

Pitchside

My life in Indian cricket

AMRIT MATHUR

Amrit Mathur was the youngest manager of the Indian cricket team to South Africa in 1992. He was part of the organizing committee of the 1996 World Cup.

He was Secretary Sports Authority of India , he worked with the Delhi Dare Devils and writes a column for Hindustan Times.

Cricket is a ball vs bat game, it is 2 vs 11. For players it is about the decisions they need to make all the time.

I am no celebrity, I have no scam or controversy to reveal. I don't have breaking news.

This book s about my innings of 35 years in and around cricket. I take the reader beyond the boundary to the workings of BCCI , IPL and the Indian cricket dressing room.

This is Indian cricket's story seen through my eyes.

The BCCI leans towards control rather than cricket. The game is not only about bat and ball, it is also about power and patronage.

For Kapil dev, hard work was his mantra,
physical pain only a temporary nuisance. I
once asked him what was his secret and he said
“mehnet and pet me aag honi chahiye”

The Delhi district cricket association (DDCA) has a rich tradition of being in the news for the wrong reasons. For the BCCI, the DDCA has been a problem child in need of regular discipline, rehab and occasional punishment.

Before the NatWest final, food is not the only gyan that Dravid gives to players. He believes players representing India must know their roles and responsibilities and the drive to succeed must come from within.

The ICC security briefing on security and match fixing had one great slide:

Everyone remembers a player. No one forgets a cheat.

Sachin always sits in the front seat of the team bus on the left hand side. Colleagues give him space and respect, and he is humble to a fault and disarmingly modest.

At team meetings John Wright is like a college lecturer who has come prepared with notes to take a class. Mostly it is a one sided conversation where he does the talking and extracts responses from the players.

Sunil Gavaskar shares a strange love hate relationship with English cricket. He respects the tradition and culture but his questioning mind resents the sense of superiority and underlying arrogance that is part of the system.

Jonty Rhodes's magic mantra for fielding – to save one run you have to practice one hour extra everyday.

Captaincy sits well on Saurav and after 4 years in the job, he has earned the solid respect of his team. This shows that he is good with his people and second, he is backed by an exceptional bunch of seniors who ensure he is happy.

The point is not to say that team meetings are bad and scrap them, the point is to ask how to fix them.

Sourav's comment when the Pakistan team was fined for slow over rate :
“ The run up of Shoaib Akthar needs to be shortened to save time”

Sourav Ganguly on captaining India :

“It matters but also shatters”

Ordinary players play according to the merit of the ball, but Tendulkar plays according to his will. That's what he did vs Pakistan in the 2003 world cup.

Dada said the following to the team for the Pakistan tour in 2004:

1. Maintain intensity even if things are not working out
2. Batsmen must fire, anyone who is in has to make it big.
3. Bowlers to focus on Yorkers, slower balls and angle deliveries across right handers.

General Musharraf measures performance in terms of victory and defeat. For him a cricket match is a battle, its about the fighting spirit, not giving up showing commitment and executing impactful action.

Dravid declared when Sachin was on 194 not out. It was his decision. Sachin was calm but upset. Sachin and Dravid had a 1 on 1 later and sorted it out. Sachin said in the press conference he was ‘surprised and disappointed” but did his best for the team. Any other team would have been divided on this issue but not this Indian team. Both Dravid and Sachin played for India.

Dravid carries himself with remarkable poise, dignity and self confidence. He wears the India cap with pride and is a great ambassador for Indian cricket. He also wears a mask that hides the emotions within.

When Sourav met Imran Khan, he talked of leadership and stresses the importance of creating loyalty by picking the right players and trusting them. Dada listens like a student and asks pertinent questions.

If Dravid is model pro No 1,VVS occupies a slot close to him. He is from the same school – self driven, on automatic mode, always striving to improve.

In late 2007 Lalit Modi called a few people for what film folk would call a narration, it was about IPL.

The sceptics in the room asked Lalit if international players would play, if broadcasting would happen, would private ownership work?

Lalit gave answers and showed them the BCCI approval.

The business model of IPL broke the mold. This was cricket's first ever handshake with private investment which resulted in actual ownership and not just sponsorship.

For IPL teams, the questions were would people buy tickets, would people come for the match if the team lost three matches on the trot, should there be concession tickets for students, what is the worth of the main sponsor logo on the T shirt? Etc.

At the end of the first IPL, there were four FIRs filed against me , the Delhi daredevils COO. For black marketing tickets, for overcharging food items in the stadium, betting on games and for the indecent behavior of the cheerleaders.

Lesson learnt, for a successful match day, you needed the local SHO and the entertainment tax officer on your side.

Ness Wadia said this best for the owners” we thought given our business background, if you take the right steps you achieve the desired objective. But sport does not work to plan. You can do all the right things and have the wrong results”

We signed Akshay Kumar as brand ambassador for DD. When Delhi ran into problems we wanted to cancel the contract which was not technically possible. I went to meet Akshay Kumar in Mumbai. He took just one second and said lets close it if its not working out for DD, he didn't ask for any money despite having the right to do so. That was magnanimous.

Anil Kumble appreciated the IPL but saw dark clouds. He felt that the players would prefer IPL and T 20 to Ranji trophy and there would be extra pressure on spinners, especially off break bowlers.

To encourage players to do better, Delhi daredevils put in an incentive plan for players, the first team to do so. Glenn Mc Grath argued against this plan, he said players play for pride and need to do their best.

Team owners support the team when the going is good. Despite polite posturing and kind words, they demand results.

David Warner was convinced that he was better than the bowler but reminded himself to respect the ball.

We hired him for DD when he had not made the Australian cricket team. He and his manager were sure he would play for Australia.

The Big bash league and The 100 are non private leagues owned by the cricket boards. If they invite private investment, the rich IPL teams will bid and take them.

India cricketers suffer from a siege mentality.
They feel targeted by the media and are super
sensitive to media criticism.

For Indian cricketers, knowledge is associated with games played – kitna khela hai. MSD press conferences were sarcastic, Virat would get riled.

Current players don't seem to respect the past players, they think the past players had it easy and the game is more difficult today.

The whisper in the world of cricket is that you cant get MSD on the line and get him to fall in line.

Virat was best described by an observer not as a music director who set a tune for others to sing but a tough sergeant whipping new recruits into shape.

Jagmohan Dalmiya was a hungry batsman who combined the work ethic of Dravid and Kohli.

For Sachin, preparation was key. He was a master who always remained a student.

Cricket for sachin was not about amassing runs, but a commitment, a duty to perform and a sacred debt to repay.

Lalit Modi was whimsical and unpredictable.
Nothing remained pending with Lalit, you
always got an answer.

Madhav Rao scindia was more of a professional CEO than the usual mantri.