

Can academia learn from cricket?

Dr Syed Saad Andaleeb
is distinguished professor emeritus at Pennsylvania State University and former vice-chancellor of BRAC University.

Yousuf Rezaur Rahman, also known as Yousuf Babu,
is a former Bangladesh cricketer. He is the first to score a century for Bangladesh in international cricket.

**SYED SAAD ANDALEEB and
YOUSUF REZAUR RAHMAN**

At first glance, the world of academia and the game of cricket may seem as different as night and day. One portrays the serious ethos of sombre lecture theatres, hushed libraries and active research labs; the other reflects an exciting game where, if you're lucky, you might be in for a treat to see a fielder juggling a ball at the boundary line, dancing in and out of the field to make that miraculous catch.

Both academia and cricket are enriched by distinct personalities whose commitment and craft are widely celebrated. In both domains, we find the data-obsessed statisticians meticulously tracking H-indexes or citations and batting averages or dot balls that measure excellence. Then there are the unorthodox innovators, like the unconventional researchers or bowlers who challenge the norms and produce unusual results. We sometimes experience the mavericks whose boundary-pushing ideas challenge the status quo, or the dedicated mentors who invest in future generations, fostering intellectual or athletic growth.

Deep down, in both arenas, there are a great number of similar themes: leadership, discipline, resilience, teamwork, moral standing, courage, and innovativeness to thrive, among other traits. If you're ready,

departmental goals; they must rally their team under a unifying strategy, keeping morale high while leading the way towards a larger vision.

Discipline and strategy

The hours cricketers spend perfecting technique would impress even the most

While research today is often solo-centred, a stronger emphasis on collaboration could lead to breakthroughs that are otherwise beyond reach. The mutual respect and collaboration needed in academia are often missing. I have wondered why classrooms are taught by a single teacher. Why not invite a second teacher—perhaps someone from

the broken-hearted rejects from those who publish milestone papers. Sometimes there's a need for dogged determination in the face of adversity. In a 1963 Test match, English cricketer Colin Cowdrey's arm was broken from a turbo-charged delivery by Wesley Hall of the West Indies. Yet, in the second innings, when the ninth wicket fell, Cowdrey came in

took a few notes from cricket mentors, like displaying a bit of patience and empathy, early-career researchers might feel a bit more encouraged to "play their game" with confidence.

Embracing diversity

In cricket, success comes from a diversity of skills. Each team combines batters, bowlers and fielders to form a unit, recognising the importance of each role. This diversity makes teams resilient, capable of handling different conditions and opponents. Academia, too, could benefit from valuing varied expertise. Rather than relying on just a few "star players," academia could achieve more by embracing those who specialise in different methods or fields.

When English cricket legend Geoffrey Boycott was criticised for his slow scoring, he responded, "I'm not here to entertain you; I'm here to get runs." Boycott knew his role: to be a reliable constant for his team. Similarly, academia could benefit by understanding the diverse perspectives and strengths of each individual, recognising that each skill, however different, is essential for collective success.

Lessons from the field to the academy

So, can academia learn from cricket? Absolutely. Cricket's emphasis on vision, leadership, teamwork, discipline, moral and ethical footing, courage, and innovation provides academia with a new playbook for success. Just as cricketers rely on each other to achieve greatness, academia, too, can thrive based on its diverse traits—collectively.

Constant effort in sports "brings essential fitness principles such as speed, agility, strength, flexibility, stamina, and skill, applicable at both amateur and professional levels." Similarly, cultivating crucial mental, methodological, and pedagogical skills is necessary for academia to achieve the desired results. But, as the late John Wooden, the celebrated basketball coach at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), stated, "I always stress condition with my players. [But] I don't mean physical condition only. You cannot attain and maintain physical condition unless you are morally and mentally conditioned." Are academics listening?

At the end of the day, both cricket and academia remind us that every match, every research paper, every innings, and every research presentation is a part of a larger journey. By drawing on the best qualities of cricket, academia can foster an environment where success isn't just about individual achievement but about moving forward, patiently, as a goal-directed, dynamic and united team. When they achieve their academic goals, they too can celebrate with the same joy that fills a cricket stadium after a hard-fought win. One might even extend the above ideas to nation-building. That means our present student leaders and the interim government may also pick up a few pointers from vaunted cricketers playing on an uncertain pitch, inclement weather, and with unruly players—within the team, as well as in the opposition.

This article draws upon Yousuf Babu's insightful book Sentimental Journey (April 2002).



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

Much like the five-day Test matches in cricket, academia must value patience, discipline, and stamina. While a cricketer might get accolades for a hard-hit six, academics receive the subtle thrill of knowing their paper is accepted for publication, followed by the nod of peers and administrative compliments.

let's pad up, wear a helmet, and explore what academia can learn from cricket's playbook.

Leadership and vision

Cricket captains have the unenviable task of leading a team through countless ups and downs, taking responsibility for each game. A classic example of quality leadership is recorded in cricketing history after Pakistan, inspired by Imran Khan, won the ICC World Cup in 1992. An average team that lost three out of the first five matches at the initial phase of the tournament came out strong when it mattered. After barely scraping through to the semifinals, Imran led his team to a victory that no one expected.

Like cricket captains, academic leaders must juggle departments, budgets, difficult egos and, sometimes, huge expectations. Like captains, academic leaders must also constantly navigate the delicate balance between individual faculty needs and

dedicated academic. "Little Master" Sachin Tendulkar spent countless hours honing his batting skills, which made him one of the greatest batters in cricket history. Great academics, too, spend countless hours, digging deep and perfecting teaching and research skills, in long continuous caffeine-fuelled training sessions.

Much like the five-day Test matches in cricket, academia must value patience, discipline, and stamina. While a cricketer might get accolades for a hard-hit six, academics receive the subtle thrill of knowing their paper is accepted for publication, followed by the nod of peers and administrative compliments. The discipline it takes to keep improving year after year is something both cricketers and academics share. And, if nothing else, that delayed gratification is the prelude for a match-winning mindset.

Teamwork and collaboration

Rahul Dravid and VVS Laxman's legendary 376-run stand in Kolkata Test against Australia in 2001 turned an impossible game around, helping India towards an unforgettable victory. This type of partnership is a rare, beautiful thing. Academia could truly benefit from the team spirit that is seen in cricket. Paul Samuelson and Robert Solow collaborated extensively on macroeconomic theory and policy, which led to the discovery of the Phillips Curve with implications for policy. James Watson and Francis Crick worked to discover the double-helix structure of DNA with far-reaching implications in genetics, medicine, and other fields.

another discipline? Such experiments could bring a new dimension of collaboration, delivering far greater insights for students than the isolated antics of the "lone genius" pursuing ancient pedagogical theatrics.

Courage and perseverance

Every cricketer has faced their share of failure. Former Indian cricketer Virender Sehwag was famous for his aggressive batting style, but it came with its ups and downs. To deal with setbacks, he humorously remarked, "I have two shots for every ball: one to hit it and one to get out." This self-deprecating humour endeared him to fans and helped him maintain a positive outlook even during tough times. Similarly, when interviewed after a fascinating and successful Ashes away campaign, Alastair Cook, the former captain and opening batter of England who scored 33 Test hundreds, made a thought-provoking statement, "During my training sessions ... I learnt how to leave balls more than how to hit them." That is discipline and perseverance. No wonder he scored nearly 12,500 Test runs and is considered one of the best opening batters in the world.

The academic version of Sehwag might be finishing a research paper, submitting it, waiting in anticipation, and then receiving a polite "revisions needed," along with 10 pages of feedback "requiring" attention. How many academics would roll up their sleeves and get back to work?

Academics, like cricketers, need courage in the face of adversity. Failed experiments, funding cuts and scathing reviews are part of the journey, and it is resilience that separates

with his arm in a cast to face the last few balls and saved England from defeat.

Adaptability and innovation: Embracing change as an advantage

In T20 cricket, adaptability is key. New Zealand's Brendon McCullum is famous for smashing records and proving that thinking outside the box can lead to new records. This adaptability, whether smashing sixes or defending the crease, is an asset that academia can embrace. Too often, tradition holds sway in academia, making academics reluctant to adopt new theoretical nuances or interdisciplinary approaches to a research question.

Imagine if academia embraced adaptability like cricket. For example, emerging technologies could be seen as opportunities to push the boundaries of traditional disciplines or reshape pedagogy. Like cricketers who keep pace with evolving formats, academics must also embrace change (new pedagogies) to build a more dynamic academic environment.

Mentorship and guidance

Just as cricket players benefit from their coaches' experience, young academics benefit from the guidance of their mentors. Former cricket greats like Ricky Ponting now serve as mentors, guiding younger players not only on techniques but on handling the pressures of the game. Senior academics could similarly guide the neophytes on a variety of academic challenges. A mentor who's invested in the student's or junior colleague's personal growth could make a world of difference simply by listening. And if thesis advisers

Democracy dies undefended



Debra Efroymsen
is executive director of the Institute of Wellbeing, Bangladesh.

DEBRA EFROYMSON

communities to this day. Ronald Reagan ushered in a new generation of millionaires and increased poverty. America incarcerated Japanese people during World War II and turned away boatloads of Holocaust survivors seeking shelter on American soil. Earlier in its history was the extermination of most indigenous people and the forced migration, with mass deaths, of the remaining natives.

neither to women nor to non-white men.

Too often in its history, the American people have accepted horrific injustices. Too often they have turned away in apathy and distaste from politics and the need to reform it.

The tag line of *The Washington Post* is: "Democracy dies in darkness". The paper's owner, billionaire Jeff Bezos, refused to allow an editorial endorsing Kamala Harris

Democracy dies when people passively accept atrocities committed against other groups. It dies when people refuse to be engaged citizens. It dies when we allow ourselves to be distracted by social media, entranced by conspiracy theories, and amused by buffoonish but exceedingly dangerous politicians.

To the horror of many in the world, a seemingly racist, misogynist, Islamophobic would-be dictator has beaten his highly qualified and intelligent opponent, to become "leader of the free world." Many are lamenting that America will no longer be a beacon of democracy.

But let's get real. The US has never been a shining star of justice and human rights. America has consistently supported totalitarian regimes in other countries. It decimated Vietnam because of a fear of communism, casually dropping leftover bombs on Cambodia and Laos. It invaded Iraq after Saudis, not Iraqis, attacked the World Trade Center. It continues to provide arms to Israel despite all the atrocities Netanyahu has committed.

Domestically, the country has not been much better. There is the extremely undemocratic and unique system of life terms for Supreme Court justices. There is the electoral college, which means that the president is not chosen by the popular vote, so each person's vote does not count the same. There is a long and ugly, continuing trend of voter suppression, and the fact that a third to a half of voters fail to vote in major elections.

Shall I continue? President Clinton started the period of mass incarceration which continues to devastate Black



Supporters of Donald Trump look at screens showing him speak from the Palm Beach County Convention Center, as they attend the New York Young Republican Club watch party during the 2024 US presidential election, in Manhattan, New York City.

PHOTO: REUTERS

America's founding fathers (and much of the population at the time) did not consider Black people as human. The declaration that "All men are created equal" extended

for president due to fear of economic reprisal from Trump if he won. Democracy dies in many ways. It dies when we allow people to accumulate such vast wealth that

they can almost singlehandedly determine the direction of our politics. Democracy dies when people passively accept atrocities committed against other groups. It dies when people refuse to be engaged citizens. It dies when we allow ourselves to be distracted by social media, entranced by conspiracy theories, and amused by buffoonish but exceedingly dangerous politicians.

As to why Trump won, it was probably a mixture of causes. The biggest reason may have been inflation, which has caused incumbent politicians around the world to be voted out of office. Then there is the untoward influence of billionaires, the dumbing of the nation through social media, and a mass media that profits from Trump. Then there's the ongoing misogyny and racism that prevented a highly qualified and decent woman of colour from winning.

What can we learn from the American disaster? First, that democracy isn't easy. It doesn't thrive without constant work and care. I've always been impressed by the level of activism in Bangladesh, of people demonstrating, speaking up, and even putting their lives on the line for what they care about. We could use some more of that commitment in the US. Second, that ugliness, hatred, and vitriol are appealing

to many. Trump knows how to play a crowd, and just as people loved Ronald Reagan because he allowed them to feel good about being selfish, so people adore Trump, even worship him, because he encourages them to be, not their best, but rather their worst self.

Given the second point, and the sway that conspiracy theories have over the uninformed, it is of vital importance that we raise the level of political discourse and find ways to make important issues interesting to the masses. The joyful, hope-filled campaign of Kamala Harris is an example of making politics enjoyable and celebratory. We need to understand that her loss likely had nothing to do with her campaign—that it is generally a minority who appreciate nastiness, and that it is never acceptable to copy the methods of successful autocrats. We can and must do better.

America has let the world down. The devastating consequences to peace, the environment, the climate, and the global economy will be felt worldwide. The correct response is not despair, but rather a stronger commitment than ever to fight for democracy and decency wherever we are. America was never a model democracy, but perhaps now another country can more justly assume that role.