



KENYA'S FINEST HOUR BY HARESH PANDYA

Kenya may have made a history at Cuttack on 18 February 1996, when they took on India and thus made their debut in the quadrennial World Cup. But the real history for the African nation was made at the Nehru Stadium in Pune, on 29 February when it humiliated the giant West Indies by 73 runs in a Group A match of the Wills World Cup 1996.

We have proved that we too, can play cricket. And play it competitively at that”, said an ecstatic Maurice Odumbe, the Kenyan captain who had played a key role in his team’s dream victory with his tactical acumen and clever off-spin bowling which gave him figures of 10-3-15-3, minutes after the unthought of miracle was worked. “We have always had the potential to be a giant killer in a tournament like this. It is time some carping critics stopped coming down heavily on us”, he further added.

The Kenyans had arrived in Pune only on the eve of the tie. The net practice was out of the question. And they were “tired” as well. But Odumbe, always a lively fellow, said with a glint in his eyes, “Of course, we were tired. But we cant complain after such a turn around, can we?” Odumbe also pointed out that the Kenyans had nothing to lose, being written off as underdogs. “The pressure was actually on the West Indies, considering they were a superior side with some big guns in its ranks. And they seemed to wilt under the pressure the moment our bowlers began striking one crushing blow after another, the Kenyan skipper said. “This win will surely help cricket spread like wild fire in Kenya. It was a wonderful team effort although I cant help feeling that Odumbe led from the front today”, said Hanumant Singh, former Indian Test player and the coach of the Kenyan national team for the last few years.

Both Odumbe and Singh agreed that the early dismissal of Brian Lara was the turning point of the match. “After the departure of Roger Harper there was no doubt whatsoever in my mind that Kenya was going to be the winner”, added Hanumant Singh.

The incredible triumph of the Kenyans over the calypso kings will go down in the history of the game as one of the biggest upsets ever. To call it a flash in the pan would be an act of Philistinism, for the Kenyans were the deserving winner on that memorable day. They completely outclassed their more talented rivals in every department of the game. “West Indies appear to have caught the English disease. Demoralised, disunited, sour-faced, and seemingly uninterested in playing cricket. In contrast, the Kenyans exuded enthusiasm and commitment - as well as plenty of skill and discipline”, were the spontaneous reactions of Mike Marqusee, distinguished cricket scholar and connoisseur, and the author of the fantastic *Anyone But England: Cricket and the National Malaise*, sitting next to his correspondent in the press-box.

Richie Richardson, unable to hide the frustration of losing to Kenya, was gracious in defeat. “Ive only two things to say. Congratulations to the Kenyan players. We played very badly and deserved to be beaten. I am sorry I have no words to say anything further”, said the Caribbean captain.

Of late unnecessarily arrogant but still basically sporting, the West Indians, led by Richardson himself and Wes Hall, went into the Kenyan dressing-room shortly after seemingly recovering from the shock. They greeted each and every member of the victorious squad, including officials, and shared the bubbly with them. Not only that, the Caribbeans presented three miniature bats, signed by each member of the team, to the Kenyan team; a gesture that went down well with the winners.

Team of the People

There was terrific crowd support for the Kenyans right from the beginning of the match itself. Two stands of the stadium were full of Kenyan supporters, vivacious and vocal, some of whom had come from Kenya itself while the rest were the Kenyan students studying in Pune and elsewhere in India. Touched by their constantly optimistic cheers, the Kenyan team went straight to the stand on the left to the pavilion, where a majority of them were celebrating Kenyas feat and expressed their sense of gratitude towards the fans. In fact, both Odumbe and Hanumant Singh admitted that support from the Kenyan and well as Indian supporters was a key factor to the epoch-making win.

The celebrations that followed the Kenyan victory were perfectly spontaneous. After acknowledging their supporters warmth and love, as said earlier, the Kenyan players ran round the whole ground with the hallowed stumps in their hands. As they came near the suddenly crowded press-box, which was on the first floor in front of the pavilion, each mediaperson gave them a standing ovation. It was a touching sight.

Many of the Kenyan players as well as supporters were seen shedding tears of joy. At the end of it all, you could not help feeling, “What a match!” And to think so many people, including those from the press, had actually paid scant respect to this tie till the beginning of the West Indies innings.