

TIM WIGMORE AND PETER MILLER

FOREWORD
BY GIDEON HAIGH

XXII SECOND

CRICKET IN ITS OUTPOSTS



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SECOND

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Tim Wigmore writes on cricket for The Daily Telegraph, ESPNcricinfo, The Cricketer and The Nightwatchman, and is also a contributing writer for The New Statesman. In 2013, he was highly commended for the Ian Wooldridge Young Sports Writer of the year award and in 2014 he was specially commended for the Young County Journalist award.

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Foreword by Gideon Haigh

SIR John Seeley famously remarked that the British conquered half the world in a fit of absent-mindedness. Something similar is true of the global spread of cricket – that is, it has tended to occur, steadily and stealthily, while most of the game’s administrators, participants and fans have been busy looking the other way.

That will carry through to 15 July 2015 when the vast bulk of the cricket world will be readying itself for another Ashes Test at Lord’s, with all the pomp, circumstance and self-congratulation that goes with it.

The 50th anniversary on that date of another event, actually at the self-same venue, will almost inevitably go unremarked – as, indeed, it largely did at the time. On 15 July 1965, representatives of England, Australia, West Indies, India, Pakistan and New Zealand met at Lord’s where they were brought to order by Marylebone Cricket Club president Richard Twining, an alumnus of Eton and Oxford, a Great War veteran.

Having arrived as members of the Imperial Cricket Conference, they disbanded as members of the International Cricket Conference, their membership expanded by three ‘associate members’ from outside the Commonwealth: Ceylon, Fiji and the United States.

This quiet and ever-so-slight lowering of a Union Jack produced no headlines or grand communiqués. You’ll find it recorded, rather sketchily, on pages 1001–02 and 1009 of the 1966 *Wisden*. But it has led in its way to this timely compilation, a warm and welcoming but realistic and unsentimental survey of what cricket has to show for half a century of ostensible internationalism.

It also rather set the scene for the ad-hocracy that was to follow. The election of Ceylon, Fiji and the United States, followed a year later by the inclusion of Denmark, the Netherlands, Bermuda and East Africa, was in terms of their hosting cricket that was ‘fully recognised and organised’.

Nowhere were these terms defined. No reports were solicited; no fact-finding missions were despatched. There was no strategic, commercial or even philanthropic purpose served, because membership conferred no benefit outside an entitlement to attend a meeting that didn’t really decide anything terribly much anyway. Imperial or International, the ICC was the loosest of confederations, a talking shop rather than a sports organisation, a concession to democracy by the Anglo-Australian duarchy.

It was only a decade after that initial decision that the ICC began issuing periodic reminders of itself of its official nomenclature, when it extended entry rights for the inaugural World Cup to two associate members.

In hindsight, the idea of a ‘World Cup’ in cricket in 1975 was the height of pretentious me-tooism. The 16 teams in soccer’s World Cup the year before had been sifted from 100 competitors playing 22 qualifying matches. The ICC, on not much more than a hunch, invited Sri Lanka and East Africa, and gave them three games each. But one must start somewhere, and in some ways the World Cup has remained a tournament disproportionately influenced by ‘minnows’, because the seeming tokenism of their presences has heightened the impact of their successes.

Sri Lanka beating India in 1979, Zimbabwe beating Australia in 1983 and England in 1992, Kenya beating West Indies in 1996, Bangladesh beating Pakistan in 1999, Kenya beating Sri Lanka in 2003, Ireland beating Pakistan and Bangladesh beating India in 2007, Ireland beating England in 2011: these are memories all the more vivid for the regular humdrum of World Cup preliminaries.

Hence also, perhaps, the ambivalence of full members about the advance of cricket’s junior members, given that it is almost always made manifest in one of them being beaten. That comes at

cost to pride, and these days to the exchequer. When the successes of Bangladesh and Ireland in the Caribbean eight years ago cost India and Pakistan their places in the Super 8s, the result was a sub-continental television switch-off that cost the game dearly. And while none but the ECB's chairman Giles Clarke, can say what he was thinking as Kevin O'Brien wellied 113 off 63 balls against England in Bangalore in March 2011, it's a fair bet that it wasn't, 'Gosh, isn't this a great night for cricket?'

And the truth is that it's the full members who have always held sway over the ambitions of associate members and affiliate members (a designation that has existed for the last 30 years to cover countries where the game is played 'according to the Laws of Cricket'). They pay the bills and, for the foreseeable future, will continue to do so. That relationship was entrenched, in rather ironic fashion, by the election of Jagmohan Dalmiya from the Board of Control for Cricket in India as the first president of the ICC in July 1997.

While the votes of associates had been integral to Dalmiya's successful campaigns to bring the World Cups of 1987 and 1996 to the sub-continent, the governance upheaval that resulted from his pitch for high office included the establishment of an executive board that curbed associate voting power. The quid pro quo was money – for the first time, actual dedicated cash money from the ICC for the reinforcement of the game at its frontiers, half the profits from the first ICC Knockout in October 1998 being set aside for the first two years of a 'development programme'.

And while 17 years have elapsed, a great many of that programme's rudiments survive, including the division of the world into five development regions: Africa, Asia, the Americas, East Asia-Pacific and Europe.

The monies available for development have expanded with each subsequent sale of the ICC commercial rights. More of it, too, has been pooled in the interest of providing regular competition and proper rankings, first trialled at the ICC Trophy in Toronto in July 2001, and fledged more fully with the commencement of the three-year, five-division Pepsi World Cricket League in January 2007.

But it's been difficult throughout to obtain any sense of why administrators see this as gainful, even if they do at all. Do they feel a deep and genuine enthusiasm for cricket's flowering in previous foreign fields? Or does it simply please them, every so often, to parade as weighty men of affairs and of vision, before reverting to type as nationalist autocrats and bureaucrats?

This came into sharper focus with the root-and-branch restructure of the ICC plotted by the BCCI in cahoots with the ECB and Cricket Australia, and revealed by this 'big three' to the full membership in January 2014. Two years earlier, the executive board of the ICC had received, and rejected, an independent governance review that recommended a more active council and a funding model 'based on need'.

The 'big three' presented, virtually as a fait accompli, a reconfiguration defining the ICC as a 'members organisation' with a funding model based on want – specifically the BCCI's want for 'hiring their team out to the ICC' for global cricket events.

This involved lots of appeals to the efficacy of 'market forces', the necessity of 'sustainable and transparent' methods, and the importance of members 'standing on their own feet economically'. 'A lot of people criticise BCCI but look what they've achieved,' claimed CA's chairman, Wally Edwards. 'If Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, West Indies and a few others could take a leaf out of their book, cricket would be better off.'

What did not cross his mind was the difficulty of being like India if your country was not, like India, with a GDP grown six-fold in the last two decades.

Not that the full membership had much say but the ICC restructure was sold to them as a necessary placation of the BCCI whose financial impacts would be mitigated by a growth in the overall value of commercial rights; not that the associate and affiliate membership had any say but they were beguiled

by the possibility of a Test match down the track if they could pick off the weakest of the existing ten.

~~‘A glittering prize!’ exclaimed Giles Clarke in *Wisden*. For someone who obtains it, perhaps assuming it remains on offer, given that it’s being made available by an organisation that will shrink its next two World Cups to ten teams, and has scheduled all its major events in the big three for the next decade.~~

For all that, there’s seldom reason in cricket not to be hopeful, and one of the most entertaining even enchanting aspects of the game’s second tier is how it defies ready calculation and whiteboard strategising.

Who would have predicted cricket in Afghanistan? Yet, as Tim Wigmore documents here, it simply forced the world to take notice. What about cricket in the US, with its sophisticated market and manifold advantages? Yet, as Peter Miller chronicles, it careens from crisis to crisis. What a unpredictable, uncontrollable, wonderfully human game it is that flourishes in an environment of protracted war yet flounders amid freedom and plenty. And this book, put together on a shoestring by true cricket lovers, is a fitting tribute to how far a bit of absent-mindedness can get you.

The World Cup

Standard-Bearers

Afghanistan by

Tim Wigmore

GEORGE Orwell's oft-quoted definition of serious sport – 'War minus the shooting' – does not apply to cricket in Afghanistan. When the national side qualified for the 2015 World Cup, the guns were not put away.

'One of the army commanders came to congratulate the team,' Dr Noor Muhammad, the chairman and executive of the Afghan Cricket Board, explained. 'He told me that it was the first time that both the Taliban side and our side were shooting, but not at each other. There was shooting in the air to celebrate the success of the Afghanistan national team.'

Jubilant celebrations greeted the Afghan side who arrived at Kabul Airport and then boarded a coach through the city. 'Everywhere the fans are shooting and flying Afghan flags to say "we played" – they were very happy. Everyone was shooting into the air,' remembered captain Mohammad Nabi. Chants of 'Afghanistan, zindabad!' filled the air. 'The supporters came to the airport. Whole roads were blocked and they took big security, the government.' He had previously admitted, 'We were a little fearful of a bomb blast.'

Hillary Clinton is among those who have praised the Afghan side. 'I might suggest that if we are searching for a model of how to meet tough international challenges with skill, dedication and teamwork, we need only look to the Afghan national cricket team,' she said in May 2010.

'For those of you who don't follow cricket, which is most of the Americans, suffice it to say that Afghanistan did not even have a cricket team a decade ago. And last month, the team made it to the World Twenty20 championships featuring the best teams in the world.'

Their success might not have been possible without one particular ally. 'It is the favourite game of everyone in the country, including the Taliban,' Dr Muhammad said. After Afghanistan qualified for the World Cup, the Taliban sent a message of congratulations to the players.

Afghanistan's relationship with cricket stretches back to at least 1839 when British soldiers in Kabul played the game during the First Anglo-Afghan War. In *Wounded Tiger*, Peter Osborne recounts the Revd GR Gleig's observation that 'horse-racing and cricket were both got up to in the vicinity of Kabul; and in both the chiefs and people soon learned to take a lively interest'.

Gleig also noted, 'They looked on with astonishment at the bowling, batting and fagging out of the English players; but it does not appear that they were ever tempted to lay aside their flowing robes and huge turbans and enter the field as competitors.'

Locals did play with British soldiers during the Second Anglo-Afghan War, from 1878–1880. Yet cricket had long since been forgotten when Soviet tanks rolled into Afghanistan on Christmas Eve 1979. One of the more unlikely consequences of the decade-long war with the Soviet Union was to inculcate thousands of Afghan refugees with a love of the game.

Afghanistan's captain is one example. Nabi was born on New Year's Day 1985 in a refugee camp in Pakistan. The Nabis had fled Afghanistan as the war between the Soviet Union and the Mujahideen became ever more devastating. It was here that they came into contact with cricket for the first time. When the family returned to Afghanistan at the start of the next century, they took their enthusiasm for the sport with them. Although 'there were no grounds, nothing in Afghanistan at that time', Nabi was not to be deterred by the lack of cricketing infrastructure in his new home of Kabul, or the rest of the country.

As the Taliban extended their grip over Afghanistan in the 1990s, sport was not immune from the

consequences. The Taliban took a markedly more draconian line than other Islamic regimes; while football thrived in Wahabi-dominated Saudi Arabia, it was anathema in Afghanistan.

Yet the Taliban's al-Qaeda-funded regime made an exception for one sport: cricket. The elder brother of the first head of the Afghanistan Cricket Federation, founded in 1995, was a member of the Taliban. The Afghanistan Cricket Federation registered with the Afghan Olympic Committee as a national sport.

In January 2000 the Taliban urged the Afghanistan Cricket Federation to write to the Pakistan Cricket Board requesting support to join the International Cricket Council as an affiliate member. For cricket, the Taliban saw a sport that could both promote the regime at home and gain some acceptance abroad. The Taliban recognised cricket as a sport that could fit easily with a hardline Islamic state. After all, cricket was Pakistan's national sport, and Pakistan was one of only three states to recognise the Taliban as Afghanistan's official government. Taliban teams had even been known to play in Pakistan, as recounted in *Wounded Tiger*.

Cricket sat easily with Afghanistan's cultural heritage. The sport bears significant resemblances to the old Afghan game of top danda. Both games involve a wooden bat hitting a spherical object. Cricket's dress code also proved amenable to the Taliban. Unlike football, where the kit marked out those who wore it out as heathens in the Taliban's eyes, cricket kits accommodated religious and cultural requirements.

'Cricket became one of the favourite games of the Taliban because of the clothing,' Dr Muhammad reflected. 'They were not allowing sports with half trousers (shorts). In Islam, your knees should be hidden in your trousers and that's it. Your knees should be hidden because that will allow you to offer prayers.' In contrast to other sports, there is no direct physical contact between players in cricket.

After the 9/11 attacks on the United States, Afghanistan became the focus of President George W. Bush's 'War on Terror'. As provinces have been fought over since, cricket has offered a rare source of stability. It is played and watched in all parts of Afghanistan.

Taliban insurgents from Pakistan often inhabit the areas where cricket is most popular. 'Cricket is stronger in areas where the Taliban are stronger,' Dr Muhammad noted.

The Taliban have latched on to the sport. It is a shrewd move and means that the success of the Afghan cricketing side cannot be used as proof of the virtues of a more Westernised life. The Taliban have instead tried to claim the success of the cricket side as their own: leading players are reputed to have received gifts from people associated with the Taliban.

'The Taliban don't have any problem with cricket,' Afghanistan's former coach Taj Malik told me. 'In areas that are ruled by Taliban there are a lot of boys playing cricket.'

Jalalabad, a Taliban stronghold 80km from the Pakistan border, is regarded as the home of Afghan cricket, and is the home of Taj, the man regarded as the sport's father in Afghanistan.



After spending 16 years as a refugee, Taj had no time for those who thought that his dreams of Afghanistan reaching the World Cup were incredible. Temperamental and bombastic, Taj lifted Afghan cricket up through his insatiable enthusiasm and self-belief.

No one would have wanted to call the Kacha Gari refugee camp on the edge of Peshawar home. For tens of thousands of Afghans, including Taj and his ten siblings, it was allowing a sort of normalcy to develop. For Taj and many others, cricket was the centrepiece of their lives as refugees. 'When we were refugees in Pakistan, we got interested watching international matches. I started playing cricket

in 1987 when England was touring Pakistan during Mike Gatting's captaincy.'

~~This was not the sport as Gatting's team knew it. It was played with a stick and plastic bag wrapped up to make a ball or, if the players were more fortunate, a tennis ball. The Kacha Gari refugee camp contained little flat land so most games were played on a gradient. No one who played here would ever moan about the Lord's slope.~~

It was still cricket. Taj set up a team in the camp: Afghan Cricket Club. Ramshackle as it was, for many Afghans the refugee camps provided their first exposure to cricket. It did more than just imbue Afghans with a love of the game.

The bonds forged in Pakistani refugee camps remain. Nabi played with Asghar Stanikzai, Dawlat Zadran and Shapoor Zadran, key figures in the national side today, in Peshawar. The players broke into the local club scene, where they played alongside leading Pakistan players including Umar Ghouse and Arshad Khan, both of whom would play Test cricket. Afghanistan's cricketers can hardly claim to have been lucky, but it was fortunate that their years in Peshawar coincided with the flourishing of the game in that part of Pakistan.

As the refugees returned to Afghanistan, they found a country that had no time for cricket. 'Even in 1995 there were not more than 20 or 30 people who were playing cricket in the country because it was a very new game,' Dr Muhammad said. The refugees took their new sport with them. 'They started street cricket. They were playing in very rough areas in football grounds.'

One refugee returning from Pakistan was Allah Dad Noori. In 1995 he set up the Afghan Cricket Federation in Kabul. It was the first organised cricket body in Afghanistan's history. Taj Malik and Allah Dad fought for control of the nascent Afghan cricket team. Eventually they hit upon a compromise: Taj would become coach, while Allah Dad assumed the presidency of the Afghan Cricket Federation (which later became the Afghan Cricket Board).

In June 2001 the ACF was registered with the ICC, who awarded Afghanistan affiliate membership. Their first official tour was to Pakistan later that year, where they played against club sides.



Afghanistan's first official fixtures came when they were invited to the Asian Cricket Council Trophy in 2004, a tournament featuring 15 teams (though none of the four Asian full members). The competition was held in Malaysia: this was the first time that any of the players had flown on an aeroplane.

Before they did that, there was the small obstacle of obtaining passports. This was more onerous than it sounds: many players had only a vague idea of when they were born. 'Talking to my mother she works out my age by seeing who the president was,' the Afghan player Raees Ahmadzai told ESPNcricinfo in 2009. 'Unofficially I'm nearly 25, give or take three years. Or four. I could be 21 or 28.'

The cricket was a modest success. Afghanistan lost their first official game – to Oman – by four wickets, but then defeated Bahrain and Malaysia to finish sixth in the tournament. The game was already beginning to show the positive effects it could have in Afghanistan. *Wisden* in 2004 highlights one example. 'Allah Dad Noori was playing one day in Kabul when a young man walked by carrying an AK47, watched for a while before being invited to join in. Afterwards, he asked if he could play next time. When he returned he was without the rifle. "Where's your AK47?" asked Noori. "Oh, I don't need that," the youth replied. "I'm playing cricket!"'

Factionalism was never far away in Afghan cricket. Allah Dad, by now the vice-president of the

Afghan Cricket Federation, had appointed himself as captain of the side for the ACC Trophy in 2000. It was not a decision that owed much to his playing ability. His top score in the tournament was three runs. He bowled a total of ten overs, which went for 85 runs while claiming only one wicket. He dropped himself from the team for the final two games.

When he returned home, Allah Dad found out that not only had he lost his job as captain and been dropped from the squad, he had also been sacked from the Afghan Cricket Federation.

The outside world was beginning to take notice of Afghan cricket. An MCC team toured India in March 2006 and invited Afghanistan over for a game, splitting the cost of Afghanistan's trip to Mumbai with the British Embassy, who were one of the early financial supporters of the game in Afghanistan. MCC were captained by a 48-year-old Mike Gatting, and the blithe assumption was that they would give Afghanistan a lesson in playing the game.

Gatting, whose England tour to Pakistan in 1987 had inspired Taj's love for the game, edged out by a duck. His side fared little better: Afghanistan won the 40-over game by 171 runs. The cricket promoter observing their success then organised a tour to England in 2006. 'When we go there to the English counties and other cricket journalists they don't know anything about Afghan cricket,' Taj recalled. By the end of the tour their opponents had a sense of Afghanistan's talent: playing mainly against county second teams, they won six of their seven games.

Afghanistan's victory over MCC had special significance for two Afghan cricketers, Hameed Hassan and Mohammad Nabi. The bandana-wearing Hassan impressed with his pace and swing; Nabi bludgeoned 116.

While they had both lived on refugee camps, in other ways their life experiences were hugely different, and emblematic of the diversity in the Afghan side. Nabi's family is among the wealthiest in Afghanistan, and has always keenly supported cricket. Like Nabi, Hassan learned the game in Peshawar, but his family loathed the game and attempted to stop him playing. The Hassans only embraced cricket when Hameed was becoming successful.

Both earned contracts to play for MCC Young Cricketers in 2006. John Stephenson, head of cricket at MCC, said that they brought a 'pure and joyful' approach to training sessions at Lord's. 'Incredibly dedicated and strong', Hassan has the build of an ox but has 'no sense of when to stop', perhaps explaining why he has been injured so often. Rapid and with a devilish yorker, Hassan smashed Monty Panesar's helmet with a bouncer in the nets. Nabi also made an impact – in fact, he made cricketing history. Playing for MCC against Sri Lanka A, he became the first player in the history of first-class cricket to hit the first ball in both innings of his debut for six.

Helped by their experience in England, Afghanistan had made solid progress since their first international in 2004. They came third in the Asian Cricket Council Trophy in 2006, an improvement of two positions on their previous performance. But Taj Malik and his team always had greater dreams. They wanted to play in the World Cup. Thanks to their performances in the ACC Trophy, they had a chance.

Still, it was a remote one. Afghanistan had to win three consecutive promotions – from World Cricket League Division Five, Four and then Three – just to get to the final World Cup qualifier where 12 teams would compete for the four places in the 2011 World Cup. However fanciful, the dream instilled Afghanistan's players with a palpable sense of purpose.

In May 2008 a squad made up entirely of former refugees in Pakistan headed to Jersey for the World Cricket League Division Five. Vanuatu, Norway, Japan and the Bahamas were among those competing alongside Afghanistan. By now the Afghan side had the company of a group of film makers who, sensing what an incredible story they had stumbled upon, followed the side around for two years in making the superb film *Out of the Ashes*. The director Tim Albone first encountered the

side in 2005. ‘They had such enthusiasm for the game and such self-belief. It really stayed with me’ so much so that he decided to make a film about their attempts to qualify for the 2011 World Cup.

Before the squad left for Jersey, the film-makers spoke to the British ambassador to Afghanistan about the side’s prospects. ‘They play cricket like war,’ he said before predicting, ‘They’re going to be stuffed!’ against international sides.

He was emphatically wrong on the second point, but it was hard to disagree with him on the first. For most sides in the competition, international sport was an enjoyable divergence from the mundane existences; Jersey’s side included financiers and hedge fund workers. Afghanistan’s desperation for success boiled over into ugly histrionics when decisions did not go their way. ‘You could see how much they wanted to win,’ Matt Hague, who captained Jersey in the tournament, recalled. ‘We thought they were a little bit arrogant.’

Jersey contained copious surprises for the players. For most, it was the first time they had gone beyond Afghanistan, Pakistan or Malaysia. In their hotel, the squad looked incredulous at the sight of female pensioners line-dancing. So distrusting were the squad of the local cuisine that they regularly ate at McDonald’s.

Without rain, Afghanistan might well not have qualified from their group. Their game against Jersey, who won their four group matches, was abandoned; had it gone ahead, Afghanistan would have needed to win. They then had to beat Nepal in the semi-final to advance to World Cricket League Division Four. Thanks to Nabi, who scored 48 and took two wickets, they did.

Before planning for their trip to Tanzania for World Cricket League Division Four, Afghanistan played in the Division Five final against Jersey. After collapsing to 42/7 in pursuit of 81 to defeat the hosts in the final, they scrambled to a two-wicket victory.

‘Once we won the final I couldn’t control myself from crying,’ the batsman Raees Ahmadzai told me. In Jersey he ‘saw peace and I saw birds and animals flying around and walking around in the middle of people. I was sad that our birds and animals are not feeling safe in our country.’ As the crowd applauded austerely, Taj fell to his knees, sobbing in celebration.



After all he had done for Afghan cricket, Taj might have felt entitled to some loyalty in return. But players turned on him after defeat in the semi-finals of the ACC Trophy in 2008 (a completely separate competition to the World Cricket League). No one doubted Taj’s commitment but his bluster and ludicrous predictions were deeply unhelpful. In Jersey alone, he boasted that Afghanistan would score 400 runs against Japan and that they could beat England. He threatened to throw himself into the Atlantic if Afghanistan failed to win the tournament.

Afghanistan now needed more than a brimful of passion. They needed a coach who could develop their cricketing skills, someone who would not resort to chain-smoking at the sight of a batting collapse.

Taj remains rankled by his departure. ‘Up to Jersey there was no government involvement in cricket, and there was no support from any department,’ he said. ‘When cricket became more popular, all people got interested, all the nation got interested and the government removed me from my position. They told me, “Now we are going to the big stage and you are a low level coach.” But I’d done the most difficult job to help the team to play with a hard ball and I gathered the team and motivated them.’

England had just ditched Peter Moores – largely because he lacked Test experience – in favour of someone who had played at the highest level. Afghanistan did the same: for all Taj’s achievement

cricket in Afghanistan has never been about sentiment.

Kabir Khan was appointed as his successor. As a former Test cricketer for Pakistan (albeit only for four Tests) he was assured of respect. And though he could be considered a foreign coach, Kabir could not be called a carpetbagger. Like many of the Afghan side, he was born in Peshawar. His late father was Afghan.

‘It was a tribute to him,’ he said. ‘I thought if I could do something for that country, then my father might be happy.’ Kabir spoke Pashto, the most popular language in Peshawar and Pakistan-bordering parts of Afghanistan, as well as some Dari, Afghanistan’s other official language, so communicating with the players was not a problem.

‘I could speak to them in their mother tongue. They needed someone who could translate cricket language into their own language.’

Kabir described his role as more akin to a ‘headmaster keeping an eye on everything’ than a cricket coach. He had to teach the players everything from how to behave at functions to how to speak to the media and how to eat like athletes. On one occasion, on the night before an ODI in the Netherlands in 2009, some players became embroiled in an uber-competitive dance contest with local girls until the early hours. ‘I shouted “it’s not going to be a dance match tomorrow”,’ Kabir remembered.

Paradoxically, developing a professional mentality – even though the players were only paid expenses until 2010 – was easier because of the turbulence in Afghanistan. ‘I was lucky, in that when I joined them, they were training full-time because there was nothing else to do. They were free anytime for practice,’ Kabir reflected. ‘And the respect of all the team for me, I could see it was like for another brother or a fatherly figure. All of them respected me a lot. Each thing in training I said they never questioned it, they just did it. I think that was the main reason for their success.’

Kabir had a subtler and less demonstrative coaching style than Taj. Afghanistan became calmer and more disciplined in their shot selection and running between the wickets. They no longer collapsed like a tribute act to the 1990s England cricket team. Along with Afghanistan, Jersey qualified from Division Five to Division Four, which was held in October 2008 in Tanzania. Even during the three months between Division Five and Four, Afghanistan improved significantly. ‘They were at a different level,’ said the Jersey captain Hague. ‘They were always very strong in bowling but they became much better at building an innings. It wasn’t so wham-bam.’

In Tanzania, Jersey shared a hotel with Afghanistan and unlikely friendships developed between the two qualifiers from Division Five. ‘When you got to know them they were great people,’ Hague said. ‘They said to us we should come and play cricket in Afghanistan.’ That invitation was not taken up, but Hague heeded advice from Hameed Hassan during Afghanistan’s game against Jersey. Hague was padded up to bat at number three but, because of the heat, was waiting to bat without his helmet on. ‘Hameed said to me, “Skip, are you not wearing a helmet?” He was a bit worried for me – he knew he was going to bowl some short stuff.’

Throughout Afghanistan’s nascent years, they faced a perpetual worry over where they could find halal cuisine – or even just roti and naan. At the World Cricket League Division Three tournament held in Argentina in January 2009, the all-rounder Hasti Gul took over the hotel kitchen to prepare traditional karai for the entire squad because they were missing home so much.

The cricket provided another worry. After losing to Uganda in their first match, Afghanistan won their next three games. But they had to win a fourth consecutive game, against the lowly Cayman Islands, to progress. Afghanistan chose a bad time for their batting to implode: they reached just 68 from 31 overs and, after rain adjusted their target, the Cayman Islands only needed 63 from 20 overs to win.

They were cruising on 35/2 when Afghanistan were reprieved by the rain, which forced the playe

off and kept their World Cup dream alive. ‘I have seen people die and I have not shed a tear,’ Hassan said after the game against the Cayman Islands. ‘But there is something about cricket that gets me here [pointing to his heart]. Cricket is our chance.’

Kabir said, ‘I nearly had another heart attack. I think I need to say thank you to God as he has been very kind to us today. We needed it to rain and it did.’

Rather unfairly, the game was replayed from scratch the following day. Afghanistan won and, with a little help from the weather, they reached the World Cup qualifiers in South Africa in April 2009. After making it past the first round, Afghanistan qualified for the Super 8 stage, which would determine which four qualifiers made the World Cup.

A match against Ireland, the associate cricket powerhouse, loomed ominously. Afghanistan posted a respectable 218/7 but, despite a jittery start, Ireland were cruising on 186/5. They needed 33 from 3 balls: a facile task for a side that had defeated Bangladesh and Pakistan in the last World Cup.

That was reckoning without Hassan. Armed with his trademark blue headband, he decimated Ireland’s tail: their last five wickets fell for ten runs. Four of those fell to Hassan, who ended with 23 including four batsmen clean bowled. Ireland had no riposte to his whippy action and 90mph late swinging yorkers.

It heralded the start of one of the most captivating rivalries in the world game: the orthodoxy of Ireland, the best-drilled and most efficient side beyond the Test world, against Afghanistan’s audacity and irascible aggression.

‘Both teams have that same fighting spirit. We’ve had a few contests that have teetered on the edge but we know what’s at stake,’ Ireland captain William Porterfield reflected. ‘They are a fantastic team with the cricketers to put in big performances.’

Associate sides have been accused of lacking ambition, but it is not a claim that anyone could make against Afghanistan or Ireland.

Despite Hassan’s intervention against Ireland, Afghanistan’s fairytale thudded into reality. Afghanistan earned ODI status – and with it the extra funding necessary to implement a proper cricketing structure in the country. But sport is about glory and Afghanistan didn’t make the World Cup: they lost to Kenya, Netherlands, UAE and Canada in South Africa. As Afghanistan’s hopes of making the World Cup were ended by Canada, Taj was at home, following the game on a creaky internet stream.



Taj would soon return as assistant coach to Kabir. His profuse enthusiasm complemented Kabir’s more cerebral virtues. After the disappointment of missing out on the 2011 World Cup, Afghanistan still had the chance to qualify for the 2010 World Twenty20.

One of their group games in the World Twenty20 qualifiers was against the United States. It was a rare occasion when a game between non-Test teams attracted the cricketing world’s attention. And it was an instance when cricket did not provide Afghanistan with escapism, but a reminder of the devastating situation in the country.

On 27 August 2008, American forces raided the home of a former player, Rahmat Wali, after receiving a tip-off, and shot him dead at the age of 28. Wali was suspected of being an IED facilitator – someone who enables people to build improvised explosive devices or roadside bombs. Taj Malik, for one, does not believe that. Taj described him as ‘a very good guy, a very simple guy. In 2000 we had a match in Peshawar stadium, he hit the biggest six ever which I saw. When I heard that he died it was very sad.’

Afghanistan easily defeated the United States, who could not handle Hassan. After yanking on the player, Hassan leapt to the floor, extending his arms and legs as he gloriied on the wreckage he had made of the American's stumps. The side dedicated the win to the memory of their former player Wali. The victory led to the team receiving a message of congratulations from the Taliban, recognising its potential psychological value in their own fight against America.

The win also helped Afghanistan secure one of the two places for non-Test sides in the World Twenty20, effectively the World Cup in the shortest format of the game. It was the first time that the country had reached an international finals event in any sport. That Afghanistan won the qualifiers, they twice beat Ireland in the tournament, including in the final – at the start of 2010 was a sign of how far they had come in under a year.

They were also proving that it wasn't just the shortest format in which they could excel. Afghanistan also won the four-day Intercontinental Cup in 2010. Had the 2011 World Cup qualifiers taken place in the year preceding the tournament, Afghanistan would surely have made it. Still, the World Twenty20 was a significant prize.

'It just went crazy after that,' Kabir reflected. 'You could see the tears in the boys' eyes and obviously, the emotions and the emotions in the country. It was just like winning a World Cup, really not only qualifying for the World Cup.'

Afghanistan found themselves in a group with India and South Africa: they could scarcely have received a less auspicious draw. 'I am a big fan of American television and movies and my favourite film is *Rocky* – I vividly remember watching it when I was growing up – and one of my heroes is Sylvester Stallone,' he wrote on his ESPNcricinfo blog after the victory over the United States in the qualifier.

'I think that there is a similarity in the story of Rocky and the Afghanistan cricket team – we both started at the bottom and gradually made our way up.'

Though both matches were lost, like Rocky fighting against the world champion, Hassan would not be overawed: he took 3-21 against South Africa, dismissing Jacques Kallis, Mark Boucher and J. Duminy. Hassan and his side would be back at the World Twenty20s in 2012 and 2014. In 2012, he gave India a mighty fright: Afghanistan needed 44 from the last four overs, with four wickets in hand and Nabi going well before they collapsed.

By this point, Taj's cricket career was already over. 'There is no justice,' he lamented when asked about the end of his time with Afghanistan cricket. Like cricketers across the world, Taj blamed greedy administrators, saying that they were clinging on to money that the players earned from qualifying for the 2010 World Twenty20. The Afghan Cricket Board softened their stance and gave the players some of the winnings, but Taj said that the players did not make him aware of this. He resigned, though he briefly resurfaced as Afghanistan A's coach after changes in the board. That stint only lasted for a few months.

He now lives a spiritual life of Tableegh – the same devout Islamic existence that permeated the Pakistan side under the captaincy of Inzamam-ul-Haq. Taj only follows Afghan cricket from a distance, but he still keeps in touch with some of the players – including Nabi, the skipper.

'I worked for seven, eight years with these players when we had no facilities, no money. Now some of the senior players want to have a relationship and come and talk with me. I'm not the kind of person to have bad behaviour with them.'

In 2014, Nabi described Taj as 'a great man', saying 'I meet him from time to time when I go back to Afghanistan. We don't talk about cricket.'



Taj's departure would not be the only time that the Afghan side was afflicted by boardroom disputes. His successor as coach, Kabir Khan, resigned later in 2010, citing interference in team selection and planning. 'Everybody in Afghanistan wanted their son or nephew or whoever to play, because there's a lot of fame in it, and obviously money involved in it. So every politician, every donor, or anybody who had a bit of power, they were trying to influence the Afghanistan Cricket Board. The officials of the cricket board couldn't bear that pressure.'

No shortage of people wanted to latch on to the success of the side; a stable, well-run cricket team is a challenge anywhere, let alone in a country with Afghanistan's wider challenges.

Kabir was persuaded to return from the more comfortable surroundings of the UAE at the start of 2012 after receiving assurances that he would be able to get on with his job in peace.

'The team was doing really badly after I left and there was no one interested in joining them. I was coaching UAE and the team was doing very well, but I knew anyone would join the UAE but no one would be interested in Afghanistan at that point.'

As UAE coach, Kabir had masterminded two victories over Afghanistan in World Cup qualifiers in late 2011, and so endangered the goal of taking Afghanistan to the World Cup for which he had worked so hard.

His return as coach, which lasted until he resigned for personal reasons in September 2014, had the desired effect. In 2013 Afghanistan needed to win each of their last six games in the World Cricket League Championship – two each against Scotland, Namibia and Kenya – to be assured of a World Cup berth. By October, that was down to two.

Afghanistan could have been forgiven for being overcome with nerves. Kabir ensured that they were not. They bowled Kenya out for 89 and 93 en route to two emphatic wins. Hassan proved irresistible, taking 6-30 across the two games to underscore his status as – back issues permitting – the most exhilarating fast bowling sight beyond the Test world.

'He is indisputably the fastest in the associate cricket world. One of those who could bowl 90mph when he was in a good rhythm – he was truly a fighter,' Kabir said. 'If he's 50 per cent fit, he'll still be hungry to play.'

On 4 October Afghanistan qualified for the World Cup: vindication for the side's newfound professionalism, as well as its resolve.

It was far removed from Jersey in 2008. Yet there was continuity in the journey: six of those who had played in the victory over Jersey were in the final 11 that secured Afghanistan's place at the 2011 World Cup, including the captain, Mohammad Nabi.

A few months earlier, World Cup qualification would have been far from Nabi's mind. This owed nothing to events on the field, but to the kidnapping of his father. In May 2013, Nabi's father, a wealthy car salesman, was abducted from his car in the city of Jalalabad. For more than two months his father's whereabouts were unknown, despite a concerted effort by the government to find him. 'It was quite a difficult time,' Nabi said. 'It was very hard to find my dad.'

At the start of August, Nabi and his team faced two crucial World Cup qualifying matches in Namibia. He decided that he could not miss the tour. 'My brother said, "It's not your issue – inshallah when you reach Namibia we will have good news." When I reached Namibia after three days my brother called and said, "Your father is found by the government." I was very happy.'

Nabi celebrated by playing the match of his life. He smashed 81 not out from 45 balls, showing the audacity, clean timing and effortless power evident when he played for MCC Young Cricketers seven years earlier. He then made sure of victory by taking 5-12 with his crafty off spin.

Two months later, Nabi's smash through midwicket against Kenya secured Afghanistan's place at the World Cup. The moment was celebrated by a jubilant, intensely partisan crowd, and their chants of

‘Afghanistan, zindabad!’ The entire Afghan team ran from the dressing room to hoist Nabi into the air. ‘I was very proud of myself.’

It felt like a home crowd, but it was not: Afghanistan were playing their ‘home’ game at the Sharjah Cricket Stadium. No country has ever agreed to tour Afghanistan, so they have made the UAE their home. The Afghan contingent has been rather more raucous than many home crowds, cheering their side relentlessly and bringing in everything from Afghan tricolours to air-horns to bagpipes to add to the atmosphere.

Back when Afghanistan played Ireland in the final of the World Twenty20 qualifiers in 2010, the ICC only allocated an area with 3,000 seats, thinking that would be enough to satisfy demand for the fixture. Around 10,000 supporters came and the area they were supposed to be in became so overcrowded that they started scaling the fence at the front of the stand, where there was a 40-foot drop to the lower tier. The ICC had to enlist Taj to speak on the tannoy in Pashtu to make sure none of them invaded again. No one moved after he had spoken.

To prevent a repeat, Afghanistan’s final World Cricket League game against Kenya in October 2013 was the first time that the ICC had charged supporters to attend a game in the UAE not involving Test sides. Five Afghan parliamentarians were among around 5,000 in attendance. Then-president Hamid Karzai (one of the president’s functions is to act as patron of the Afghan Cricket Board) was glued to his TV.



As stirring as qualification for the World Cup was, having a women’s team free to compete on the international stage would be more remarkable.

Even among Afghan cricket fans, few people know of Diana Barakzai. She is the pioneer of women’s cricket in the country or, more accurately, the would-be pioneer. However great the obstacles that the men’s side has had to overcome, they are nothing compared with those faced by Afghanistan’s fledgling women’s team.

Diana and her three sisters, who are all keen players and ICC-qualified coaches, learned to play as refugees in Pakistan having fled from the Taliban.

Since returning to Kabul in 2009 they have tried to encourage other women to take up cricket. Diana said that her father and brother ‘have always been supportive to us, always teaching us about cricket’. Their father converted a plot of land from his old house in Kabul into a cricket pitch that he provided women with somewhere to play.

The Afghan women’s national team was formed in 2010, with lofty ambitions to emulate the success of the men’s team. It has not worked out like that. The women’s side has still yet to play an official match with ‘political reasons’ cited by the Afghan Cricket Board. Players have been likened to prostitutes, while practice matches have been disrupted by mullahs bellowing from the sidelines. The charity Afghan Connection, the driving force behind women’s cricket in Afghanistan, now endeavours to play behind walls in order to protect the girls.

An annual tournament is held between girls’ schools in Kabul, but the sport continues to be stifled by Afghanistan’s attitude to women. Outside the more affluent and progressive members of the society – who tend to live in cities like Kabul – it is still anathema for women to be seen in public by themselves. ‘Playing cricket for a girl was not less than suicide,’ Diana said of her experiences. She has now lost her role, with Dr Muhammad citing ‘poor performance for three years and for not having an educational degree’ as the factors.

Women’s cricket must respect ‘Islamic values and the values of traditional Afghanistan’ to grow

Dr Muhammad reflected. It is now hoped that the women's side may appear in the Asian Challenge Cup in 2015, but plans for official matches have been abandoned copious times in the past.

Taj doubted whether women's cricket could ever gain acceptance. 'It's very difficult because Afghanistan is a Muslim country and Islam does not allow women and girls to participate in the game, especially in an area like Afghanistan. Even they cannot move without Islamic rules to walk from home. So how can they play?' He said that female cricketers in Kabul 'didn't know anything about the game'.

Just as the Taliban's support has been crucial in the success of the men's side, it has stymied women's cricket.



Afghanistan have already proved that World Cup qualification need not be the summit of their cricketing achievements. In February 2014 they defeated Bangladesh away in the Asia Cup. A few months later, they drew an ODI series 2-2 in Zimbabwe, including winning the last game by 100 runs.

Off the pitch, Afghan cricket has developed an increasingly professional operation. Even the phone line to the Afghan Cricket Board has become less capricious. A Memorandum of Understanding has been signed with the Ministry of Education to establish cricket as a compulsory part of the national curriculum. A diverse array of donors, including UNICEF, the Swedish Committee and USAID, have helped to develop the infrastructure of the sport. In October 2014, Germany agreed to put €700,000 towards the construction of a new cricket stadium in the city of Khost, near the border with Pakistan.

For donors eager to attach themselves to a good news story in Afghanistan, funding cricket holds obvious appeal. The Taliban's support for cricket is also significant. Cricketers are not loathed by the most reactionary segments of Afghan society, as footballers often are, meaning that donors are insulated from criticism of pushing Western values before the country is ready. It also means that investment in cricket is unlikely to be wasted: cricket pitches and players have not been targets for Taliban attacks.

Sponsors have also invested in Afghan cricket: it offers one of the best ways for companies to reach the Afghan middle-class. The support means that Afghanistan is much less reliant on the International Cricket Council than other associate nations; ICC income only accounts for around a quarter of their funding.

In its running of the game, the Afghan Cricket Board is more enlightened than many full members. 'The cricket board punch well above their weight in their environment in terms of good governance and administration. They're really well-run,' an ICC insider told me: chief executive Dr Noor Muhammad is a former United Nations youth coordinator.

Afghanistan aims to play Test cricket – and not at some mythical point in the future, but as soon as possible in 2018 when the ICC Test Challenge, pitting the lowest-ranking Test nation against the winners of the Intercontinental Cup, is scheduled.

Afghanistan also needs Test cricket to prevent an exodus of its best players to Pakistan, as has happened with the best Irish players leaving for England. Wicketkeeper Mohammad Shazhad was initially reluctant to play for Afghanistan: he qualified for Pakistan too, which offered him the only possible route into Test cricket. Afghanistan's associate opponents have often complained that their side has an unfair advantage because so many of their players have connections with Pakistan.

Sensitive to this, the Afghan Cricket Board pushes players to speak Pashtu in interviews rather than Urdu, to show it is for Afghans rather than Pakistanis. The links between the first generation of Afghanistan's side and the Peshawar refugee camps also raises a question: can the Afghan structure

produce players of the calibre of those who were exposed to the Pakistani club scene?

There are significant reasons to think that it can. While for most Afghans cricket exists as a game played with a tape ball wherever space can be found – from narrow streets to the promenade of the Darul Aman Palace on the edge of Kabul – the game is becoming increasingly structured. There are now over 80 grounds in Afghanistan, including more than 50 turf wickets. The country has around 500 cricket clubs, including leagues in 32 of the 34 provinces.

Even before the Test Challenge was floated, the Afghan Cricket Board had plans to extend the duration of the two-innings regional tournament from three to four days. The new format began in October 2014. Afghanistan was ahead of its great associate rival, Ireland – as well as Sri Lanka – in introducing a four-day domestic structure. Bangladesh only formed a multi-day structure after it had been awarded Test status.

The domestic Twenty20 competition, the Etisalat Sixes, has been an astounding success. A capacity crowd of more than 10,000 watched the final – ticket prices were doubled from the final in 2013 but that proved no deterrent – and thousands more were turned away at the gates. The Etisalat Sixes are also a ubiquitous presence on television sets in Afghanistan. Perhaps optimistically, the Afghan Cricket Board claimed that 12m people watched the final in 2014.

Though its funding remains trivial by comparison with the Test-playing nations, the Afghan Cricket Board has put in place a good structure for nurturing players. As it has grown, so it has been able to improve ways of identifying talent, especially outside the main cricketing hubs. While the concentration of players from near the border with Pakistan remains, cricket's popularity is also growing in the north. The quick bowler Mirwais Ashraf hails from Kunduz, a city in the north of the country, near Tajikistan, that has become a focal point for fighting between the Taliban and the Afghan security forces. The board contracts 43 professional players, including five under-19 players.

One of those who recently progressed through the Afghan youth structure is Usman Ghani. At the age of 17 he scored an ODI century against Zimbabwe, opening the innings. Five months earlier, he had been a member of the Afghanistan side that defeated Australia and Sri Lanka in the Under-19 World Cup in 2014. The results served as notice to the world of the abundant talent that exists below the Afghanistan national side, even if the exact ages of several players have been questioned.



The increased professionalism and popularity of Afghan cricket has lent it an entirely different character. Gone is the motley bunch who played in Jersey in 2008, receiving only travel and accommodation and a very modest allowance in return. In their place are Afghan celebrities who are not shy of monetising their talents.

The changes have not pleased everyone. 'When I was captain in that time our players were hungry to play cricket,' Raees Ahmadzai said. 'Now players have contracts and make good money. When going on tour players have daily allowances and stay in five-star hotels so players' lifestyles have changed.'

Taj Malik did not begrudge the players their riches. 'I'm happy that they're playing on a good level, they have good salaries, they don't have economic problems. They have model cars.'

Yet, to him, professionalism has come at a price: the essence of Afghan cricket has been lost. His cricketing philosophy is encapsulated by his favourite game, against the UAE in the Asian Cricket Council Twenty20 tournament in 2009. Afghanistan needed ten to win from the final two balls with their last pair at the crease. 'I shouted at Hameed to not go down the track and stay in the crease and hit it very far. The first ball he hit for four and the last for six and we won.'

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