

A CHAMPION'S SLOW FADE

Once India was on his shoulders, now Tendulkar's retirement can't come soon enough for some



THURSDAY WITH

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IT'S NOT the scores only, for scores do not always speak the entire truth. No, what worries are the errors. Like reading the length of the ball incorrectly, bringing the bat down too slow, not arranging the feet adroitly. Small errors, tiny errors, errors that hint that the clock on Sachin Tendulkar's genius has nearly run out.

The great athlete's gradual fade is a strange, sorrowful, inexplicable time. The foundation of the champion is his idea of invincibility: of course he knows he can lose, but on the field he does not believe he can lose. But now, suddenly, Tendulkar is a mortal man, of smaller scores, of average performances.

At World Cups, cricket's biggest occasion, he was always at his finest. In the 1992 cup, only 19, he was India's second-highest scorer with 283, averaging 47.17; in 1996, he was tournament top scorer with 523 (average 87.16), in 1999 he managed 253 (42.16), the tournament during which his father died; and in 2003, he top scored again with 673, averaging 61.18.

This cup, in the two matches India needed him most, he scored 7 (Bangladesh) and 0 (Sri Lanka). That most awful, improbable of things had happened to Tendulkar. He was like everyone else now, no longer unique.

How? Why, we ask. What has gone wrong? Maybe he asks, too.

Is it the eyes, wherein he picks up the ball a fraction later, a fraction less time to decide and move, a fraction which essentially is the difference between good and great?

Is it the body, wounded by successive injuries, pushed too far for 17 years, deciding to be disobedient, just not moving quick enough, the bat-speed slower, the reflexes not as quick?

Is it just doubt which slyly accumulates after every unsure innings till you cannot think clearly any more, your confidence leaking away?

But here is the tragedy of it all. Nobody knows precisely why genius fades, not even sometimes the genius. It is why they keep playing, in the hope that it may return, that this is just some temporary shut-down.

An emotional churning is under way in India about Tendulkar (he is loved, yet booed), and to understand it one must first comprehend his place in the subcontinental universe.

In a land of a billion, India was bereft of champions. Hockey players have won nothing substantial for a quarter-of-a-century; the odd badminton player and snooker player was world champion, a few shooters knocked down world championship gold.

But in the sport that became modern India's obsession, cricket, we had no single player to call "the best in the world". We had the money eventually, the passion, and then, just as cable TV arrived to broadcast his brilliance across in India in slow motion, we

got Tendulkar.

Tendulkar was violent in the way he played, flirting with risk, a man of the times, a perfect fit for a new, impatient, ambitious India. Yet he was also the boy next door, choir-boy voiced, modest in manner, wary of controversy, that cliched humble superstar whose conservatism was applauded.

He was also, finally, an Indian cricketer with the prefix "best in the world" before his name, and through the lean years of the 1990s, India leant on him, worshipped him, demanded of him, and he did not complain, but kept going, scoring, and scoring, this incredible curly-haired machine.

Cricket elsewhere is a team sport, in India it was an individual one. It could be that only Maradona has faced greater pressure from his nation.

In a nation where so many struggle, Tendulkar represented hope, confidence, respect, success. Of course we made too much of him. And of course we are conflicted about him now.

After a World Cup humiliation, the public wanted blood. Coach Greg Chappell was sacrificed, and now senior players, their attitudes questioned, are in the line of fire. Tendulkar, too.

Many feel he should retire, some angrily, some compassionately. Older men, whose lives are intertwined with Tendulkar's,



cringe at seeing their champion stutter, disrespected by bowlers, and prefer to remember him in his perfect prime; younger fans are just impatient, score or move aside, they say.

Tendulkar, understandably, is not the player he was, he cannot be, but so shallow is India's talent pool that he is still superior to the young men who are lining up to take his place. Captains still desire his experience in the team, but what does Tendulkar desire?

Records, money, camaraderie, winning, why is he still playing, why in fact do great players keep going on? He has scored 10,668 Test runs at an average of 54.70 with 35 centuries, and 14,847 one-day runs at an average of 44.05 with 412 centuries, and earned more millions that one can keep count. We tend to say he has enough (of most things, runs, records, money), but greatness is arrived at only because athletes are driven to keep going.

His scores are not so outrageously bad that he warrants dropping, but is he content to play at this standard, averaging in the 40s, sometimes 30s, making deals with himself?

Is it enough to be better than the next player but nowhere near as good as he was; is it fair to pit a champion against

his prime or can he only be compared to the other players in the present?

Tendulkar's legacy, I am advised by my friend Leonard Thomas, the esteemed sports editor, will not be affected and he is mostly right; however long he struggles, Tendulkar's place in history will remain undisturbed. But it is hard to see him struggling, looking ordinary, there is something sad and undignified to it.

But, rightly, we have no say in his future, the choice is always the champion's. A friend told me recently he wished Tendulkar would score a century and retire. It is a nice thought. But if Tendulkar scored a century, he might simply think he is back to his best.

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