

# Be afraid, be very afraid

They may still be flashy and prone to combust but Pakistan now also have a formidable cohesiveness and a more pronounced backbone. India may just be in for a surprise when they visit, warns **Osman Samiuddin**. Photograph by **Aamir Qureshi/AFP/Getty Images**

**P**akistan is dead, long live Pakistan. Inescapably this offered itself as a chant after the Lahore win over England. As a Test series win, it was special; they hadn't won one anywhere for nearly two years. At home, they hadn't done so for longer.

But unmistakably, in the afterglow the air was heavy with meaning. Pakistan had beaten England before, they had been indomitable at home before, they had perpetrated similar imploding heists too. But that last-day victory, built on four days of proper, widespread graft and 14 days of progression echoed a broader, longer-term trend altogether.

The series win too had come on the back of 18 months where Pakistan worked, scrapped and fought for stalemates, through a whitewash, through injuries to key players, through better opponents, all the while evolving. Precisely because of what preceded it, it can be construed a milestone win and it may well herald a new time. When India now visit, they will meet a fresh Pakistan side, new and improved from the last time India toured and newer still from Pakistan's tour last year. In identity they may not have changed that much, but in spirit they undoubtedly have.

Admittedly it's tempting to be blasé and practise a "we've seen it before with Pakistan" cynicism. A loss here, a change of coach and captain there and we're back to square wherever. It won't, after all, be the first time. But this latest stage in Pakistan cricket's timeline has an authenticity of endeavour, an authority of purpose, that suggests it will not be readily forsaken.

For one, this story is deeper-rooted, going back to immediately after the World Cup in 2003. And to those who initiated the necessary process of change then, due credit must be ascribed. With the axing of eight senior players, including crucially the two Ws, an epoch defined and defaced by spectacular wins, losses, fractiousness, scandal – was mercifully brought to an end. Aamir Sohail, part gleeful ruthless assassin, part visionary chief selector, carried out the cull and brought in what amounted to a new line-up.



## preview



Julian Herbert (team), Stu Forster (Woolmer) / Getty Images

Still, there were further tremors in the year subsequent, notably the loss of Rashid Latif as captain, Javed Miandad as coach, and Sohail himself. And only four of the players who played that first Test against Bangladesh after the World Cup played in Lahore against England. Still, the two sides were unified by the ethos of cleansing both belonged to. Lahore could only have happened had the World Cup cull happened.

Roughly halfway through, when India rammed through at Rawalpindi in April 2004 – a Test that saw seven of the current line-up playing – reconstruction awaited, not a mastermind but a resuscitator. With the appointment of Bob Woolmer it found one and it is from here really that the story acquires coherence of plot and narrative. From this point on, Pakistan's progress has been visible and Woolmer's influence, like that of others before him, must also be acknowledged.

Crucially, he came without any agenda save cricket; the unavoidable politics of Miandad's stints as well as the undeniable ineptitude of Richard Pybus's were finally banished. Happily Woolmer brought with him some order to Pakistan's chaos. First he attacked fitness, transforming what he called the worst side he had seen in terms of fitness to one that has an honest zeal about it.

Some players, Woolmer claims, are 180 per cent fitter than before. Fundamentals like fielding and running have also improved. This feel of organisation, of attention to basics, has borne itself out most vividly in Pakistan's ODI performances, particularly this year, in India, the West Indies and now against England.

Possibly of greater significance has been Woolmer's work with the Pakistan psyche, from Inzamam-ul-Haq to Shahid Afridi and all the grey in between. Although it is a woolly, unquantifiable realm, almost all the younger players have publicly gushed about the confidence he has instilled in them. In turn, from them he has extracted confident performances.

But for the chiselling of a spine – which is what most marks and distinguishes this side – much credit must go to Inzamam. Arguably he has been more vital than Woolmer even, as the coach himself asserts. Inzamam revealed this propensity to fight back even before Woolmer, with centuries against India at Lahore, as well as against Sri Lanka in October last year, very early in Woolmer's tenure. But the turning point came after the whitewash in Australia. Then, says Woolmer, Inzamam asked only one thing from himself and his team: to compete and compete hard ignorant of context or circumstance.

Since then, Inzamam has responded personally to defeat – 184 at

## The facilitator

Bob Woolmer speaks about his role in Pakistan's evolution and the changes since he took over

**In the past Pakistan's growth has always been haphazard, with no real pattern to it. Do you think the case may be different now, after the England Tests?**

I'm happy with the way we've batted in all the Test matches and also with the way we've bowled. We've certainly fought hard all the way from Australia, which I think was a turning point. Even when we played in India, where we were given no hope at all, we played all three Test matches pretty well. Then in the West Indies we had a blip again but we played the second Test very well in Jamaica. I think there is a measure of consistency since India.

**What do you think were the key aspects that led to the win over England?**

I think there were quite a few, which is pleasing. Inzamam's batting was a key factor but the players who batted around him also did very well. In Test matches if you score enough runs you can put the opposition under pressure. I know you need to take 20 wickets in a match to win it but it's always easier if you have 600 on the board. Also the resurgence of Shoaib Akhtar as well as the variety in our bowling attack. We have Rana, Sami, Danish and Shoaib Malik; it's a useful attack if everyone is firing.

**What do you think your biggest contribution has been as coach?**

I would hope that I have created an environment in which the team enjoys playing and practising their cricket as much as possible. That's probably the main thing but obviously a lot of work has also been put in on an individual basis. Working with certain players on a one-to-one basis; it's a matter of adding up all the little bits really.

**You have India coming now. Do you think this series might be different to the last time India visited? Both countries are at different stages now since they last met.**

I think it will be a cracking series because India are playing good cricket and we've started doing that as well. It'll be a tough series, a lot will depend on the weather and the pitches but it will be a typical India-Pakistan series.

**You've been following their form of late?**

Definitely, I have, and I've been very impressed. They've upped the ante in the field and they still have a very strong batting line-up. Harbhajan Singh and Anil Kumble give them a strong spin department, and Irfan Pathan has certainly grown as a cricketer, in his batting and bowling. We've been watching them closely over the last couple of months.

**Shoaib's form, attitude and fitness has provided the attack with a sort of completeness, hasn't it?**

He's the quickest bowler in the world and therefore he is an asset in that respect. He certainly will and did give us an edge. I'm not



sure about completing the attack but he gives us an edge.

**You seem to have gotten more out of players like Afridi, Razzaq and Shoaib Malik – more than others in the past.**

I can't comment on what other coaches did before me and you're probably better off asking the players themselves how I have helped them. As I said earlier, I just try and create an environment where people will enjoy playing their cricket and want to get better at what they do. I think with those particular players they enjoy that type of treatment. We have to make sure that people want to get better, and Inzamam has been a big a huge factor in developing that theme. But that is always a theme I have had in any coaching stint I have done.

**Are you pleased, generally, with the progress Pakistan has made since you've been here?**

Well you couldn't get better than last night (when Pakistan beat England by 165 runs in Karachi). We dropped a catch or two but it was a pretty classy performance. From my point of view, I have seen progress in the team and in individual players. Certain players like Salman Butt and Kamran Akmal are progressing brilliantly and a few others are as well. And we still haven't been able to give opportunities to other players who I think can do really well. I'm still fighting the battle for Shoaib Malik to open the innings. I believe he can do the job.

**Are you happy with how Pakistan is shaping up for the World Cup?**

We have played some good cricket, we've fought back from

different situations and there is more belief in the side than at any time. We have a pretty powerful side – if they all fire, it's very difficult to beat them. The two most important things for the World Cup will be to develop a strong bench and also to give opportunities to players during the year so that we aren't shattered by the time the World Cup comes. We have to find ways – sometimes through injuries they will be natural ways – in which to prepare our other bowlers especially. We have Mohammad Asif, Umar Gul, Mohammad Khalil, Shahid Nazir and Najaf Shah waiting in the wings. That will be a key thing through next year – to give these guys an idea of international cricket.

**As an ODI team, what do you think are Pakistan's strengths?**

One of the major strengths that has suddenly appeared is Kamran Akmal's ability to open the batting. At the moment we are not using Shoaib Malik, who scored so many runs last year for us. We have to utilise that. There are areas

where certain players need to improve their mobility, others need to improve their upper body strength, and we need to practise diving. Our throwing is a lot better now but we need to work on specifics. Just as an example, Mohammad Yousuf – not because he can't throw but because of a lingering shoulder problem which we need to try and get right. I have a list of things – about 30 – which I want to improve and which is a lot. For example, our players like picking up one-handed in the field. It may not be the correct way of doing it but because we like to do it, we must practise it.

**How close are you to having a final XI for the World Cup?**

I have a good idea and also of the top 20 players I want to take there as well. That's how I work, by planning ahead. The World Cup seems to be a watershed in Pakistan in terms of everyone's expectations every four years. There doesn't seem to be any forward planning after that, which worries me. I think there needs to be planning beyond the World Cup. Only one side wins the World Cup and you can't guarantee that you will win it, just produce a team that is ready to win it and hope they perform in the games that count, which are usually the semi-final and final. If we produce performances like we did last night, then we have as good a chance as any of the top six of pulling it off. The problem with saying that you'll do well at the World Cup is that it is so far away – though not in terms of preparation and getting people in the right physical and mental state and giving the bench opportunities.

Interview by Osman Samiuddin

## Afridi's revitalisation is a vivid tribute to Paistan's new team ethic. His genius and lunacy are both now comfortably accommodated

### preview

Bangalore, 228 runs in the ODI series in India, 117 not out at Jamaica – with Pakistan riding pillion. Multan against England neatly packaged this; Pakistan hung on for four days with Inzamam at the helm, before pouncing at the very death.

Loudly, Inzamam's immense form (over 1600 runs at 62 as captain) has bellowed his leadership values. As a batsman, for him this year has been an apogee, and for Pakistan's performance it has been a prerequisite. But softly, his benevolence, his patriarchal air as leader, permanently unperturbed, has also been essential for uniting his team.

Rameez Raja, who, having played in the decades preceding this, knows a thing or two about factions says Inzamam's equanimity has nurtured the lack of divisiveness. Not bedevilled by captaining ex-captains and cliques, Inzamam has also been lucky. But on the final afternoon in Bangalore, as Pakistan harried India into submission, something intrinsic in Inzamam's persona as captain changed; barring the odd day of insipidity since, he has never looked anything less than Pakistan's captain or unifier.

The unity he has forged has in turn bred collective will and performance. It is this, above all, that imbues the progress with the makings of something truly worthwhile. If Inzamam has led by deed, then the roll call of those who have followed his lead has been varied and vast. Younis Khan, Mohammad Yousuf, Kamran Akmal, Danish Kaneria, Salman Butt, Shoaib Malik, Rana Naved-ul-Hasan, Asim Kamal, Mohammad Sami, Shabbir Ahmed; all have not just flashed occasionally, the majority have sustained. Having gorged on the exploits of individuals for so long, this has been group catharsis for Pakistan.

There is also a strong correlation between this enhanced cohesion and the team's growing adherence to an Islamic code. Yousuf is a convenient poster boy for it but far more revealing has been the increased fervour with which players such as Afridi have taken to religion. And when Shoaib Akhtar, a notorious connoisseur of life nocturnal, says: "Now we're learning to be united. It's to do with the religion thing as well. People are forgiving, and that's the best thing. I am not the strictest Muslim but I am a bit more religious, a bit more calmed down," you know how important it has been.

Surprisingly but refreshingly, the unity has filtered beyond the playing XI into a broader group of approximately 20. Remember that through this period Pakistan's playing XI has had little sense of finality about it; in 13 Test matches since Woolmer's arrival, no two successive Tests have had the same line-up. And despite the win against England and the trial of more than 10 opening combinations since the World Cup, only half the predicament is near resolution. The pivotal No. 6 slot brings a problem of plenty; one of Afridi, Kamal and Abdul Razzaq's compelling cases must be considered. In the bowling, at some stage the case for the inclusion of Umar Gul and Mohammad Asif will become undeniably loud.

Often changes have been imposed by injury, sometimes they have been made simply to scratch selectorial itches, and occasionally – as with Shoaib – they have been the result of a deeper attitudinal disquiet. Frontline bowlers have missed matches, as have batsmen, yet Pakistan have kept moving without panic, as if determined to prove that reliance on one or two players is no longer done. Understandably they have imploded on occasion but mostly the changes have been accommodated without fuss and often with relish. Two examples highlight the fruits of this approach.

Afridi's revitalisation in the last year is both a vivid tribute to, and example of, this team ethic. Where once he floated uneasily, unsure of a function that oscillated between match-winner and utility, both his genius and lunacy are now comfortably accommodated in the line-up. He is not depended upon entirely; instead he is left to his own devices, both team and player safe in the knowledge that if he does do what he can do, more often than not he will influence matches. If he doesn't, someone will compensate.



Su Forster/Getty Images

Tellingly, in this unburdened environment, since the last year, Afridi is yet to go through either a Test or ODI where he hasn't contributed in some way.

A different but more stunning illustration lies, of course, in Shoaib's rehabilitation. In the space of three Tests he has been absorbed into the very bosom of the team; from an outsider with adolescent problems of discipline, attitude and commitment, he has become his own antithesis. Even Shoaib, troubled, distant, difficult, has been taken in – a maverick reformed. Through 15 days against England, he brought endurance and a sustained threat and importantly, he fit in.

There were, further, two snugly symbolic points about Shoaib ending the England Test series with Pakistan's solitary five-wicket innings haul. One, it was deserved for the toil he put in. And two, because it was the only one, it exemplified the shared sense of threat of Pakistan's bowling, something that hasn't always been the case in the distant past as well as the more recent, with Shoaib in it. Similar to the lack of 10-wicket match hauls for the West Indian pace quartet of the eighties or the current Australian attack – so many of them chip in that any one taking 10 wickets is rare – the statistic reveals a diversified, and thus greater, potency. Here, Pakistan won *with* Shoaib as opposed to *through* him as had been the case.

And that, in a considerable nutshell, is that. Cursory, Pakistan's record under Woolmer can be glanced at, although it reveals little; 13 Tests, five wins, six defeats and two draws. Five series: one comprehensive defeat, one comprehensive win and the rest shared. Middling, and instinctively, because it is Pakistan, the unexpected should still be expected as India arrive. But emphatically, this is not Pakistan as we have known them. Built on sturdier, broader foundations than in times gone, there could now conceivably be a sustained pursuit of excellence rather than the erratic, faction-driven pursuit that historically held us in awe. Sure, against England in Multan and Lahore, we saw the taste for drama and theatre remains but now we know that is no longer their essence. [F](#)