland in the group stage based on net run rate.

And even Nepal, devoid of any expectation, almost pulled off the highly

improbable, losing to South Africa and Bangladesh by a whisker, whereas teams like Namibia and Oman made their mark by locking horns in a Super Over thriller, one of the seven final-over nail-biters witnessed in the group stage.

USA, meanwhile, en route to amping up cricket's fan following in the country, remained hungry for more as they cemented further history by entering the second round – the Super Eights – in their maiden appearance, setting the narrative for one of the fairytale triumphs of the mega event.

Even though fellow hosts West Indies could not make the cut to the semifinals, they would be pleased to give their fans the impression that the two-time champions are on the right track, especially following a string of debacles in the preceding white-ball World Cups.

The team that accompanied the West Indies in the Super Eights were Afghanistan, who created their own fairytale chapter. Defying odds, Afghans first scripted New Zealand's exit and then set the Super Eights alight by taking down the mighty Australia before holding their nerves against Bangladesh in two World Cup classics.

Afghanistan's triumphant run was eventually cut short by South Africa, who shrugged off the tag of 'Chokers' to land a coveted place in the final – a first for the Proteas after being on the receiving end of seven excruciating exits in the last four stages.

As far as individual glories are concerned, elite superstars like Australia's swashbuckling opener Travis Head, India's pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah and opener Rohit

Sharma, among others, lived up to their reputations while promising talents were unearthed in Bangladesh's leggie Rishad Hossain, pacer Tanzim Sakib, et al. Rishad was the joint third in the wicket-taker's column before the final, a list that features an almost even mix of pacers and spinners in the top 15.

Last but not the least, the 29-day tournament verified the notion that an international competition is a completely different beast, in terms of the challenges it presents, compared to what franchise leagues keep dishing out.

Case in point, the influence of the latest edition of Indian Premier League (IPL), which made way to a bunch of 200-

- Expanded World Cup lives up to billing
- Minnows and hosts get boost
- Perennial underachievers flip script
- Thrillers in abundance
- Superstars shine, promising talents leave trace
- Pacers and spinners grab spotlight in tandem
- IPL expectations did not match

plus scores, did not go onto set the tone in the USA and West Indies by any means. Prior to Saturday's final, this edition saw only four 200-plus totals in 54 matches – three of which materialising in Saint Lucia – while 175-plus totals were achieved 16 times.

Negating the IPL narrative further, Virat Kohli, who had been IPL 2024's highest run-scorer, limped the entire tournament up until he got his bearings right in the final, while a struggling Hardik Pandya rekindled his form in every department. Like Pandya, his IPL teammates in Suryakumar Yadav, Rohit and Bumrah from bottom dwellers Mumbai Indians, who ended the campaign at rock bottom, were unfazed in national colours.

All in all, this T20 World Cup will go down in the memory lane as an unforgettable one that refused to play by conformism, and yet it captivated audiences worldwide like never before.

### What to WATCH

**T SPORTS**  
Euros  
England vs Slovakia  
Live from 10:00 pm  
Spain vs Georgia  
Live from 1:00 am  
(Monday)

**T SPORTS AND SONY SPORTS 2**  
Copa America  
Mexico vs Ecuador  
Live from 6:00 am (Monday)  
Jamaica vs Venezuela  
Live from 6:00 am (Monday)

## 'Most open Wimbledon in 20 years'

AFP, London

Alexander Zverev placed himself amongst the serious contenders for the Wimbledon title on Saturday, insisting that this year's showpiece "is the most open in 20 years".



The world number four has never got past the last 16 at the All England Club.

However, with Roger Federer retired, Rafael Nadal resting and both Novak Djokovic and Andy Murray carrying injuries, the 27-year-old predicts a power vacuum in south-west London.

"I think this is the most open Wimbledon Championship that we maybe had in 20 years in terms of favourites, in terms of potential winners," said Zverev.

"I think there's multiple guys who have a very decent chance of going deep and winning the tournament.

Since Lleyton Hewitt claimed the 2002 Wimbledon title, the tournament was dominated by Federer (eight titles), Djokovic (seven), Nadal (two) and Murray (two). Carlos Alcaraz's victory over Djokovic in the 2023 championship match finally broke the 'Big Four' stranglehold.

"It's the first time I really feel like I'm here to be a competitor, to maybe win the title," said Zverev. "I didn't feel like that previous years when I came here. I didn't feel like I was capable. I didn't believe I was capable."

Zverev has suffered two heart-breaking defeats in Grand Slam finals.

At the 2020 US Open, he surrendered a two sets lead against Dominic Thiem while at this year's French Open, he slipped to a five-set loss to Alcaraz from two sets to one up.

His two fourth round losses at Wimbledon were also five-setters against Milos Raonic in 2017 and Felix Auger-Aliassime in 2023.

"This is a tournament where maybe I need a bit more luck and maybe a few things to go my way, a few things to happen," he added.

"More than maybe at other Grand Slams. If those things all come into place, if all those things maybe go my way for once, do I believe I can win? Then yes, I can."



**UAE Team Emirates' Slovenian rider Tadej Pogacar, tipped to win the title this year, cycles with a teammate during the team presentation for the 111th edition of the Tour de France, on Piazzale Michelangelo overlooking the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore dominating the skyline in Florence in Italy yesterday. Pogacar is gunning for a historic Giro-Tour double, while champion Jonas Vingegaard of Colombia is seeking a third straight title.**

PHOTO: REUTERS

## 'Georgia have already won the Euros'

AFP

Georgia coach Willy Sagnol insisted the rank outsiders would go into Sunday's Euro 2024 clash with Spain in relaxed mood having already far exceeded expectations by making it to the last 16.

"We will go into this game with a lot of confidence because we have absolutely nothing to lose. For me, we have already won the European Championship and I am just excited to be on the pitch," Sagnol told reporters in Cologne, where Sunday's game will be played.

Georgia are appearing at a major tournament for the first time and made it to the knockout phase with a remarkable 2-0 win over Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal in their last group match on Wednesday.

That followed a 3-1 loss to Turkey and a 1-1 draw with the Czech Republic and allowed them to progress from Group F as one of the best third-placed finishers.

However, all the evidence suggests their run will come to an end against a Spain side who have been the most impressive team so far at the tournament, winning all three group games.

Georgia have played Spain four times since Frenchman Sagnol was appointed coach in early 2021, and have lost all four meetings.

They went down twice in the 2022 World Cup qualifiers, and then lost twice more in qualifying for this competition.

That included a chastening 7-1 reverse at home in Tbilisi last September.

Much like their 16-year-old starlet Lamine Yamal who recently passed the country's compulsory end of secondary school exams, Spainaced their "group of death" examination, overcoming Croatia, Italy and Albania to finish the opening phase with a 100 percent record and three clean sheets.

No other team managed either feat and after Spain came into the tournament without the favourites tag worn by France and England, now

many are starting to believe in La Roja.

Lamal acknowledged that Spain's dominance so far in the tournament would mean nothing if they slipped against Georgia.

"Everything we've done in the group phase serves for nothing if on Sunday they knock us out," warned Yamal.

"We have played against them before, but we know that it won't be the same game."

As recently as the 2022 World Cup, Spain enjoyed high possession but badly lacked cutting edge in attack, which with Yamal and his left-wing counterpart Nico Williams, now they have in abundance.

"When you have wingers like that, it makes the other team worry about them," Spain defender Alejandro Grimaldo told AFP.

"They create you advantages in every moment because in one-on-one battles they are unstoppable.

"They give the national team this ability to be direct and put a fear factor into any attack."



**England forwards Harry Kane and Phil Foden will look to find their shooting boots in their Round of 16 European Championship encounter against Slovakia in Gelsenkirchen today. England captain Kane, the country's all-time highest scorer, has netted one in the tournament but has largely remained toothless much like Foden who has been entirely ineffective down the left flank so far. Meanwhile, Cole Palmer's impressive cameo in England's last group game against Slovenia might earn him a spot in the eleven.**

PHOTO: REUTERS