

A Shot in the Heart – An Analysis of Mis-Governance of Zimbabwe Cricket

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Synopsis

On March 25, 1992, Zimbabwe was dismissed for 134, and England, in prophetic form, seemed poised to extend their dominance. However, just a few hours later, Zimbabwe orchestrated one of the most remarkable comebacks in modern cricket history, punching well above their weight.

Over the next decade, Zimbabwe consistently punched above their weight, showcasing immense promise despite facing significant setbacks. Their journey, marked by moments of brilliance, seemed to affirm their rightful place in the cricketing world. Highlights included a notable home victory against England in the 1996-97 season, a historic 1-0 series triumph in Pakistan, and a remarkable run in the 1999 World Cup, among other achievements.

Zimbabwe emerged as a beacon of promise, not only as a cricketing nation but as a country overall. Despite the impact of colonial rule from 1880 to 1965, which left the majority of the population marginalized while a small white minority held the reins of wealth and power, Zimbabwe garnered respect on the global stage. It earned the esteemed title of the "Breadbasket of Africa," reflecting its rich agricultural potential and significant contributions to the continent.

However, the land reforms implemented by Robert Mugabe between 1998 and 2001 sparked widespread unrest and deepened racial divisions within the country. The black community, seeking to address the injustices of colonial rule, saw violent seizures of white-owned farms, with some farmers being robbed or even killed. This turmoil extended to the cricketing arena, unsettling a team that had been performing impressively up until that point.

The era between 1995-2000, could be said as the golden years of Zimbabwe cricket; they achieved some major milestones and were able to build a team that could take on any team. However the radical changes of late 1990s and early 2000's impacted the Zimbabwe cricket as well. The Zimbabwe Cricket Union (ZCU) was mired by corruption, inefficiency and more so lack of planning to take game forward. This saw cricket falling far behind in terms of performance as the period of darkness engulfed the team. The team returned to Test cricket after a jitus of six years in 2011 but it was far from being competitive neither the board did improved, amid shouts of incompetency the board was suspended in 2019 for Government's interference in the game.

Sadly the team has continued to fall below its junior team like Bangladesh, Afghanistan.

Chapter- 1 - A Promising Start, Golden Era and Widening Cracks

(June 1983- February 2004)

Cricket's ascendancy in Zimbabwe began with the arrival of the British in the 1880s and gained significant momentum as the national team achieved One Day International (ODI) status in 1983. The team's subsequent successes and the robustness of its domestic infrastructure culminated in the prestigious award of Test status in 1992.¹

Zimbabwe's Test debut was nothing short of remarkable, as the team not only held its own but dominated India in their inaugural Test match.² This promising start was further underscored by a compelling tour to Pakistan in late 1993 and a notable series draw against Sri Lanka. These early successes heralded the rise of Zimbabwean cricket, showcasing their formidable potential on the international stage.³

Zimbabwe continued to achieve steady growth in international cricket. On February 4, 1995, they registered their first-ever Test victory against a formidable Pakistan team. A year later, they successfully drew their two-Test series 0-0 in New Zealand. In the 1996-97 seasons, they also won the ODI series against England 3-0. Zimbabwe's greatest achievement to date came during the winter of 1998-99, when they secured their first-ever overseas Test series victory by 1-0. They demonstrated strong performances in the 1999 ODI World Cup and the England tour of 2000. In 2001, although they narrowly missed defeating the West Indies, they later decisively overcame Bangladesh.

However, economic turmoil began to impact cricket, leading to the departure of key players Murry Goodwin and Neil Johnson. This marked the beginning of a decline from which Zimbabwe struggled to recover. The golden era of Zimbabwean cricket, which spanned from February 1995 to November 2001, came to an end. Despite this, with stalwarts like the Flower brothers, Heath Streak, and emerging talents such as Travis Friend, Andy Blignaut, and Sean Ervine, Zimbabwe continued to remain competitive.

The cracks though continued to widen as Andy Flower, Zimbabwe's greatest cricketer left the country with Henry Olonga protesting against the policies of Robert Mugabe's government. The foundation of Zimbabwe cricket was though strong and survived for an another year but the fire of change in the government ultimately swallowed the promising team.

¹ Zimbabwe's rise to Test Status – Peter Wynne- Thomas, The Cricket Historian, 1992

² Zimbabwe's Test Debut by Bill Frindall ,The Wisden Cricketer, 1992

³ The Rise of Zimbabwean Cricket- By Bruce Morton , The Cricket Journal, 1994

Chapter 2- The Darkest Day and Period of Regression

As Tristian Holme wrote down in his remarkable article “A decade of Hurt” for ESPN Cricinfo, March 11th 2004, was game changer in the history of Zimbabwe Cricket.⁴

The meeting between Zimbabwe Cricket Union and Captain Heath Streak was heated one. While the board till now had been able to have good relations but with arrival of a certain Ozias bvute in November 2001, who was a businessman, politically well connected and rose to the higher ranks by March 2004, things have started to change. His political views were on the lines of Mugabe government and he wanted to ensure more black participation in the national cricket team.⁵ Streak who was much more sensible man, knew the importance of having representative team but he also knew a successful transition would take time as centuries of injustice could not be overturned in a night. The government and Bvute though at different opinion, they wanted to bring changes but the mean didn't mattered for them. Revenge, displacement, meritless selection took the centre and these drastic measures also touched the Zimbabwean cricket.⁶

A month later on 16th April 2004, 13 white cricketers went on strike, some of them were proven performers, the foundation of the Zimbabwean cricket had started to crack, the team slumped to one defeat after another. Ultimately in 2005 the board had to make request to ICC to give them a break of 6 years from Test cricket. The team continued to play limited over format.

April 2004- August 2011-It was an era when Zimbabwe played more with hope than anything else, the white cricketers have moved to other countries to explore more opportunities and the domestic cricket had virtually collapsed with no quality players present in it. As Holmes also points that the system on which Zimbabwe use to feel proud till 2004, crashed like pack of cards with grassroots developments almost nonexistent.⁷ Result amid the surprises here and there Zimbabwe struggled painfully between 2004-2011. Zimbabwe

needed an efficient administrator like Ali Bacher of South Africa but those ranks were also empty with plethora of inefficient and incompetent administrators in line.⁸

Zimbabwe's record from April 2004- July 2011⁹

Format	Matches	Wins	Losses	Draws/NR	Ties	% win
Tests	10	0	0	1	0	0%
ODI	137	35	100	1	1	25.54
T20	14	03	10	0	1	21.42

⁴Zimbabwe's decade of Hurt, Tristian Holmes, The Cricket Monthly, ESPN Cricinfo, December 2014

⁵<https://www.espn-cricinfo.com/story/ozias-bvute-the-power-behind-the-throne-143682>

⁶<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/jan/19/zimbabwe.andrewmeldrum>

⁷Zimbabwe's decade of Hurt, Tristian Holmes, The Cricket Monthly, ESPN Cricinfo, December 2014

⁸<https://www.espn-cricinfo.com/story/players-lambast-incompetent-zimbabwe-board-218844>

⁹<https://stats.espn-cricinfo.com/ci/engine/team/9.html?class=3;spanmax1=31+jUL+2011;spanmin1=01+aPR+2004;spanval1=span;template=results;type=team>

Chapter 3- The Return and Continued Struggle amid Flashes of Genius

Between 2005 and 2011, the team faced significant adversity both on and off the field. Once boasting a surplus of \$8 million in 2004, the Board's financial stability rapidly deteriorated following the onset of the strike and the onset of OzvisBvute's autocratic and corrupt tenure. By 2009, the Board found itself burdened with a staggering \$18 million in debt.¹⁰

As the debt mounted and the Zimbabwe Cricket Board's reputation plummeted, banks became unwilling to extend further loans. Struggling with diminishing profits, the Board faced mounting challenges in paying salaries to players and staff. Consequently, the crisis led to an exodus of players leaving the sport or the country, while others went on strike, further exacerbating the turmoil.¹¹

In 2011, the team re-entered Test cricket with high hopes, but within just two years, they suffered devastating defeats and faced intense criticism from fans. Despite this, experts expressed sympathy for the young players who had grown up without senior guidance amid a series of losses. They were also sympathetic towards the selectors who didn't have much options to select from, the robust system of pre 2004 had gone barren with the pipeline that supplied players went dry.

Robert Mugabe once said "Cricket civilises people and creates good gentlemen. I want everyone to play cricket in Zimbabwe; I want ours to be a nation of gentlemen" It is tragic that Mugabe was the prime reason how the country and cricket's economy and standard declined over the period of time.

The consequences of this decline were so profound that even Zimbabwe's return yielded minimal progress; they struggled to compete with established Test nations and found themselves even outpaced by emerging teams such as Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Ireland. Their performances against these so-called junior Test nations over the past decade have been particularly disheartening.

The biggest setback has been the failure to qualify for the ICC tournaments, 2018 and 2023 were two major failures which sent the Zimbabwe cricket way back in times, as Netherlands qualified for the 2023 World Cup.¹²

Amidst these turbulent times, Zimbabwe Cricket reached its nadir in 2019 when the International Cricket Council (ICC) suspended the board due to severe misgovernance. Although the board was later reinstated, progress has been minimal. The team has struggled with a sparse Test schedule and has failed to capitalize on limited-overs opportunities. Furthermore, top-tier teams have become increasingly reluctant to compete with them. This situation has tragically resulted in Zimbabwe Cricket falling significantly behind even the likes of Bangladesh.

¹⁰Is there any way back for Zimbabwe cricket? By Steve Vickers BBC Sport, Harare 11 May 2020, retrieved on 9th September 2024

¹¹<https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-2006-01-09-voa49/325991.html>

¹²<https://www.indiatoday.in/sports/cricket/story/icc-world-cup-2023-qualifiers-zimbabwe-vs-scotland-ryan-burl-sean-williams-2401886-2023-07-04>

Chapter 4- Conclusion and Suggestions

The social upheavals of 1998-2010 significantly impacted the country's cricket, plunging it into a period of darkness from 2004 to 2011. During this era, Zimbabwe Cricket failed to regain the momentum it had enjoyed from 1992 to 2004, a time when the sport was on a promising trajectory and the nation seemed poised for greatness. However, the fortunes of Zimbabwe Cricket took a dramatic turn for the worse on a fateful afternoon in March 2004, and the sport has never fully recovered. This decline can be attributed to a board plagued by mismanagement, corruption, and a lack of vision and strategic planning, which severely hampered the game's progress in the country.

So what can be the solution? To address the crisis, it's crucial to recognize that the disruption in Zimbabwean cricket stemmed not from internal policies but from radical government interventions that undermined the sport's infrastructure from grassroots to elite levels. This destabilization led to the collapse of a robust system built over decades. Therefore, to rebuild and secure a sustainable future for cricket in Zimbabwe, the board and administrators must undertake a comprehensive, long-term strategy that includes:

1. Overhauling governance and administrative structures
2. Investing in grassroots cricket development
3. Expanding and nurturing the talent pool
4. Enhancing player welfare
5. Increasing the number of international fixtures for the national team

Without these critical reforms, Zimbabwean cricket risks further decline, lagging behind emerging ICC members and compromising its potential for future success.

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