

# Is Cricket's History Repeating Itself?

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Dr Rudi Webster/File Photo

by Dr Rudi Webster

Two years ago, I asked M.S. Dhoni, Captain of India, what motivates today's cricketers? He said:

“Playing for your country should be your main motivating force. But today you need to have a good income and livelihood. Only a few players have a professional education or academic qualifications. A good cricketer has seven to ten years to earn the money that will sustain him for life after cricket. So he must balance his love for and loyalty to the country with a good income and livelihood. Of course love and passion for the game and the need for recognition are other powerful motivators. But in today's competitive and fast-changing world we cannot ignore the importance of money in the life of a cricketer.”

I remember telling him that if those basic needs are not balanced, a conflict of values would result in mistrust and bad feelings between cricket boards and players who are trying to set themselves up financially for life after cricket.

I then wondered aloud why in our economic system cricketers are labeled as mercenaries and are victimized and punished for doing things for which people in other professions are admired and praised – legally maximizing their income and financial status!

Why are cricketers held to a higher level of patriotism and loyalty than people in other professions? And why are cricket boards and administrators charged with the responsibility of managing the game and the players. Should we the public and the players not expect the same level of loyalty, patriotism, competence and integrity from them?

In 1977 cricket boards banned players who were contracted to Kerry Packer's World Series Cricket. Soon after, Tony Greig and John Snow brought a case against the English Cricket Board in the London High Court. The case lasted seven weeks and resulted in a victory for the players and Packer. Immediately after, the ICC tried to retaliate but it soon lost the battle and had to back down and compromise.

In his judgment, the judge said: “Professional cricketers need to make a living and ICC should not stand in their way just because its own interests might be damaged. The ICC might have stretched the concept of loyalty too far. Players could not be criticized for entering the (WSC) contracts...”

Is the West Indies cricket Board (WICB) in its effort to improve cricket stretching the players' loyalty too far?

Two recent articles vilifying West Indies players in the Indian Premier League (IPL) reminded me of the many vitriolic articles that were written about Kerry Packer and his players in World Series cricket over thirty-five years ago. The front page of the Mirror Sport newspaper read, **PIRATES, Aussie TV Tycoon Could Shatter World of Cricket**. And that article was mild compared to some of the others. From May 1977 UK's The Mirror lambasted the players who had signed with Kerry Packer.

During World Series, 14 West Indies players were banned by the WICB and were treated like outcasts. This rejection motivated them and gave birth to the champion team that dominated world cricket for fifteen years. At the time the WICB was trapped in the past and could not see what lay ahead in the future. It did not have a vision and could not see that it would have to rely on the performances and star power of the players to attract crowds and lucrative sponsorships from multinationals and to get enormously profitable funding from TV and other media outlets. These types of sponsorship are now the lifeblood of today's cricket.

When the Australian Cricket Board refused to grant Kerry Packer exclusive TV rights to broadcast Australian cricket he immediately started World Series Cricket. He targeted many of the world's greatest cricketers and offered them perks and salaries that were unheard of at the time; offers they could not refuse.

World Series Cricket (WSC) was a powerful cricket revolution that brought about seismic changes in international cricket. Boards that vilified Packer and accused him of promoting greed and friction in the game eventually removed their blinkers, shed their hostile attitudes and adopted many of his strategies for making money through TV and multinational sponsorship.

Packer introduced higher salaries for players, drop-in pitches, night cricket, white balls, coloured clothing, black sightscreens, helmets, coaches and fitness experts, professional multinational sponsorship, TV rights as a money making strategy, and the marketing of cricket as an exciting spectator sport. And he revolutionized the TV coverage of cricket by employing multiple cameras and commentators and by using clever and innovative TV animations for viewers who didn't know too much about the game. These initiatives were ignored and resisted for some time by the cricket boards, but they are now the fabric of today's cricket.

T20 cricket is a mini-revolution that has made a big impact on the minds of cricket lovers, particularly the young ones. We are not quite sure where it is leading but it has already introduced many innovations to fielding, batting, bowling and captaincy and has revived young players interest in the game. Of course there are negatives to this revolution but we should not dwell on them and punish players who are attracted to this format. Instead we should search for the positives, capitalize on them, and use our imagination and creative minds to see what opportunities and beneficial changes this mini-revolution will create for cricket in the future.

Today's administrators must rewrite the future of West Indies cricket by changing perception and by thinking in new and creative ways. They must get rid of bad habits, egocentric attitudes, and limiting beliefs and err on the side of motivating rather than punishing players. They must also enhance performance and learn to spot and seize opportunities by reforming and restructuring their boards. Finally they should avoid committing the same mistakes about the IPL that their predecessors made during the Kerry Packer Revolution.

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