

Wasim slams ICC bullying

HE IS one of the great all-rounders of the game, hailed as one of Pakistan's greatest ever cricketers. Whether sending down a vicious bouncer or in his present role these days as a highly prized commentator for ESPN StarSports, World Cup winner Wasim Akram has been known to call it as he sees it. Currently in Singapore doing television work, Wasim recently talked to RAHUL VENKIT about the "joke" that is the International Cricket Council (ICC), match-fixing and India-Pakistan relations.

What is your take on bowlers like Muttiah Muralitharan and Harbhajan Singh constantly being hauled up by the ICC for their bowling actions?

Wasim: I think it's a joke. I don't know what the hell the ICC are up to. How can an umpire on the pitch possibly gauge whether a bowler is bending his arm 14 degrees or 16 degrees? It leads us to the bigger question of why the ICC do not include Asian bowlers in their bowling action-clearing panels. More often than not, they employ a former UK county cricket player who is totally unworthy, instead of someone experienced like Imran Khan or Kapil Dev. Put simply, the ICC don't understand Asian spin bowling, so they naturally pick on our bowlers. I feel hurt and I get angry when the ICC get away with such bullying.

Is the scourge of match-fixing over, or is it here to stay and we should all just get used to it?

Wasim: I think the sport of cricket has cleaned up its image of late. Match-fixing existed and it tarnished the image of top players. I was also dragged into the scandal at one point, but as everyone knows, my name was cleared. I think what tempted players to accept bribes at one point was their low pay-scales. These days, cricketers have no such excuse as they are rewarded very well. Now, everything is crystal clear.

Why don't India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka perform as consistently as Australia?

Wasim: When has consistency ever been a part of our Asian culture? Australia might have developed a culture of excellence where they systematically destroy a side. But India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka hinge on raw talent. Personally, I find that more exciting. For example, compare the Ashes to an India-Pakistan match. The passion of Asian fans and players create a euphoria that only Indians or Pakistanis understand.

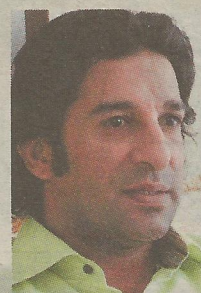
How politically-driven is cricket in India and Pakistan?

Wasim: I would say that politicians make best use of the fact that cricket unites people from both nations. And why not! Last year, when India made a clean sweep in their Pakistan tour, the standing ovation the team got from the Pakistani people spoke volumes. Even in the current series, I see fans with an Indian flag painted on one cheek and a Pakistani one on the other. That is what it is all about — cricket for peace. My greatest joy is seeing Indian and Pakistani flags flying together.

Who are potential future cricket stars from Asia?

Wasim: For Pakistan, Younis Khan and Salman Butt look promising. Danish Kaneria looks poised to get more wickets as well. Irfan Pathan, Yuvraj Singh and Mohammed Kaif will star for India, while Virender Sehwag has spiced up the concept of Test cricket batting.

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— Wasim Akram