

Dhoni— Courage Under Fire

By AJAY VISHWANATHAN



With a ready, infectious smile, a charming sparkle in his eyes, and an enthusiastic gait, he came not as a cricketer conventional, but as a breath of fresh air in the buttoned-down, humdrum world of cricketing personalities. Mahendra Singh Dhoni has been different right from the time he caught the public eye. In a dry world of predictably articulated answers, Dhoni has surprised us with his natural candor. “Not really,” he replied when asked if it was his childhood dream to lead India. He doesn’t say much, even in team meetings, but when he speaks, he makes a lot of sense; the power of his messages comes from the economy of his words.

When Dhoni (popularly addressed as ‘Mahi’) first walked onto the field in late 2004 and played, what we saw was an unorthodox, ungainly person with graceless defense, eccentric stroke-making, and patchy wicket-keeping. Even the news he made was less for his on-field skills, more for his appetite for milk, atypically long hair, his hailing from an obscure state, and lust for sporty bikes. We didn’t even realize—a tribute to the determined and astute head beneath that shock of unusual hair—when a rustic newcomer graduated and seamlessly replaced Sachin Tendulkar as a new hero with an audaciously honest demeanor. “The cameras used to pass by; now they stop for me,” he once said.

The candidness in his conduct was seen from the very beginning of his career; it is not as if he adopted and then honed this, now characteristic, style. About the new attention that he was getting, he told *Wisden*, the popular England based cricketers’ Almanack, that it happened overnight. “If I’m doing well, then it’s good. If not, then all the publicity will automatically stop.”

On April 5, 2005, he squashed, rather ruthlessly, all doubts over the selection of the wicket-keeper batsman: Dhoni displayed an astounding array of bizarre strokes as he pulverized the Pakistani attack in Visakhapatnam. That knock gave an opportunity

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to Indian cricket to talk about the next superstar; their earlier demi-God had almost outlived his tenure, was looking jaded, and was breaking down too often to keep their star-appetite whetted. The magnifying lens whirred towards its new object, and suddenly all of Mahi's tremendous assets, earlier buried under the impression of gawkiness, came into view. Here was a young, well-built man who hurried between wickets like someone possessed, who could cut bowling egos to humbled slices with his impudent batting manners, who could help us permanently abandon the idea of asking a tiring Rahul Dravid to keep wickets again.

A combination of several factors, including his unquestionable commitment, willingness to push the envelope, and the cricketing climate of the nation, precipitated his ascent, which was awfully dramatic, as if someone had taken out the middle pages of his career. An unlikely officer-in-training had suddenly become the CEO—within a span of two years.

There is something about being close to the pinnacle: it has coaxed many into being ordinary decision-makers. The guys who spoke fearlessly start sounding mundane, the undaunted risk-takers begin to make

conservative calls, and the leaders who were expected to bring about a sweeping change in attitude towards team selection start appearing squeamishly compliant. Dhoni, so far, has adhered to old traits and perspectives. He remains the person we came to adore and admire: his interviews continue to be succinct, his acknowledgements of defeats are graceful, and his demeanor during victories or during a tense match situation remains quietly confident.

During the recently concluded Asia Cup he triggered a wave of raised eyebrows when he talked openly and sorely about the grueling scheduling of matches. He was only voicing what others wanted to, with players crumbling in the agonizing heat and humidity. To the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), the weather seems irrelevant, and injuries normal; they are concerned more about maximizing their bottom line than worrying about the health and joy of the players. *You lose some, you get more; you lost Zaheer, you found Ishant. Meanwhile, let us squeeze their last ounce of energy while we wait for the next willing victim.* The BCCI has attributes that are scary: highly detested but dreadfully powerful, callously inefficient but supremely rich. It was almost laughable when Dilip Vengsarkar, our national selector, wondered brazenly why the national stars don't play in the domestic tournaments any more.

So, when Dhoni expressed his displeasure and need for a break, it made headlines. In a haughty and detached reaction, the high-and-mighty BCCI asked all those players

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requiring rest to stay at home, if they want to. Dhoni did exactly that. In a rare and fearless move, the current biggest star of Indian cricket decided to go on vacation. He pulled out of the ongoing Test series against Sri Lanka.

The critics barked and questioned his willingness to play in the never-ending IPL after a taxing tour Down Under.



Dhoni is straightforward but not stupid: why would he say no and relinquish \$1.5 million, especially when he was priced at that staggering amount amidst competition from the *crème de la crème* in the business? Sourav Ganguly, on the other hand, subsequently admitted that he couldn't afford to take such a break. That is probably the best word he could have used; with so many endorsements and the compulsion to remain in the limelight, and the constant threat of competition breathing down his insecure neck, he certainly could not afford it.

This withdrawal spoke as much of Dhoni's smartness and sense of security as his guts. His heart probably told him that considering the sheen that he imparts to Indian cricket, the selectors would not drop him, that this break will let him reignite his dulling passion (and prolong his career) by soothing his hurting fingers and knees.

Cricket is a funny game; there is so much going on in the mind as you take the field that today's self-confident psyche can degenerate into tomorrow's diffident mind. That is why it remains to be seen if this is a path that other cricketers will follow, although it is hopeful that this debate over brutal scheduling would force the authorities to revisit their numb souls and come out with a refreshed attitude.

In Dhoni, we had found an unimaginable hero. Today, he continues to be forthright in his decision-making. It would be interesting to see if the Indian board recognizes this trait or penalizes him for going against their interests. For decades we have had captains who manage the team but rarely lead them. Peter Drucker, a famous social ecologist, could easily have had Indian cricket in mind when he said, "Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things."



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