Massive Match Fixing in Indian Cricket

Despite being illegal, betting is big business in India and many players are tempted to fix matches

by Michael Herborn

Although betting is illegal in India, Indian punters wagered an estimated 40 billion US dollars over the course of 2007. This black market for betting supports a powerful and wealthy mafia underworld, says Indian journalist Murali Krishnan. And with such a lucrative market for the bookmakers, organised crime has a vested interest in the outcome of every ball delivered in a match.

Krishnan has been investigating the darker side of cricket since ‘Hansiegate’, when South African captain Hansie Cronje admitted his involvement in the fixing of international cricket matches. “My investigations have started from the time Hansie was willing to stand and be counted as one who underperformed,” says Krishnan of the Indo-Asian News Service. “That took me from covering the Indian players who were given life bans and suspensions to some games in the 1999 World Cup when South African captain Hansie Cronje admitted his involvement in the fixing of international cricket matches.

“Corruption in cricket unfortunately does not leave behind a paper trail,” says Krishnan. “Its only compelling circumstantial evidence that one is left with is near-impossible. Proving their guilt in a criminal trial would not be easy however. While there have been a number of cricketers who have come forward and stated their claims is near-impossible.

Mind-boggling sums

Cronje’s admission did not mark a one-off for cricket. Between 1999 and 2001, a series of scandals led to the establishment of the International Cricket Council’s (ICC) anti-corruption unit. Corruption inquiries were launched in six out of the ten test-playing nations.

Betting on cricket is big business in India, says Krishnan, who describes the money riding on cricket matches as “mind-boggling” Annual betting volumes could be as high as 40 billion US dollars according to some estimates. For certain matches, for instance a one-day international match between Pakistan and India, 250 million US dollars could pass hands.

According to Lord Paul Condon, who was appointed as the head of the ICC’s anti-corruption unit after retiring as chief constable of the Metropolitan Police in London, illegal gambling is a bigger business in some countries than drug-running or robbery.

Players bought off

The nature of cricket lends itself to several different opportunities to bet. Often fixing will not involve the result of a match, but may instead revolve around a particular delivery bowled by the bowler.

Thousands, even millions of dollars may ride upon whether one single delivery in a match was a no-bowler. Being able to know when that delivery will happen means payday for gamblers. So much so, that some are willing to pay cricketers handsomely to ensure the right financial outcome.

Being in possession of such information is “the equivalent of knowing in advance when the roulette wheel is going to land on red or black,” says Krishnan.

Marlon Samuels of the West Indies is one player who the bookies are alleged to have got to. Samuels, a batsman and occasional bowler, was taped by police from the Indian city of Nagpur, when the West Indies team toured India in 2007, just before the 2007 Cricket World Cup. The telephone conversation was with a well-known suspected bookmaker, Mukesh Kochchar and centred on the next day’s play, including who would be bowling at what stage of the day, and the likely starting line-up for the West Indies team.

Despite the accusations against Samuels, the ICC has not banned him from International Cricket. He is, however, now under investigation by the West Indies Cricket Board for his links with Kochchar.

No paper trail

Samuels’s case is just one of the many instances of players being tempted by the financial rewards of fixing yet few have been charged by the ICC. Krishnan’s initial investigations into the cricket world’s underbelly focused upon the activities of two bookmakers in particular – Jagdish Sodha and Shobhan Mehta. However, as neither are officially involved in the cricket world, the ICC lacks jurisdiction to impose sanctions.

Sodha, a businessman working in the film industry, has been accused of bribing players to fix certain aspects of cricket matches, including the Kenyan all-rounder Maurice Odumbe. He is also believed to have used a dancing girl from Mumbai to gather information from her cricket-playing customers from Sri Lanka.

Meanwhile, Mehta is alleged to have been a member of a group of 23 bookmakers who had worked together to make a 135,000 US dollars weekly payout to Indian police during the 2003 World Cup in South Africa to enable them to operate freely. It is further alleged that the bookies were let off on instructions from joint police commissioner Shridhar Wagal, who is now in jail over claims he was involved in a separate corruption scandal.

Proving their guilt in a criminal trial would not be easy however. While there have been a number of cricketers who have come forward and stated they have been offered bribes to throw games, such as former New Zealand captain Stephen Fleming, finding documentary evidence to back up these claims is near-impossible.

“Corruption in cricket unfortunately does not leave behind a paper trail,” says Krishnan. “Its only compelling circumstantial evidence that one is left with to take the story forward. Especially when syndicates are tied up with the underworld there is only so much you can peel.”