

Dravid takes guard

India's go-to guy has just had an extra helping of responsibility heaped onto his plate. And unsurprisingly enough, he seems all set to deal with it in a meticulous, balanced, innovative way. By **Rahul Bhattacharya**.

Photograph by **Namas Bhojani**

“I do my best to be in a relaxed state of mind because that's when I play at my best. I try to slow things down a couple of days before the game. I have long lunches, do things in an unhurried way. The morning of the match I always get up a couple of hours before we have to get to the ground so that I have plenty of time to get ready. I take my time to have a bath, wear my clothes, eat breakfast. I never rush things, and that sort of sets up my mood for the rest of day.”

This was to *Wisden Asia Cricket* in Australia in the December of 2003. Those were different times. Rahul Dravid had become India's batting leader but not still its captain; he had recently become a husband but not yet a father. Two years on, this is the build-up to his first Test series as full-time captain of India.

He spent the long evening of November 28 at the Wankhede in Mumbai, leading India to a series-levelling win against South Africa. Seventy-eight not out chasing – drenched, coarse batting; he willed it really. Still stung by the reception at Kolkata three days ago, he applauded the spectators from mid-pitch moments after victory, called them “stars” at the presentation ceremony, and at the press conference that followed, he paid tribute above all to the unity within a team which had just completed an extraordinary turnaround in the one-day game. He slept not a wink – “saw no point in it”, probably could not have from the adrenaline of the past month even if he wanted – and took a 3am flight to Bangalore.

At 5.30am he was home and delighted to find awake not only his wife but also Samit Rahul Dravid, all of six weeks (beam, soft smile, blush). He spent the whole of November 29 “doing nothing, absolutely nothing”. The next morning he was on the plane to Chennai and by early afternoon at a practice session that was ▷



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the first involving Sourav Ganguly and Greg Chappell since their little email misunderstanding. That evening he “had a little meeting with Greg to talk about Test cricket, general things, specific things to the match”, departed to receive his wife and son at the airport, returned only at half past 10 and went to bed later than usual.

The following morning, December 1, he was at the ground with the team at 9.30am for a long session under billowing skies which included, among other things, support staff delivering balls in Muralitharan action from atop chairs. At its completion he shuffled up to the first floor for a trophy-unveiling ceremony, shuffled back down while the Sri Lankan captain and coach did their presser, shuffled back up to do India’s, where he showed just who was in charge by admonishing a senior journalist’s innuendo about Virender Sehwag’s niggles with a blunt, “There’s no need to make issues of little things.”

Shortly after, he was in a selection meeting with Greg Chappell and Kiran More at the hotel. “Formally I will announce the XI only in the team meeting. Anyway it’s only one or two guys who’ve missed out you need to tell – those guys I would have already told.” Following the selection discussion, “some food, bed for a bit. Then a captain’s meeting with the match officials. Now this.”

“This” being *Cricinfo Magazine*’s first intrusion which began at precisely 5.30pm in the coffee shop as scheduled. Throwing regular glances at the interviewer’s wrist while speaking passionately, the captain sprang up and shook hands in the middle of an answer at exactly a minute shy of 6pm. “Got to run, mate, another meeting.”

This was the team meeting where Anil Kumble talked about his preparation for a Test match, Sachin Tendulkar dwelled on a few differences between Test and one-day cricket, and the captain himself with VVS Laxman relived their Adelaide partnership of 2003, because “one of the things we’re trying to do is make team meetings more interactive than watching endless replays of the opposing batsmen. You realise when champions like Sachin or Anil talk about the game, how much of time and thought they put into it – it’s not that they become champions by just turning up.”

On the heels of the team meeting, the team dinner, since “anyway we have to eat food and people tend to stay cooped up in their rooms and order room service and watch television. These are great opportunities – to sit around and talk, try and make it as informal as possible, don’t try to make it too heavy as if you’re trying to give advice. I think Greg and Ian [Frazer] have been very good in that way.” An early night.

And after all that, three and a half days of weather watching. This meant trips to inspect the ground, on one of which he browsed the boundary, high-fiving the few hundred poor souls who had landed there hoping against hope; a few sessions at the gym; acquainting himself with the new selectors; providing his input on India’s itinerary for the tour to Pakistan; giving several interviews, engaging in more relaxed interaction with the players; spending bonus time with his family; and revisiting parts of Mike Brearley’s *The Art of Captaincy* (on the menu over the last few months has been a book on NFL, one on boxing, and a couple on management passed on by Frazer.)

Chennai finished with four fruitless sessions of cricket. Then it was off to Delhi and the whole thing began again and finished in triumph, but by that evening Kolkata was burning again and the following day the Left and the BJP had found common cause in Parliament and it all promised to be just the start. By Ahmedabad the poor chap was in hospital. This now is Dravid’s world.

“It is different,” he shrugs, smiles. “I spoke to a few captains before I took the job up – and in the course of even when I was vice-captain – whether it’s been a Mark Taylor or Steve Waugh or Gavaskar, the basic thing they told me

is that you grow into the job. One of the things you realise is the *pace* of the whole thing. It needs a bit of getting used to, no doubt about that.”

Queried once about the three most important attributes for a batsman, Dravid’s first response was, “balance”. It is a quality that will now be tested more than ever at the crease and he knows it because he always does. Rahul’s been waiting – waiting, watching, listening, learning, preparing – long enough. His team, his time.

There’s the bigger picture. Asked if he’s getting a sense of the kind of captain he’d like to be, Dravid says it will take time. “But,” he adds without cue, “I do have a sense of the kind of *team* I’d like to have.” Which is?

“Which is, obviously, tough, competitive – a team that is looking to *improve* and have some fun along the way. Not taking things too seriously, as at the end of the day it is sport and we must have a lot of fun playing it and must play it hard.”

As new captains mostly do, else there would scarcely be need to appoint them, Dravid has inherited a team in flux. At the time of writing it is not known whether Ganguly will be on the plane to Pakistan or not. The same for Zaheer Khan. VVS Laxman and Anil Kumble are out of the one-day squad. Ashish Nehra is Ashish Nehra and on the mend. L Balaji is crooked and somewhat forgotten. And it’s hardly been as simple as that. For a period it appeared that the BCCI’s masterplan to revive a flagging team was to appoint alternating captains while the board itself had some fun in court. The new coach was not exactly looked upon as Santa Claus and things got trickier when he injured a finger. Without question it has been the most controversial year for Indian cricket since Mr MK was pouring his heart out to the CBI at the top of the decade. In case it has been forgotten, till September it had been a fairly rotten year for India’s results too.

Something needed to be done. Chappell’s and Dravid’s approach, of which they were able to convince the selectors, was a shake-up. It has been the first and most crucial phase of team-building and it has been difficult. Some terribly cold decisions have been taken, opinions on which are bound to remain divided. It is possible that some may have caused Dravid unease, but it is clear that he stands steadfast by a philosophy of team ethic, and that stagnation has hurt as much as defeat. He is after self-starters, those who “can look back and say that I’m a better player now than I was four years ago. Or, I can do this better.” He does not like naming names but over and over in conversation he will return to the phrase “finding the right people”.

“The right people and – I hate to say it – not have the wrong people around them. You don’t want people whose own insecurities, whose own problems and whose own fears drag everyone else down. That can be a big dampener in teams. I want to say that at this level I shouldn’t need to *motivate* anyone. If I’m needing to motivate an international cricketer then there’s something wrong actually. The challenge is to not *demotivate* anyone.

“If you’re going to be spending time in the team always having to cajole and look after a few people, you’re doing a disservice to the rest because you’re wasting and investing too much time and energy in a few people who’re taking away from the group. Players need to understand that they need to give energy to the unit. There are times of course when you’re not doing well and your form’s not good and you’ll need the support of other people. But most of the time you’ve got to give to the team and make sacrifices to the team and give back to the team.”

But are not bad boys, lonesome hobos, sluggish talents, going to be part of any side? What is his attitude towards them?

“I believe that you need different kinds of characters in the team. But there are certain non-negotiable rules because you’re playing a team sport. ▷



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You’ve got to understand that your behaviour, the way you conduct yourself, affects other people and you have a responsibility to all of them. Those are the broad rules we work under. But within those non-negotiable rules I think it’s important to allow people to express themselves.”

What, for example, did he say to the mightily gifted, passionate, but perma-dander-up Harbhajan Singh? In this instance Harbhajan came with a particular baggage: he had openly sided with Ganguly in the Chappell row, and there had been suggestions, some, sadly, from within the team, that he had been deliberately trying to undermine Dravid. All through, his form had remained nondescript.

“Well, Harbhajan’s a champion performer. One of the great things about Harbhajan is that he really cares about his bowling. He’s a very proud cricketer. And it’s not hard work with people like that. I’ve no problems working with people who want to be champions, as simple as that. I think he figured out for himself that he needed to focus a bit more on the game and not worry about anything else, get back to what he was doing when he was successful. It’s credit to him, it’s not about what I’ve told him.”

What is the basic approach though? The man to whose tome he has written a foreword, Steve Waugh, mentions slipping players memos, encouraging poems and other such cute stuff. Is Rahul Dravid a speechmaker? A one-on-one man? He laughs. “Better ask the guys.”

Laughed off, too, are queries about perceptions of Chappell’s domineering style. “I don’t know where that has come from. I’ve not found him domineering at all. He’s been more than willing to listen to my ideas and my thoughts and I get a very good say. At the end of the day I think he believes that a captain must get what he wants. In fact, in a lot of ways we do a lot of things in my way.”

Rather, of the initial friction between Chappell and a section of the team he says that, “like anything, sometimes it takes a bit of time for people to understand what the other person is trying to do and achieve. I think the guys have responded very well. I’ve really enjoyed it. In a lot of ways he’s trying to bring in some new thoughts, some new ideas. We have our opinions and sometimes we agree and sometimes we might disagree. At the end of the day, he’s done a really good job. He’s trying to coach teams in a slightly different way. I think it’s a good way.”

What way is that? “I think he believes in giving different people different experiences so that they can learn and grow from those experiences, whether it is from different kinds of drills in practice or in match play, so that your mind has a variety of options to choose from. A big believer in the mental side of things.”

Listening to Dravid, watching him work, you sometimes worry that he is consumed by an intensity that can burn, torn by “the traces of torment” of Melville’s Captain Ahab, who “sleeps with clenched hands; and wakes with his own bloody nails in his palms”. In truth experience, not least time spent banished from the one-day team, and now a wholesome family life, has taught him that at some level there is nothing which is too important.

When asked, for instance, why Mark Taylor is among his favourite captains, the immediate response does not address Taylor’s tactical sparkle. Rather it is because “he had a lot of balance, I felt. Equanimity. About Mark you felt that he always treated this as a game, nothing more and nothing less.”

Maybe it is this outlook, and Dravid’s obvious intelligence, that allows him to bring to his captaincy a Taylor kind of adventure – ploy upon ploy, trick upon trick, never passive. “Basically,” he says, “I believe you’ve got to keep the game moving.”

Enough has been seen so far to say that his major calls have been characterised by, one, the emphasis of team over individual, and two, the



inclination to take the gamble so long as there is some cricketing logic involved. He prefers not to discuss the Multan declaration with Tendulkar on 194, but is happy to delve into other instances that provide insight into a variety of aspects of his decision-making.

One from the micro level. During the outstanding defence of 106 at Mumbai against the Australians in 2004, he famously threw the ball to Murali Kartik ahead of Anil Kumble in the fifth over of the fourth innings. Kartik responded with two wickets from his first six deliveries.

“What happened there was that when I was batting in the second innings and Michael Clarke came on to bowl, he immediately started getting a lot of spin, and he bowled with a round-arm flat action. He was virtually impossible to play, bowling fast, straight balls that were spinning. There was no time to react to that. When I was batting it crossed my mind that Murali Kartik would definitely be a great option on the wicket to right-handers because he can push the ball through faster. But the good thing there was that Zaheer Khan took the wicket of Justin Langer in the first over – that was a very critical thing, Zaheer’s wicket, people forget that. It exposed (the right-handers) Ricky Ponting and Damien Martyn when it mattered, and I could get Kartik on.”

In one-day cricket he’s been an aggressive tactician, preferring at every turn the attacking option and often the left-field one. As far back as October 2003, again versus Australia at Mumbai, he opened the bowling with a spinner while standing in as captain. It did not quite come off – but it did provide a glimpse into his thinking. In Sri Lanka last July he showed that, particularly in defence of medium totals, he was prepared to risk looking foolish by keeping catchers on and the field up. But, he adds: “It depends on the quality you have. It’s all very well to say put only two guys out. For example, I can easily bring the field in for Harbhajan Singh but not so easily for Virender Sehwag. They are different bowlers, their level of consistency is different, their *thinking* is different.”

Most revealing of his readiness to take risks have been the (largely successful) batting orders, which may seem to have been generated by an iPod shuffle, but were, he explains, prompted as much by long-term strategy as plan for the day.

“How do you sometimes get the best out of people?” he asks. “By challenging them. From personal experience I’ve seen that batting at different positions has made me think about my cricket differently. I had to bat at No. 3 for a part of my career in the one-day game, batted at No. 5, kept wickets, batted at No. 6, No. 4. The demands have been different. It’s obviously opened up my game. I’m hoping it will help a lot of others as well.”

Long-term-view, too, were the decisions to rest Tendulkar and himself in consecutive games against Sri Lanka. Though the series was in the bag, the team had just found form, just managed to curb the increasing cynicism of the watching public. More conservative minds would have chosen not to tinker. More insecure souls would not have dared, at that stage, grant captaincy to another even if for only one game.

“It’s just that when you’re on the road and playing a lot of cricket, there’s a lot of physical pressure and a lot of mental and emotional pressure. I don’t think the same XI is going to be able to play the whole season for you. People need just a little bit of a break to recharge their batteries. In fact, when we’re playing a lot of one-day cricket I think there might even be a case for someone who doesn’t play to go back home and spend two days with his family. More can be gained by taking that time off than another long net practice. These are things we need to be aware of.”

Perhaps Dravid’s strongest batting-order call came not in one-dayers but in the Delhi Test against Sri Lanka. With Virender Sehwag missing the game, Dravid promoted himself to open. He was on antibiotics for a viral flu,

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was unable to make it to practice the previous day, and the voice escaped his body as if through a jute towel stuffed in the gullet. And he had failed in each of his seven previous innings as Test opener. In another time the wicketkeeper or the newest member might have been sent up.

Dravid rejects the suggestion that it was about making a statement or setting an example. "It was a tactical decision. Losing Veeru opened up the situation. I knew there would be a bit in the wicket in the morning. I didn't want to expose the middle order and since I do bat at No. 3 and play the new ball quite often, I thought I would be the best equipped to handle it." In the second innings, with quick runs the need of the hour, Irfan Pathan was sent in and the delightfully well-rounded stripling responded with a decisive 93. Dravid did not displace the strokeful VVS Laxman from the No. 3 slot he had occupied in the first innings.

In short, unnerving, but he seems to have it basically sussed. Creative but not absurd, ruthless but fair, diplomatic but articulate, ambitious but grounded, demanding but not dictatorial, progressive in every way, he has the makings of a complete captain for the age. He even looks happy in skins.

Inevitably a time will come when the team will lose and it is only then that Dravid will truly be tested and only by his response to that can he truly be assessed. Between them, Dravid and Chappell have taken or precipitated decisions of the type not usually associated with Indian cricket. Having done so they've also turned up the heat on themselves. The challenge before the combine, even if neither may say it, is to better the successes of the Ganguly-Wright era, for that is how they will ultimately be gauged by the public.

But to talk of this as the Dravid era suggests a kind of discontinuity from the past. For him it's been the same journey and it goes on. Six years ago, in a bid to overcome the staleness that had crept into his game, he spent a summer at Kent which he regards as a key phase in his own self-understanding. It was there he met John Wright, whom he subsequently recommended to the board, and from there began a grandly exhilarating, grandly fluctuating period for Indian cricket with his co-debutant at the helm and in which Dravid himself was performer-in-chief. In many ways it is Dravid who is the central bond between the eras. How does he look back on the last five years, the thrilling rise, the sagging end? In what ways has the approach changed? Flexibility, "total cricket", there's been a lot going on. What's coming?

"John did a fantastic job for us for the time that he came in. You must never forget that. He and Sourav had a good combination and they did some very good things for four years. John worked really hard and made sure we worked really hard. A lot of us raised the bar during the period. He created the right environment and evolved a sense of team in a lot of things that we did."

His voice rises a touch and the earnestness is striking. "You know, teams go through ebbs and flows, things like team spirit, things like performances, they have to be constantly worked on. Just because you have it today doesn't mean you have it tomorrow. You have to constantly reinforce it. Over a period of time, due to a lot of factors, maybe complacency to a certain extent, injuries to some extent, we struggled a bit. We've got to try and get that back. We're trying."

"I think there's a lot of focus now on trying to get better at skill, thinking about the game a lot more... It's early days... it's going to take time. I don't want to start saying that it's something huge. Part of it has been necessitated by circumstances, part of it by need, part of it by what we're thinking and where we want to go..."

He weighs his words. "Like I said, it's going to take time... We want a good team... We're looking to challenge people... We're looking to take it forward." He leaves it at that. There's not much more to ask. [E3](#)