

The Spirit of the Game

From: The MCC Cricket Coaching Book 1952

Cricket is, in a sense, warfare in miniature and a cricket match should be fought out by both sides with all the resources of spirit and technique at their command. At the same time it should always be a recreation, a game to be played not only according to written laws but in harmony with an unwritten code of chivalry and good temper.

A cricket team should feel that they are playing with, as well as against, their opponents. The home side should remember that they are hosts, the visitors that they are guests, and both should realize that the true greatness of the game lies in combat and comradeship combined.

Pursued in such a spirit, victory, and nothing short of victory, should be the object of both teams from the first over of the match. The bowlers and fielders of the one, the batsmen of the other, should go on to the field determined to attack and to go on attacking until they are really forced to fall back on defence, and even then to resume the offensive directly the balance of the game permits.

It would seem that of recent years this instinct for attack has tended to give place to a premature concern with defence in which the batsman's chief aim is to stay at the wicket rather than to make runs and the bowler's is to keep down the rate of run-getting rather than to get wickets. With the resulting development of defensive technique in batting, bowling and field-placing the game is in danger of becoming less vital and less enjoyable for players and spectators alike.

The coaches of today can do cricket no greater service than by helping the cricketers of the future to recapture the spirit and the armoury of attack: only so can they win from the game the best that it has to give them.

In no other game perhaps is the individual and his team so closely integrated. One man can virtually win a match, not necessarily by technical skill, but by intelligence, concentration and character: one man can lose it by a failure in those qualities. Conversely the morale of each member of an eleven can be largely built up and sustained by the atmosphere of the whole. Unity of purpose and belief in each other is a tremendous asset in cricket, and it is usually possible to sense it by watching a team take the field or listening to them talk as they sit and watch the game from the pavilion. It was not by hazard that one of the most famous of amateur cricket clubs called itself 'The Band of Brothers'.

Nor does any other game expose a player to a more varied or exacting trial. It can be a lonely and formidable experience to walk out, perhaps after an agonizing wait, to bat at the crisis of a school match, possibly to face a fast bowler on a fiery pitch, or a spinner on a sticky one: formidable too to stand under a high catch knowing that to miss it may cost the game. Bowler and fielder alike may often towards the end of a hard day have 'to force their heart and nerve and sinew to serve their turn long after they are gone'.

There are also the less obvious but more insidious trials of failure and success: the greatest players will have spells when nothing will go right; then comes the test of still keeping cheerful and finding some consolation in the success of others: and if fortune smiles for a time and the game seems easy and all men speak well of him, the true cricketer will remember to keep a modest mind as well as a straight bat.

The Spirit of the Game – by Ahmer Naqvi (April 2014)

When Kumar Sangakkara led Sri Lanka to the World T20 title recently, I felt a particular sense of elation. I had long been a huge fan of the player - for his graceful strokeplay and his sharp wit. But what I loved most about him was his aggressive attitude and the ability to back that up with runs. If he were able to bowl like Wasim Akram, he would have become the ideal cricketer that I imagine myself being in heaven.

Yet many of my friends and fellow fans from Pakistan can't stand Kumar. While many tolerate his in-your-face approach, they are put off by the fact that he is celebrated as an embodiment of that woolly term "the spirit of cricket" after he delivered the MCC Spirit of Cricket Lecture in 2011. The connotations of that honour seemed to contradict the sledge-happy, umpire-needling, push-the-rules style he brought to the field.

I decided to take a look at the speech to see if I could understand the situation better, and pleasingly (but not surprisingly) the speech was not only wonderfully eloquent, it was also a grand narrative of the history of Sri Lanka and its cricket, and how the latter had helped define the former. The speech helped establish not only the coherence in Sangakkara's words and actions, but it also shed light on another meaning of the phrase "spirit of cricket", one that is frequently discussed but rarely clarified.

For many people, spirit of cricket refers to "gentlemanly" forms of conduct, such as indicating when you're not sure if you took a catch cleanly, or issuing a warning before Mankading the non-striker. These values are largely a throwback to the game's English countryside origins. Yet the development of the sport internationally has added another layer to what this phrase could come to mean. In Sangakkara's words, the true spirit of cricket is when "fans of different races, castes, ethnicities and religions together celebrate their diversity by uniting for a common national cause".

The first evidence of this alternative understanding of the phrase comes from CLR James' seminal book *Beyond the Boundary*, although he never articulated it as such. James wrote on how a "native" style of playing cricket allowed for the articulation of an identity distinct from the colonial perception, expressed in terms the coloniser could understand. He gave the example of the late cut being an affront to the very idea of colonial rule and culture - a shot that showcased not only the native's mastery of the game but also the desire to pursue aesthetic mastery over the exigencies of winning and losing.

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Over time, the natives not only managed to develop their own styles, but also to raise them to a level of quality where they could challenge the final score and not just on the grounds of aesthetics. In the aftermath of de-colonisation, teams from the colonised world increasingly sought to win to establish a sense of mastering the game on their own terms. From West Indies' dominance, starting in the 1970s, to the World Cup wins for India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, cricket has served as a platform for nascent nations and communities to express themselves as united entities able to reach success.

More importantly, these wins were accompanied by a distinctly aggressive disdain for the established, amateur-tinged idea of the spirit of cricket. Players like Viv Richards, Sunil Gavaskar, Imran Khan and Javed Miandad exuded this subversive ideal in their actions on the pitch as well as off it. They were adamant that they would use cricket to show that their people had matched and could exceed their former masters. One of the best exponents of this attitude was Arjuna Ranatunga. The brilliant English writer Rob Smyth in his book on the spirit of cricket described how

Ranatunga's contravening of some people's idea of the phrase ended up embodying it for his team, whose development accelerated under his watch.

(This attitude has also come to define Australian cricket, though its colonial experience was not quite similar to those of the West Indies, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and Australia's sporting pedigree was never in the same doubt. One would have imagined their experience to be like those of New Zealand and South Africa. Also, perhaps the general importance of sport to the Australian identity has much to do with it as well.)

Of course, most sporting achievements provide a political context for their countries, particularly in the so-called third world. Take Iraq's win in football's AFC Asian Cup in the aftermath of the American invasion. Even in the "developed" world, many sporting rivalries have a distinct political and historical angle, like Real Madrid versus Barcelona, or Argentina versus England. However, cricket is unique in that its major teams all have a shared colonial past, and have plenty of opportunities to play these rivalries out. Many African countries have a similar experience with France when it comes to football, but they rarely get the chance to play these out on the world stage.

Moreover, cricket has also witnessed more success for teams from poorer, formerly colonised nations. Football's World Cup has yielded eight different winners in 19 editions, with three from South America and five from Europe. In contrast, the ODI World Cup has seen five different winners in ten editions, with four of them being post-colonial, third-world sides. This seems to further cement cricket's role of serving as a stage where nations are able to punch above their weight in international geopolitics, and for them to be known for reasons other than their poverty, violence and so on.

For the longest time, England has served the role of being the "master" or the "establishment" that other teams seek to displace. Over time, however, that idea of the oppressive "other" has come to mean different things to different countries. What is in common is a team's sense of helping its people achieve a higher status in the world than they are usually accorded.

The recent ascent of India as a financial and sporting leader of the game has added a new layer to this idea of spirit of cricket. Bangladesh, Afghanistan, UAE and Nepal are all sides that should become more important in the game, and all of them have a distinct political history with India and Pakistan. For some of these teams, victories at the Wankhede or the Eden Gardens might soon achieve the same romantic resonance that a win at Lord's holds in the game.

Consequently, one understanding of the spirit of cricket (and there are many) is that it has come to define the ability of the game to provide struggling societies with hope and belief. This idea of the spirit of cricket has been instrumental in providing a vision of a united national (or supranational) identity in countries where there are too few examples of such.

Ideally one would hope that this understanding of the spirit of cricket evolves into something different, because the societies that use it end up developing the required institutions and social cohesion and thus have no need for sport alone to provide rare moments of hope. However, as long as that doesn't happen, the spirit of cricket as a means for nations to help move on from their fractured pasts is beautiful and worth celebrating.

(Ahmer Naqvi is a journalist, writer and teacher. He writes on cricket for various publications, and co-hosts the online cricket show Pace is Pace Yaar)