

Cricket Champions Trophy final

Simon Wilde

CRICKET CORRESPONDENT



Dystopian final symbolic of India's attitude to Pakistan

As in any other walk of life, cricket sometimes throws up utterly farcical situations. Those from England who either played in or professionally followed at close quarters the "Covid" Ashes of 2021-22 prayed that they would never go through anything as absurd again.

It was a tour that began without a confirmed schedule and with the England squad training on the Gold Coast in two groups separated by a wire fence. Covid regulations varied from state to state, so testing was frequent, intrusive and unpleasant.

When England's bio-secure bubble was breached, members of their coaching staff were sent into quarantine, but when Australia's net bowlers were found to be positive it was decided it did not matter. Hell or high water, the five Tests were going to be played to safeguard revenues.

Stuart Broad later declared the series void, much to the irritation of Australia's players. Not that they were best placed to speak, as they did not play a Test match away from home during the two years of the pandemic.

As a dystopian experience, that was hard to beat, but the Champions Trophy 2025 has given it a good run for its money. Hosting rights were awarded to Pakistan several years ago, but India's refusal to play there – resulting in the compromise that any match involving India would be played in Dubai instead – hobbled the entire enterprise.

Host countries anticipate a celebration and a festival, and an opportunity to grow the game at local level and inspire future generations. With a third of the matches being outsourced, including, as it happens, the final – which will take place in Dubai this morning between India and New Zealand – Pakistan were left with only ten games and, as fate would have it, unseasonal rain ruined three of these.

The Pakistan team themselves were a grave disappointment. Drawn in the same group as both eventual finalists, and beaten by both, they went out at the earliest opportunity. But of their quality as a cricket team, more in a moment.

First we need to look more closely at India's treatment of their great rivals and neighbours. India's refusal to play in Pakistan is based on government decree and dates back to the terror attacks on Mumbai in 2008, which

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were attributed to an Islamist militant organisation based in Pakistan.

Since then, meetings between the two countries have largely taken place on neutral soil. Exceptions were a short tour by Pakistan to India in 2012-13 and, two years ago, Pakistan nobly agreeing to travel to India for the 50-over World Cup, where, after being granted visas at the last minute, they played nine matches in Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad and Calcutta. Pakistan hoped India would return the favour this year. They did not.

If the only problem was the stance of the Indian government, Indian cricket would have everyone's sympathy, but that argument does not hold. Pakistan players are also barred from competing in the Indian Premier League. Initially this was due to a refusal to have anything to do with Pakistan in the immediate aftermath of the Mumbai attacks, but 17 years on this stance makes no sense. It cannot be about keeping the players safe because Pakistan visited in 2012-13 and 2023 without coming to harm.

Some might conclude it is an act of

SATISH KUMAR/REUTERS



Rohit Sharma bats in Dubai, where India have stayed for the tournament

petty vindictiveness; others may argue that it fits with a broad strategy designed to suppress Pakistan politically, culturally and economically.

The IPL boycott of Pakistan players – if that is what it is – extends beyond India's borders. IPL franchises own almost 20 teams across the globe playing in T20 tournaments in the United Arab Emirates, South Africa, the United States and the Caribbean, but whereas other teams in those competitions recently deployed Pakistan players, the IPL teams fielded only one – the Swansea-born Imad Wasim, who played 130 white-ball matches for Pakistan from 2015-24. Last year, Imad represented IPL-owned teams in the ILT20 and Major League Cricket in the United States.

A big test, therefore, looms this week with the Hundred draft. How large an influence the new owners of the eight teams will wield in recruitment at this early stage, with formal contracts yet to be signed, is unclear, but one imagines still a fair bit.

Will the four teams now owned by IPL teams be prepared to buy any of the 11 Pakistani players priced at between £41,500 (Shan Masood) and £120,000 (Naseem Shah), or the other 34 players with no reserve price? As we reported in November, the ECB was willing to warn franchise owners that discrimination would be unacceptable, though it is hard to see what powers the board has to enforce this.

Four male Pakistan internationals took part in last year's Hundred; none were retained but three have re-entered the draft. All this, of course, has relevance to Pakistan failing to get out of the first group stage of the past three ICC white-ball tournaments. Starved of exposure to high-quality short-format competitions, they are struggling to adapt to different conditions, keep up with the latest tactical trends, and to learn to cope with performing in front of large, often hostile crowds.

Their own Pakistan Super League is an excellent tournament but that is virtually the only chance many of their players get to interact with international-class cricketers away from national service.

Involvement in the IPL, remember, played a key role in England developing into a world-beating white-ball side from 2015-19, and Afghanistan enjoying a fillip from having many of their leading players at the IPL. But perhaps if Afghanistan supplant Pakistan as the second best team in Asia, India for one won't be unhappy.

ON TV TODAY

India v New Zealand

8.20am Sky Sports, 9am start



OVAL DRESSING ROOMS AND PLAYERS' BALCONY TO BE DEMOLISHED

The Oval's famous dressing rooms and players' balcony, which have had so many memorable scenes over the past 35 years, including the 2005 Ashes celebrations and the farewells to Stuart Broad and Moeen Ali in 2023, are being torn down as part of a major overhaul of the ground's facilities. Surrey

say that the new team rooms will be the best in English cricket and as good as anything in sport (writes Simon Wilde).

Most notably there will no longer be an "away" dressing room, once adorned with the signatures of visiting international captains, but rather a men's and women's home team

rooms, with the latter being used by men's away teams.

The refit is expected to be complete by the end of March and in time for the ground's new partnership with Reliance Industries, which has bought for about £60 million a 49 per cent stake in the Oval Invincibles, the Hundred

team based at the Oval. All Hundred owners are required to run men's and women's teams.

The Oval is also in the process of installing new floodlights, which will reduce power consumption by more than 40 per cent, as well as a new replay screen that will be twice as large as the existing one.