

Why a pitch that turns from the first day is a bad thing is not clear. Why this is worse or more unfair than a pitch where the ball bounces throat-high or swings like a banana from start of play is even more obscure

Home advantage

Mukul Kesavan

Towards the end of the Delhi Test between Sri Lanka and India in December, a television commentator was told by his statistician that Anil Kumble had become the second man in history to take 300 wickets in home Tests. Sitting in front of the television, I instinctively wished it had been the other way round – I wanted the 300 wickets in the “away” column. In this I was typical.

South Asian cricket teams and their supporters are sensitive to the issue of home advantage. The charge that subcontinental teams are poor tourists is acutely felt. After Chetan Sharma’s spirited and surprisingly brisk bowling won us a rubber in England, no Indian team has won a Test series there. Every Indian fan, commentator and pundit knows that the Indian team haven’t won a Test series outside of India for 20 years or thereabouts. What about the win in Pakistan in 2004 someone asked? Same subcontinent: doesn’t count as abroad. And Zimbabwe this year? A two-Test series against the worst team in the world purged of its best players? Be serious. Despite Sachin Tendulkar and Rahul Dravid and Mohammad Azharuddin and the rest, Indian pundits conclude that Indian cricket has been fundamentally unsound for 20 years.

Indians console themselves by thinking that the Sri Lankan record is even more lopsided. They win everything at home and nothing abroad. Mahela Jayawardene’s home record is Bradmanesque; outside his country he shrinks to a goodish batsman. The same is true of Marvan Atapattu. And Muttiah Muralitharan? Well, says the hard-nosed, subcontinental cricket writer, there’s a reason why the bowler who beat Kumble to 300 wickets at home was Murali. Those Sri Lankan glue-pots are made for the man.

We need to cease and desist. Indians, Pakistanis and Sri Lankans should stop apologising for doing well at home. If this self-flagellation is meant to prove to the world that we’re grown up and unillusioned and mature, I have news for you: there’s no one listening. Our obsessive need to talk down our performances at home isn’t self-awareness, it is a form of self-hatred that we should have outgrown.

Our tendency to discount home performances when calculating actual cricketering ability is based on the idea that the rest of the cricketering world judges its teams and players by their all-weather abilities on sporting pitches. That, the story goes, is how they tell the men from the boys in the West Indies, in Australia, in England and in South Africa. Actually, that isn’t really how they do things Over There. Don’t believe everything you read.

Your average English or Australian player, journalist and fan does not see failure in the subcontinent as damning. He doesn’t believe that defeat in India or Pakistan defines his team’s ability or the standing of its individual members. Steve Waugh nominated India as the final frontier because he was bidding for cricketering immortality, for the right to claim that the team he captained was the greatest in the history of the game. When he lost that extraordinary series, when Ricky Ponting barely made double figures in three Test matches, when Shane Warne was caned into comic



Hamish Blair/Getty Images (Lara), Prakash Singh/AFP/Getty Images (Kumble)

relief, the Australians didn’t become self-abnegating wrecks.

The English, on the other hand, have developed over decades of failure in the subcontinent, an epic of extenuating circumstances. It goes like this. We (the English) couldn’t compete because the food was inedible, the hotels roach-ridden, our stomachs upset, the nightlife non-existent, the heat too hot and the dust too obscuring. These were the off-field handicaps. As far as playing conditions went, the pitches were dustbowls or rolled mud, they kept low, they turned square, the ball didn’t come on, its seam wasn’t right, the crowds were too noisy, the toss too important, the umpires were bent and the home team cheated.

Central to our anxiety about home conditions is our acceptance of the Anglo-Australian definition of a “sporting” wicket. The good pitch has a light covering of grass, it has bounce and movement, it doesn’t turn till the fourth day, the ball comes on, and *it has something for everyone*. Anything else is either a feather bed or a vicious turner, not a fair Test wicket.

Why a pitch that turns from the first day is a bad thing is not clear. Why this is worse or more unfair than a pitch where the ball bounces throat-high or swings like a banana from start of play is even more obscure. Why is a hot day in Delhi harder to deal with for a touring side than the finger-numbing cold of Trent Bridge in the first half of the English season? Do you see the English discounting their recent Ashes win as a bad case of home advantage?

So long as both teams have to cope with the same sort of turn and bounce and weather, mastery of home conditions is something to be admired, not disparaged. The cricket publics of South Asia need to remember that the greatest skills in contemporary cricket have been developed by Sri Lankan, Pakistani and Indian players in creative response to subcontinental conditions.

Saqlain Mushtaq invented and Murali perfected the *doosra* to counter hard-charging, bludgeon-wielding modern batsmen who were threatening to make finger-spin obsolete. Sarfraz Nawaz and Imran Khan invented reverse swing to move the ball in conditions that English seamers had only whinged about. To watch Tendulkar and Navjot Sidhu and VVS Laxman destroy Warne on turning tracks by reading him from the hand, skipping down the wicket and hitting him inside-out from the leg-stump rough through cover, was to be given a masterclass in batsmanship. And conversely, to watch Murali bowl *doosras* around the wicket in Delhi and utterly bewilder those same Indian batsmen, the best players of spin bowling in the world, was to be present at one of those pivotal moments when the game makes an evolutionary leap.

So the next time one of our gladiators reaches a landmark, we need to celebrate without being modest on their behalf. Hail Kumble! Ave Tendulkar! All hail.

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