

A Century Is Not Enough



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*To the memory of my father, my immediate family
and all the players I have played with*

*This book is also dedicated to Jagmohan Dalmiya
with respect and love. He is no longer with us –
I wish he could have read this book.*



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Preface

Cricket was very important in my life, probably its most important aspect. By the grace of God, I could pursue what I wanted and make a career out of it. Playing this game for a long period gave me a life, financially and professionally. It gave me recognition, a place among the successful in society, and most important a tremendous amount of self-confidence. Cricket may be a sport to some, but to me it was life and very close to my heart.

During the course of my playing career it was not just the runs and wickets that were important – yes, they were – but I had to perform to play for that long. In my journey of success and failure, cricket taught me much about life, which I want to share with you in this book. From the outside most people see the adulation and hero worship but what escapes attention is the mind within. The tough periods, the important phases where you are just a little bit down, at times at painful crossroads – it happens to the best. At those points it is important how you react. They say there is no backward step in life. For me there wasn't. And this was something sport taught me.

Preface

Sport poses many challenges along the way and it teaches you to take tough decisions in life, which is crucial for longevity in sport. In this book I hope to show you the real challenge in sport. It is a fascinating challenge. A challenge that is worth taking. Always take the challenging path. You will end up a winner.

Part One

Climbing to the Top



1

Announcing the End



It was Durga Puja. As with all Bengalis, it's my favourite festival.

Our para Puja pandal is just a stone's throw from my house. Every year, I would not just visit it and offer my prayers but also play the occasional dhak, distribute prasad to the public and even do a bit of dhunuchi dancing during evening arati.

I knew that I was being watched as I celebrated. That there were people taking photos as I danced and played the drum. But I couldn't care less. During the Puja I was just like everyone else – the local para boy enjoying his favourite festival with all the glee of boyhood.

I am so hooked to the Pujas that I make it a point to always accompany the deity on her final ride. In Bengali there is a semi-tragic word for it – bisharjon. This is when the deity is immersed in the Ganga. The scene is amazing – the energy is sky-high, the crowds full of joy and sorrow at seeing Durga Ma going away, it's truly memorable. The area around the river is so crowded that once, during my Indian captaincy days, I decided to go disguised as one of Harbhajan's tribe. Yes, disguised as a sardarji.

Now I could have been mobbed big time. The situation could have gone out of control. But the thrill of accompanying the para boys and family members on the truck carrying the deity was just too irresistible.

My wife, Dona, had arranged for a make-up artist to come home to turn me from a hardcore Bengali into a convincing-looking Sikh. My cousins all mocked me, saying I would be recognized. I gave as good as I got and took up the challenge.

They turned out to be right. I was not allowed on the truck by the police and had to follow it in our car with my daughter, Sana. As the car reached the Babughat area the police inspector peered in through the window, looked closely at me and smiled gently in recognition. I was embarrassed but asked him to keep my secret. The escapade was worth it. The immersion scene around the river is just indescribable. You have to see it to understand it. Durga Ma, after all, comes only once a year.

Little did I know that the toughest decision of my life was to be announced on a Puja day in 2008. On Mahastami, when celebrations are usually at their peak, two days before the Bengaluru Test, I took part in a press conference. There I announced that I would retire from international cricket at the end of the series, after the last Test match in Nagpur. The bisharjon was still two days away but I had decided to bring an end to my cricketing career. It was 'The End', as they say in the movies. I was so emotionally drained that the Pujas that year passed me by in a blur. I don't remember a thing.

Almost a decade has gone by. Yet journalists and the Kolkata press still gossip about the events leading to my

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decision and what I felt at the time. Surely I couldn't have felt as decisive and calm as I appeared that Mahastami day. Even this week as I write this, a close journalist friend asked me with a raised eyebrow, 'Come on, you don't expect me to believe that after so much trauma you did not cry after playing the last innings in Nagpur?'

I replied, no. I don't shed tears. I did not cry even at my father's death. Most of you, like my friend, won't believe me. Sourav is not telling the truth, you'll be saying to yourself. But some of you will be nodding your head in agreement. You know my type. We are a minority who tend to think tears are the easy way out of sadness. But don't let our masks fool you. Maybe it's because we hold our emotions in check that they remain within us even more. We look tough on the outside, but inside we bleed.

The events of that summer afternoon in 2008 still remain a raw wound for me. I was going for practice at Eden Gardens and had almost reached Fort William, which was just two minutes away. Suddenly my mobile rang. The caller happened to be a journalist. He had heard the news that I had been left out of the Rest of India squad, which is a clear indicator of how the selectors feel about you.

I had been dropped? The Asian batsman and player of the year left out from a Rest of India team? After having scored consistently for India in the last three and a half years? But why? It couldn't have been my performance as I had only failed in one series in Sri Lanka where, apart from one batsman, none of my colleagues had done well. Yet they had all got picked.

I was angry. Disillusioned.

Hanging up, I told the driver to turn back and go home. I was in no mood to practise. This made it clear to me that my chances of playing for India were now pretty low. My driver was unsure. He hesitantly looked at me, as if to get a final confirmation. My face must have said it all – he turned the car around quietly. I reached home and sat in front of the television, wondering to myself, what's next?

People talk about the pluses of being a successful sportsman. The fame, the money and the high that it brings. Not many understand the tough side of the lives of sportsmen. Not only does age catch up with you but even after a glittering career you continue to be judged by others. This scrutiny decides your fate.

Never forget that through their career sportsmen often have only a single option for work. Rejection from national selectors or the cricket team closes all doors. Most of you can switch jobs. If you are not happy with the Ambanis, you can apply to the Tatas. If the Tatas reject you, you can try Infosys. The paths are many. For us cricketers, we have only one job. India placement. There is no other job. It is simple – India or nothing.

I have rarely missed a practice session. But that day I wanted to get away from all the hustle and bustle. I wanted a peaceful mind to chart out my future. I decided to call up the captain of my team and try to get to the bottom of the mess. Anil Kumble had been a friend and dear colleague for a long time.

I asked him point-blank, did he think I was no longer an automatic choice in his eleven? Kumble – the gentleman that he has always been – seemed embarrassed. He told me

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he hadn't been consulted before the selection committee chaired by Dilip Vengsarkar took this decision.

I believed him. I believed he had the courage to tell me honestly if he had been consulted. I had one more question for him. Did he still believe that his team wanted my services? I had been captain for a long time and knew such a clarification was the best way forward.

Kumble's reply consoled me. He said if it came to him taking the call, he would pick me again for the upcoming Test match selection. I heaved a great sigh of relief. There was hope after all. I had two choices then. One, do nothing – sit back at home, watch TV and wait for the team selection. That would have been nerve-racking.

Choice number two: go and play domestic cricket and convey a strong message to the selectors. Attitude is important. It is what separates the men from the boys. I was confident of my ability and knew if I was selected on the basis of my batting, no one could stop me. Around that time I could only think of one cricket tournament that was coming up, the JP Atrya Memorial Trophy in Chandigarh.

I called M.P. Pandove, the lifeblood of the Punjab Cricket Association, to tell him I desperately needed a team to play. He was of immense help and quietly obliged me even though my request had come in at the last minute.

I mean no disrespect to the tournament but most of you outside the northern cricketing belt have probably never heard of the JP Atrya Memorial Trophy. Even I knew of it only vaguely. But now things were different. In cricketing

terminology the asking rate was climbing up and I urgently needed to respond. Look, no one has and no one will stay at the top forever. The more you condition your mind to the worst, the more you will feel ease at the top. I felt I needed to go and play. So I did. No ego. No negative thoughts. I just reacted to the situation.

It was the seven toughest days of my cricketing career. After having played more than 400 international games, I had to play a tournament where I did not even know any of the players. Although I had scored more than 18,000 international runs, the runs I had to score here felt as urgent to me as in any international Test match. These runs were talking to me from the inside. Telling me, you are still good enough, still capable of scoring runs anywhere. Your love has not deserted you. The love for the game.

Alone in my Chandigarh hotel room, I thought to myself that this was truly surreal. Just three months ago at a glittering function in Karachi I was awarded a prize for being Asia's best batsman. Due to my commitments I couldn't make it to the ceremony. Dona had flown down to Karachi and accepted the award on my behalf. And here I was in this predicament. It was like driving a Rolls-Royce one day and sleeping on the pavement the next.

I have had rejections, disappointments, tragedies all my cricketing life. I have been at the receiving end of truly vicious gossip. I have lost count of how often I have come back from the jaws of getting rejected. At times I felt my life resembled a roller coaster. As they say in Hindi, kabhi upar, kabhi nichey. It could have broken the spine of someone who was talented but emotionally weak. But I have always been

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a fighter. I have handled bad news head-on and embraced pressure as part of the package.

I told myself that this too was an investment. My experience had taught me that I played best when I worked the hardest. So I continued to believe that my time would come. I knew I was a winner. Being a winner is about what happens in your head. And I had never lost belief in myself. I looked at a cricket ground and believed it was mine. Looked at the pitch and believed we would win. Looked at the bat and told myself I would score runs. I woke up every morning to succeed.

The Indian team for the first two Test matches of the Australian series was soon announced. I found my name in it. Simultaneously a Board President's team was also announced. This was the secondary team that would take on the Australians in Chennai. The Board President's XI is traditionally used to vet the potential of promising youngsters or assess veterans whose Test future is uncertain.

I was included in it as well. These teams were picked by the new selection committee under Krishnamachari Srikkanth. But its mindset seemed to be no different from the previous committee's. The message was crystal clear: a veteran of 100-plus Test matches, a certain Sourav Ganguly, was again on trial.

I felt extremely agitated. That is when I told my father that I needed to call it a day. Enough was enough. My father was a bit surprised. In the past when Greg Chappell had kept me out of the team and I was desperately trying to claw my way back, he had wanted me to retire, unable to bear his son's struggle.

Then I had resisted. I had told him, Bapi, you wait. I will be back. I still have cricket left in me. When I grow older I don't want to sit on my sofa and tell myself, Sourav, you gave up when the going was tough. You should have tried harder. I wanted to catch the bull by its horns and win.

So three years later when he heard the same person was throwing in the towel, he was surprised. I also told my wife and my mother but no one else. None of my friends had a clue. The story didn't leak. Not even in the Kolkata media, which I was often accused of favouring.

I of course had a chat with Anil before I reached Chennai. He told me, don't decide anything in a hurry. Give it some time. I assured him I would. But deep down I knew my time was up.

I made up my mind that I would give everything I had to be successful in this series. But I wouldn't let anyone else decide my future any more. I wouldn't go through the ordeal again. I had had enough! Yes, I was angry. After reaching Bengaluru I informed Kumble that my mind was made up and I would make an announcement shortly.

Cricketing history has recorded that I had an outstanding final series. Got a hundred in Mohali and narrowly missed the second in Nagpur. I was surprised at how good I was feeling. I saw the same attitude in Sachin when he played his last Test match in Wankhede. His innings was one of the best I had seen him play towards the later stages of his career. I felt that no one could do me any harm any more. I could fly freely.

In Mohali a journalist came and asked, 'Did the hundred give you special pleasure because Greg Chappell was

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watching it from the Australian camp?’ I said, at this stage of my cricketering career it didn’t matter at all. I had got past all that. For me he didn’t exist any more.

I still remember the walk out to the pitch in my last Test. As I went out to bat, the Australian team under Ricky Ponting gave me a guard of honour as a sign of respect. It was very moving, and I felt very honoured by their gesture. But I knew, irrespective of the respect shown, the moment Brett Lee went back to his bowling mark, his first delivery would be aimed at my nose.

That is always the reality in top-class sport. In the end all that matters is to win. The man the Indian selectors had kept on an indefinite trial did stand up to the Australian attack and walked away with a solid 85. I missed the coveted three-figure mark by only 15 runs but my friend Sach lent an additional flavour to the party by getting a rock-solid hundred. What made the occasion happier was that we won the Test.

I ended my final innings in Test cricket in a first-ball duck. Looking back I feel it was a loose shot as I tried to play Jason Krejza against the turn. The bat had closed early and Krejza easily accepted a low return catch. I have no regrets. It was a bad shot and I paid the price. But I still regret missing the hundred. It was mine for the taking.

As the match came to a close, Mahendra Singh Dhoni in a surprise gesture asked me to lead. I had rejected his offer earlier in the day but could not refuse a second time. Ironically, my captaincy career had begun exactly eight years ago on this very day. I handled the bowling changes and field placements while the last Australian wicket batted.

But I must admit, at that stage, I found it difficult to focus. So after three overs I handed it back to Dhoni saying, it is your job, MS. We both smiled.

I was filled with mixed emotions. I felt extremely sad that I was saying goodbye to the biggest love of my life. On the other hand, I felt deeply satisfied that I had held my head high right till the end. I had competed with the best cricket team in the world in my final series and performed admirably. It proved that a certain Sourav Ganguly was still good enough.

Anil had retired a week before at the Kotla. The Vidarbha Cricket Association had organized a joint farewell reception for both of us. The entire board was present to hand over mementos to us. I asked Anil, are you ready to leave? He said he was.

His answer consoled me. I felt if the captain of the team didn't want to continue, my decision was right. Notwithstanding selectorial whims and fancies, I could not see anyone taking our places in the side. Yet he thought this was the right time to go.

Once the felicitations finished, the party began. Members of the team had organized a night for us at the hotel. All of us really let our hair down. Some of us even went berserk. I have been around in Indian cricket for more than fifteen years and I have never experienced anything as warm, as wild and as fun as this party was.

It was a night neither Anil nor I will forget. One's fellow cricketers' admiration counts for a lot for a pro, however big he may be. I received a shirt from my teammates which

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was signed by all of them. It said: we will miss you. I was truly moved.

And so it was all over. From 11 November 2008 Sourav Ganguly was a retired Test cricketer. I was also not part of the one-day team.

I always knew that this day would arrive and I was extremely happy about what I had achieved. It was time to march on. Think of the magical moments I had experienced along the way and remind myself that it had been an extraordinary run. There really was nothing more I could have asked from life.