

# Pakistan's sticky wicket

Burhan Wazir enjoys a glance through the covers of a cricketing history

**Wounded Tiger: The History of Cricket in Pakistan** Peter Oborne, Simon & Schuster, £25.00

In sporting terms, the Pakistani cricket team is unlike any other national side. A more accurate comparison might be struck with South American footballing giants such as Brazil and Argentina. Abundant in natural talent, the Pakistani team has demonstrated extraordinary skill, resolve and flair during its 60 years of existence, yet it has also been marred by obduracy, vanity, underinvestment and corruption. All these attributes and ailments have, on occasion, surfaced within the space of a single game.

*Wounded Tiger*, Peter Oborne's incisive overview of the history of cricket in Pakistan, gets its title from the national side's flawed genius. It begins with the country's birth pangs after the partition of India in 1947. The creation of a national team was from the start seen as an essential part of nation building by leaders such as Liaqat Ali Khan, Pakistan's first prime minister. In a country short of uplifting news – both then and now – modern cricket in Pakistan has long been associated with setting a narrative that seeks to embody the liberal principles of Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

In reality, its history has been nothing less than troubled and at times farcical. Millions of Pakistani cricket fans can testify to its

reputation as soap opera, where the private and professional lives of players – who have variously tried acting, singing and advertising off-field – are considered of paramount national interest. Throughout the book, Oborne charts the course of a national side navigating a path through squalls of post-British rule, dictatorships, the independence of Bangladesh, conflicts with neighbouring India, the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and the current metastasizing of a low-level civil war. Unsurprisingly, Pakistani cricket has been knocked all over the place by all these political forces.

Yet those early decades of first-class cricket were a triumph of goodwill over meagre resources. On Pakistan's first tour of England in 1954, during which the visiting team, only in existence for five years, managed to draw the series and score a memorable win at The Oval, Pakistan sent no accredited newspaper or radio correspondents. Players survived on expenses of ten rupees a day and laundered their own whites. The father of the modern game in Pakistan, Abdul Hafeez Kardar, as an avowed Anglophile and team captain, showed his players how to use knives and forks.

In these early days, players were considered government employees. Modestly paid but secure state jobs and benefits were made available to them. Hanif Mohammad, a leading batsman of the era, for

example, was a teenager when he was hired as a trainee roads inspector by the Public Works Department. He was housed in a villa in Officers' Colony, on Garden Road, in Karachi.

As the game evolved in the Seventies and Eighties, however, it began to embody individualism as much as teamwork. Stars such as Wasim Akram, Javed Miandad and Imran Khan, who helped guide the country to its first World Cup win in 1992, demanded better wages and training facilities. They also sought to free the game from the kind of political interference and nepotism that regularly led to player strikes and boycotts.

Against this backdrop of the internal politics within the sport, *Wounded Tiger* also explains some of the global forces that have changed the game over the past two decades.

During years of military rule by Ayub Khan and Zia ul-Haq, cricketers were diplomatic pawns, and the game often suffered from corrupt selectors and periods of austerity. Elsewhere, satellite TV, endorsement deals, limited-overs tournaments, day/night matches and the rise of cricketing venues in cities such as Dubai and Sharjah changed the game. In Pakistan, capitalism would inevitably triumph over a top-down approach. It would also, unfortunately, lead to the stigma of match-fixing and corruption.

For followers of sport and



**Pakistan captain A H Kardar at The Oval after beating England**

Asian politics, *Wounded Tiger* provides an excellent and entertaining account of how cricket can mirror the fate of nations. Oborne strikes a sympathetic tone: he is generous with praise and the book benefits from a



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sophisticated retelling of key matches, visits to Pakistan and first-hand interviews.

Yet despite the country's remarkable achievements, its democratic and military rulers have never managed to expand on their original creation to realize the birth of a viable national league. Local economics still force

talented players to sign with established English county sides – a skills drain which is regrettably seen in other aspects of Pakistani life. Cricket audiences may have become global, but the centres of power remain the same.

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