

SEAMING TURFS: THE LOTTERY OF THE WORLD CUP

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Late in 1998 two Lankan cricketing enthusiasts in Adelaide confidently expressed their brimming expectation that our cricket team would win the tri-series in Australia (whereas I thought that they would not make the finals). This was wishful thinking. Hopefully, the series of defeats experienced by the team from October 1998 to March 1999 have discouraged Sri Lankan patriots from indulging in similar forms of wishful thinking with reference to Sri Lanka's chances during the forthcoming World Cup. Do not be surprised, folks, if Sri Lanka does not make it through to the second round of quarter-finals.

My pessimism is not meant to belittle the team or the selectors' choices, though I do have reservations about a couple of the selections. I hold that our cricketers have served us well in recent years and applaud their performances. But I know the vicissitudes of cricket as a game only too well. The lottery element is even more pronounced in limited over matches. In the majority of one-day games in my view each side has a fifty:fifty chance of winning. Where a particular side enters the fray with a relatively consistent series of wins, like South Africa today, the odds in their favour may swing to 55% or 60%. But even such odds give their opponents a reasonable prospect of winning.

This reasoning should not be extended to the non-Test playing sides, to Kenya, Scotland and Bangladesh, the minnows as they are sometimes referred to. There the odds against them winning lengthen. But, as Kenya revealed last time, and Canada and Lanka showed in the 1970s, the minnows can occasionally fashion a killer-punch. Indeed, I reckon that the qualifications for the quarter-finals within each group in 1999 could be determined by which match the biggies lose to Scotland and Kenya. Bangladesh may struggle in English conditions, but the Scots and the Kenyans cannot be written off from producing the odd surprise. So, Lankans, take care against Kenya.

My pessimism regarding Lanka's prospects is also coloured by two other considerations. Firstly, the matches are scheduled for the early summer when swing and seam of the sort that skittled our team in the matches last year against Glamorgan and Leicestershire will probably prevail. Such conditions will, as Imran Khan noted recently in placing England among the favourites, favour the home side. Sunny weeks are not entirely unknown in May/June, however, so those of you who have influence with the weather gods should truly reach for the sky and assist Lanka's prospects!

The third reason lies in the respect I accord to the abilities of all the test-playing countries. Note that Sri Lanka is in Group A with four other experienced Test-playing countries and only one minnow (and a minnow with punch). In sum, we are in the more difficult group. Let me underline this difficulty by stating that I consider Zimbabwe and New Zealand to be the two dark horses of the tournament. I have put my money, a small bet, where my mouth is. If bets were on offer for the semi-finalists I would have placed a large bet on these two countries.

What are my grounds for this venture? Both have well-balanced sides that include a number of allrounders and both have good swing/seam bowlers. Take New Zealand; they held their own against South Africa recently. On their home turf, no doubt, but in conditions that are not dissimilar to England and without Fleming and Macmillan for most games. They have several match-winning medium pace bowlers, two economical bowlers in Larsen and Harris, and good strikers of the ball in Astle, Cairns, Harris, Macmillan, Parore, Horne and Nash.

Zimbabwe, with an experienced side that has considerable fielding ability, truly concerns me as a looming threat. They have sorted out their captaincy problems and Campbell has settled in as a leader. Houghton, a frontier fighter to the marrow, provides coaching and gee-up abilities that could prove critical. Neil Johnson has turned out to be a utility player and useful allrounder with good striking ability. Goodwin adds solidity to the batting and can occasionally turn his arm over. Above all, in Streak they have a match winning fast bowler used to English conditions and one who will be supported by the pace of the two blacks, Mbangwa and Olonga, as well as the steady bowling of the Whittals and Brandes, the leg spin of Strang or Huckle and the left arm turn of Flower.

The Sri Lankan constituency towards whom this essay is directed is only too aware of the composition and capacities of the other leading teams and I will not extend my review. One remark however: Pakistan has gelled together magnificently under Wasim Akram after the severe internal dissension of late 1998 and after ditching Sohail. Their leading players are proud men with a point to prove. They have a balanced attack with wicket-taking abilities. It is the latter, a number of wicket-takers, that Sri Lanka lacks. And Lanka has always suffered from a lack of bowlers who can deliver a *deceptive slower ball*. It was a miracle that they secured the last World Cup without this crucial capacity within their bowling line-up.

The Sri Lankan Team

My review of the team's capacities is disadvantaged and restricted by my distance from the local scene. I have not witnessed the recent Pepsi series nor the local A-grade matches. Nor have I access to local grapevine information. It is in the light of these limitations that my comments should be evaluated.

Now that Jayasuriya has eased my worries a mite with a 90 and a hundred, Murali's recovery is my initial concern. If he is not ready or not operating at hundred per cent, then, it is better to take the long-view and omit him from the side. It was an error to wish Aravinda back into the side in Australia after his hamstring injury (twice). It is better for a team to focus on the job in hand without their star-player(s) than have these men as ghosts around their expectations. One has to cut ones losses and literally gird ones loins in the style that our men displayed in Adelaide on 23 January 1999.

In contrast with the team selected for the last Australian trip the Fifteen for the World Cup contain an array of allrounders. Chandana, Jayasuriya, Kalpage and Hathurusinghe are useful allrounders with reasonable ability in both realms. Aravinda de Silva is a batting allrounder whose intelligent spin bowling can work a Tendulkar (Tendulkar the bowler) on occasions. Vaas and Upashantha can perhaps be classed as bowling allrounders, though neither has provided solid evidence on the batting count in recent years. Mahela Jayawardene's bowling limitations were exposed in Australia and, to judge from the figures, in India recently, but his type of bowling may be occasionally helpful in English conditions. Now that Arjuna is trimmer I trust that he will remember that he has won a match or two for us with his bowling in the past. Rather Arjuna than Hashan despite the latter's infectious enthusiasm.

Batting and Bowling Worries

The bowling nevertheless remains a worry. It is doubtful that on the smallish English grounds the combination available can consistently contain the opposition batting or break through the top-order batting often enough. Murali is vulnerable to the type of assault pioneered by Cronje and Kallis - a long step down the track and a heave over mid wicket whether on one knee or not, a good cricketing shot the way that Steve Waugh and the South Africans play it. So Murali must work out a counter, Vaas has to return to his old sharpness and Wickramasinghe has to sustain his new-found incisiveness (Pepsi tourney) for Lanka to have any chance at all.

I did not agree with the widespread denigration of the selectors for choosing Wickramasinghe for the '98 England tour. His type of bowling is suited to the conditions and there was little evidence of alternatives (those available being already in the squad). In any event I had seen an Internet report much earlier in which Bruce Yardley indicated that they had earmarked Wickramasinghe, then out of the side in the wilderness, for the tour and had waited for him to come to them for reformative action. This took place, his run was cut down etc. The results are now crystallising, though there is still a need for consistency in his performance. Genially, then, I wish strength to Pramodaya's arm and guile to his mind, the latter especially.

Questions may be raised regarding the omission of Ruchira Perera and Suresh Perera. Suresh revealed promise during the English tour of 1998 and there was even the glimmer of a suggestion that he could develop into an allrounder of sorts. Unfortunately he was given no opportunity worth speaking of in Australia. Since he has not been chosen recently I can only assume that there have been solid reasons for preferring Botejue, Upashantha and Hathurusinghe in recent matches. These comments also apply to Ruchira. In his case, moreover, there was a worrying propensity to no-ball and his line of attack replicates that of Vaas. In any event the Pereras could only be

slotted in if one considered them superior to Upashantha and Hathurusinghe on English wickets. I am not in a position to judge their relative merits, or that of Botejue and Gallage. All I can say is that we require a type of bowler exemplified in yesteryear by Shackleton and Cartwright and more recently by Alderman and Dale of Australia.

The batting too, in contrast with the mid-90s, is a worry. It seems to lack consistency, depth and flexibility. Flexibility is essential to ensure adjustments in different conditions so that one is ready to graft for runs where spiteful conditions mean that extravagant strokes are a form of *hara kiri*. Given the likelihood that seam and swing would hold sway one requires a couple of Sidat Wettimunies (actually Sunil and Sidat would do) and a couple of Anura Tennekoon in the side. Aravinda has the skills and the experience of English conditions. Atapattu and Jayawardene reveal the potential to be equated with such exemplary figures. But do we have another opening batsman who fits the bill?

It is in this sphere that I have serious questions regarding the selectors' choices. It is likely that many critics will fix on the omission of Avishka Gunawardene. Albeit tentatively, on this issue I agree with the selectors. Avishka's defence may not stand up to the cut and thrust of English turfs. Moreover, his agility and swiftness in the field are limited. Remember that this applies to Aravinda and Arjuna as well, though their hands are safer than Avishka's. Arjuna and Aravinda are musts because of their batting and leadership roles. And we simply cannot have three fieldsmen who are slow in the same side.

My reservations, albeit qualified ones, lie with the selection of Tillekaratne and Mahanama. They have served Sri Lanka well in the past but their performances of late have not matched those of previous years. By midway in the Aussie tour I would have batted Chandana ahead of both. Tillekaratne's strike rate was appalling and he displayed a selfishness (particularly in the case of Jayawardene's run out at the MCG) that was damning. While I would retain him in the Test side, I question his inclusion in the one-day teams. Mahanama was unimpressive in Australia and has a technical weakness that Owen Mottau has demonstrated to him. It is not easy to get out of set ways at the age of 30 plus, so my doubts remain. Unlike Tillekaratne, however, Mahanama has experience as an opening bat and one could send him opening in seaming conditions if he came near the vintage Mahanama of old.

But whom then would I insert? Russell Arnold? Naveed Nawaz? T. M. Dilshan? Dulip Samaraweera? I have hardly seen any of them bat. Or field, or keep in Dilshan's case. So my evaluations are from a flawed base. Cautiously, it seems to me that Arnold's performances in England and the fact that he is an opening bat provide grounds for his inclusion. The fact that he can bowl is an added bonus: to bowl 25 or so overs at Tendulkar and company on the SSC batting track and keep them quiet is suggestive though not conclusive.

Thus, the side I would have chosen would include Arnold. That would leave one batsman to be selected from Mahanama,

Tillekaratne, Nawaz and others. Though my side would have been little different from that chosen, both sets of selections would set up a team that was oldish, perhaps far too jaded a side. Some mediemen in Lanka (perhaps linked to the powers that call the tune in the cricket world) have attempted to sell the selections by stressing experience. There is a point there, but I do not buy it readily. One-day games are young mens affairs - that is, they mostly beckon *fresh enthusiastic* faces-cum-legs with a sprinkling of mature hands here and there. Fresh blood, however old (e. g. Funky Miller of Australia), injects the panache that inspires success. The present Sri Lankan brigade simply has too many old hands. In the final analysis this will weigh against our side—going all the way to Lahore, so to speak. But I would be delighted if the team — and Roshan and Hashan in particular — was to prove me wrong.

Requirements

Since the selectors have cast their die, what advice can I offer to the cricket team and their mentors? I do this in point form.

1. The authorities should take immediate steps to send Arnold, an utility player and a seamer to England to play club or second XI county cricket so that they are on standby. Nor should the management hesitate to call on that old warhorse Champaka Ramanayake if exigencies arise. His experience in England would be of value. If nothing else, we would gain some amusement as the TV personnel try and get their tongue around the word Champaka.

2. I for one would not castigate the team for its fielding to the same degree as some critics. The catching has been erratic, both brilliant

and poor. Clearly, there must be improvement. This is known. The question is: are Lanka's fielding practice drills anywhere like that of Zimbabwe and Australia?

3. Let me make this point elliptically. Why would I choose Adam Gilchrist ahead of Jayasuriya in my world team — since both fulfil two roles and both score at a rapid rate? Answer: because Gilchrist converts his fifties into hundreds far more often than Sanath (or Kalu). So both Sanath and Kalu should curb their extravagance after they pass the forties.

4. The team is likely to face difficult wickets, albeit less bouncy, of the type they encountered in the game against England at the MCG. In such conditions they must restrain themselves and graft for runs till their eye is in. Indeed, on such tracks they would be well advised to open with Atapattu or Mahanama/Hathurusinghe instead of Kalu; and even to have a line-up of Jayasuriya, Atapattu, Mahanama/Hathurusinghe with Jayawardene at 5 or 6.

5. There is the issue of how fresh batsmen should seek runs during the last few overs before the death of the innings. During the Australian tour it was truly amazing to see experienced players with countless games under their belt, Vaas and Wickramasinghe for instance, come in to bat when there was a batsman who was set at the other end and then proceed to place one foot down the line of their leg stump and attempt hoicks to mid-wicket across the line. Result: a dot ball or fallen wicket. The object in such circumstances is to get singles for a while so that the batsman with his eye in can take more of the strike. This means watching out for yorkers, playing through the line and ensuring that ones body is always behind the ball so that leg byes become a possibility. The latter course increases the chance of being l. b. w. so it must involve batting outside the crease or taking a forward step when facing pacemen. This is something that has to be worked on at practice. I suggest that Aravinda and Kalpage should be instructed to assist Roy Dias in teaching the tailenders *the art form of batting at the death*. Kalpage? Because on a couple of occasions I have been impressed by Kalpage's ability to come in during the late overs and score a run a ball from the word go.

6. And is it too late for Vaas, Wickramasinghe and other medium pacers to attach some deceptiveness to their slow ball? ■

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief...

T.S. Elliot *The Waste Land*