

A Googly on the Game

The Indian Premier League has revolutionized cricket. Which way will the game turn?

By AJAY VISHWANATHAN

As the teacher tediously went over the significance of the battle of Panipat, I pulled out my fattest book. The lesson was getting dreary, which meant that it was time to start a fresh round of book cricket. I was playing World XI while my bench-mate owned Team India. As my batting lineup took shape, my fantasies ran ablaze with the likes of Vivian Richards, Richard Hadlee, and Ian Botham filling the ranks. The thrill of owning and controlling these legends was more intoxicating than the exploits of Babur.

Since the mid-eighties I have always wondered whether these cricketing greats would ever be part of a team that I support. What if Michael Holding were to immigrate to India? He could then partner with Kapil Dev and break the back of the much-touted Pakistani batting order.

Michael Holding never held an Indian passport, but the IPL happened!

A googly in the name of capitalism

This is a story of cricket turning capitalistic, and in so doing, revolutionizing the game. If it were to happen, can there be any other country than India to bring this about? Indeed, it was the inevitable waiting to happen: a



Swashbuckling batsman and wicket keeper Adam Gilchrist playing for Deccan Chargers under the captainship of VVS Laxman

cricket crazed country of a billion people...that had just tasted the trappings of capitalism, thanks to a liberalized market. Now, the nation has developed a voracious appetite for the free market and its lures, be it name-brand clothes or big name cricketers.

This prevailing environment has resulted in the elevation of the BCCI (Board of Control for Cricket in India) to a venerable governing body with global clout. Using deft moves, the BCCI combined its clout, the voraciousness of the Indian public, and the financial might of the corporate world to develop an exotic recipe for national league cricket.

And so was born the Twenty20 format Indian Premier League (IPL), with eight regional teams: Kolkata Knight Riders, Chennai Super Kings, Mumbai Indians, Hyderabad

Deccan Chargers, Rajasthan Royals, Royal Challengers Bangalore, Delhi Daredevils, and Kings XI Punjab.

This is not just about the rise of league cricket in India, but how it is changing the very dynamics of the game in terms of format, loyalties, and how it is enjoyed by fans. Thanks to IPL, we have now seen the unfathomable: Ricky Ponting, skipper of the mighty Australians, as well as "Rawalpindi Express," Shoaib Akhtar, of arch enemy Pakistan, playing for Kolkata Knight Riders! Over a dozen such international cricketers are the prize catches of the various teams of the IPL.

This novel enterprise which is currently the buzz of Indian cricket, has given all those billionaires with book cricket fantasies the chance to buy the very people whose posters adorn their kids' bedroom. *Jayasurya might have given many an Indian a harrowing time, but now I own him; he plays for me.*

Where will all this lead the game? For one, accountability of the players will rise by many notches. How forgiv-



ing will a team owner be who has shelled out a million dollars expecting you to perform? Will he have the patience to let you settle down for one whole season and hope that you will come out swinging next year? Some pundits have argued against low tolerance. Personally, I have no complaints. When we watched mediocre Indian cricket, didn't we clamor for punishment as if we owned the players? Ganguly runs lazily, without grounding his bat, and gets run out, and we wish angrily that he would be fined. When an NRI sitting 15,000 miles away can get so agitated by a lack of application on the part of the players, then why not the team owner who has invested heavily in them?

With the IPL comes the need for consistency, the requirement on the players part to show the cricketing world that you have earned every dollar. You are not there because an East Zone selector lobbied for you; you are playing because your anticipated success fetched you a huge price. You fail, you're fired.

What bothers me is not the fragile-mercy syndrome but the tendency of the team owners to go overboard in showing their involvement. The team ownership mindset in India is not yet used to staying detached and distant. Recently, Shahrukh Khan, in his enthusiasm to draw attention to himself and his team, waved frantically from the stands and gave a standing ovation to Ganguly as he walked back to the pavilion—which wasn't so ridiculous if you overlooked the fact that Ganguly had scored all of 14 runs.

Atlantan Desikan Sarathy, a keen follower of the sporting action around the world, hopes that the owners of the IPL teams will stay in the background. "Look at NFL, basketball or baseball. The teams that are winning championships now are the teams that do not have loudmouth owners. The recent records show that Redskins (Dan Snyder), Falcons (Arthur Blank) and Cowboys (Jerry Jones) have all won nothing. The guys that keep winning are the Steelers, Colts, Patriots, Spurs and teams like that." These are teams where owners maintain their distance. In the IPL, Ness Wadia is one such owner. He

is often seen rooting for his team, Kings XI Punjab, but is never to be found asking his captain to field first. His team started the tournament badly but now, as I write this, has qualified for the semifinals, using successful team tactics that Wadia has resisted tampering with.

T20 versus Test cricket and ODIs

There is talk, not all trivial, about T20 affecting Test cricket. Nandu Vaid, a keen cricketing mind and one of the most active tournament organizers in Atlanta, feels that there is already an interest slump in Tests. There is a danger of the players themselves becoming infected with viewer disinterest in Tests, considering there is more money offered for less time on the field.

In my opinion, Test cricket may actually spruce up with inevitable spillovers from T20; spillovers such as intelligent improvisations and escalating scoring rates. The one-day international (ODI) format faced similar criticism in its early days: that it would phase out Test matches. But the ODI actually enhanced Test quality by initiating the demise of dead bats and terribly defensive batsmen; the monotonous days of Chetan Chauhan and Geoff Boycott were gone.

So, if Test cricket has now improved, why the drop in interest? Sarathy, an avid supporter of innovations, says, "This is the YouTube generation and people want to see highlights. They don't have the patience to sit through the entire day." Unlike in Test matches, T20 invariably has a clear winner—a necessity for a good production.

If Test cricket is to survive, no guilt need be harbored to tweak the rules and smoothen the edges of this format: start calling wides for untouchable balls way down the leg-side, incorporate the crowd favorite free-hit rule, or bring the boundary ropes in as you do for T20. Purists often morph into stubbornness; they loathe change and fail to see the danger of a fatal stagnation. But as former cricketer Arun Lal noted, "there is nothing sacrosanct about Test cricket." Tests will survive; it is up to the ICC to make them more

attractive. A good start will be to first recognize that we have a problem.

How about the ODIs? Does the birth of the IPL mean curtains for them? Leafing through all the wonderful records, including the hard-earned ones of Sachin Tendulkar, or the effortless



Ricky Ponting, skipper of the mighty Australians, is now playing for Kolkata Knight Riders—food for thought indeed!

ones of Vivian Richards, it pains me to conclude that the audience is beginning to relish the younger, more dynamic, and prettier sister of the ODIs—the T20. The older sister appears dull and anemic, with too many scars from ICC-Botox injections.

Alok Mishra, a Green Bay, Wisconsin resident who is another passionate follower of the game, has mixed feelings about the T20. "It is a dual edged sword. On one hand it helps bring the fringe spectators into the game, but it may also be over-shadowing the rest of the formats due to its heavy dose of explosive cricket." He is however more convinced about the threat to the ODI. "They lack the fireworks of T20 and have the boring middle overs," he recalls. "Remember when we used to run errands and return for the last 10 overs of the inning?"

There is nothing more relaxing than watching a game of cricket after a good day's work, especially in the stadium, with your wife on one side, and your kids, with their faces painted, jumping excitedly next to you. This scene, even if it is in your bedroom, is more likely to play out at seven in the

evening, rather than nine in the morning. The T20 is a compact product, with essentially all the dreary parts of the ODIs trimmed and polished. Customers quickly adjust to a newly acquired convenience. Did we not move seamlessly from typewriters to keyboards, desktop computers to laptops, with a keen eye for upgrades? T20 is fresh blood that the beast has tasted; feed it ODIs and you will initially get a grimace, then a gradual refusal.

The banes and boons of IPL

I harbor this nagging feeling that the brain behind IPL, the BCCI, is more bothered about finding ways to squeeze the last bit of gold from this healthy goose while it is happy and hopping. The media, in its enthusiasm, is providing juicy and altruistic motives that the



Rawalpindi Express no more? Pakistani Shoaib Akhtar will be bowling for Kolkata Knight Riders.

BCCI (which probably hadn't thought of them before) can now use. A body that goes out of the way to smother competition, that has at its helm a crafty politician with no cricketing background, and that takes pleasure in arm-twisting its peers and influencing the governing body, cannot suddenly turn charitable in its attitude.

A report in Cricinfo.com spoke about the continued disregard and squalid conditions for the IPL spectators at the grounds. The BCCI is wallowing in mind-boggling amounts of cash, but they let the paying crowds welter and writhe in despair and frustration as they encounter inferior facilities. Sangameswar Shankar, an India based friend, who has been to several stadiums around the country, points out that

leaking sewage, stinking urinals, disorderly entrances, and unbearably long lines at counters are all too common.

There are other ugly tangents that have caused needless hype and stir. The hypocritical rant against cheerleading is one of them. Vish Sarma, a New Zealand based fan, is charged when he talks about it. "This really gets my blood boiling!" he says. "The politicians and the prudes are trotting out old saws about 'respecting' women in India, when dowry deaths and aborting female fetuses are still common. People need to focus on righting these gross societal wrongs, rather than on how much flesh a cheerleader shows—which is not that much more than in a Bollywood item number."

Sanjay Narla, the captain of a veteran Atlanta tennis-ball cricket team, comments on one drawback of the IPL—the danger to the morale and unity of team India. He feels that while the international cricketers are bonding well, many Indian national players are not, especially those playing for opposite IPL teams. "This can cause bad blood as we've already seen in the Harbhajan-Sreesanth episode," says Narla. "This may cause some discomfort in the national dressing room unless you are mature enough to leave it on the ground and start afresh when playing for the country." The relationship between Harbhajan and Sreesanth will never be the same, so it is fair to say that avoiding conflicts is better than cleaning up after it. After all, IPL is merely a money-making, interest-generating *tamasha*; the real battles are fought in national colors.

Although the IPL has brought world talent together, its shameless extravagance can hurt in subtle ways. There are so many players around the world who were neglected by the IPL or paid peanuts compared to their peers. Andrew Symonds expressed embarrassment at being paid so much

more than his captain, Ricky Ponting.

Will there be a case of confused loyalty among the spectators? How will the Chennai crowd react when its Super Kings player Matthew Hayden plays against India at the MA Chidambaram Stadium? Some have wondered if there will be a lack of intensity when the crowd roots against Hayden. I don't



The Washington Redskins Cheerleaders performed for the Royal Challengers Bangalore at their inaugural game. They have spearheaded the efforts to create the first ever cheerleading squad in India.

think so. Sports loyalty is a fickle thing. I wasn't surprised when Andruw Jones, after playing for such a long time with the Atlanta Braves, was booed at Turner field as he walked in to bat in the Dodgers uniform. When Ponting faces Ishant Sharma in a Test match at the Eden Gardens, be assured, the crowds will be so loud that Ponting will hardly hear himself breathe.

The IPL and its T20 format is here to stay for a while. It is crass but entertaining. It has no method, but loads of madness. It heavily favors the batsmen, but I bet even Glenn McGrath's little son, James, wouldn't mind it. I am less worried about the future of the IPL and the BCCI than I am concerned about the ICC's lack of foresight in preparing for the storm called Twenty20. As Atherton wrote in *The Times*, "The administrators walked blindfolded into a storm; when the storm passes, the cricketing landscape is likely to look different."

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