



PESHAWAR: Pakistani paceman Imran Khan Junior (C) from the Peshawar cricket team celebrating the dismissal of a Sialkot player during the National Twenty20 semi-final at the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium in Rawalpindi. —AFP

FROM BOMBS TO TROPHIES

CRICKET THRIVES IN PAKISTAN'S PESHAWAR

KARACHI: Peshawar, the main city in Pakistan's northwest, won their second consecutive Twenty20 title this week with players and coaches hailing falling levels of violence for helping the sport prosper in the Taleban-plagued region. The city of four million has been at the forefront of a rebellion that rose up more than a decade ago which seeks to topple the government and replace it with a hardline Islamic emirate.

For years, Taliban suicide bombers were able to strike almost at will as people feared leaving their homes even to go out shopping. But the situation has improved markedly since the government began major military offensives in the North Waziristan tribal district last year aimed at clearing Taliban and Al-Qaeda bases.

On Monday night, Peshawar defended their national Twenty20 title in Rawalpindi, beating by seven wickets a star-studded Karachi side featuring national T20 captain Shahid Afridi and his deputy Sarfraz Ahmed. Lahore and Karachi have been the country's traditional bases of cricketing power, with smaller towns and cities in prosperous Punjab province also supplying the national side in recent years.

Now, it appears Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province-home to ethnic Pashtuns who are celebrated for their bravery and prowess in

battle-is flourishing.

Peshawar coach Abdul Rehman admitted cricket success came after action against militancy. "It was tough to bring kids to the cricket grounds with bombs going on," Rehman told AFP. "Parents were scared of sending their kids, but since the military operation cricket has flourished in KPK in general and Peshawar in particular."

Peshawar players match the cavalier approach of the fast-rising Afghanistan team, some of whom also learned the game in refugee camps around the city.

'Fearless cricket'

Peshawar's never-say-die approach was the highlight of the tournament as they successfully chased stiff targets in four of their five group matches and beat six-time champions Sialkot in semis-also batting second. Rehman said bravery typifies Pashtuns, the inhabitants of the province.

"We never go easy on our enemy, be it on the ground or in the battlefield," said Rehman. "I told my boys not to fear anyone and play fearless cricket which has become the norm of international cricket with the advent of Twenty20," he added. Peshawar's outstanding performers included 27-year-old Imran Khan from Swat Valley, which was also home to Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai.

Khan was the tournament's leading wicket-taker with 16 victims, his well-disguised slower deliveries accounting for many. During his spell of 3-26 off four overs in the final he bowled four untouched deliveries which baffled the hard-hitting Afridi.

But he wouldn't be playing the game at all if his scenic home region was still in the clutches of the Taleban, who held sway there from 2007 to 2009.

"I started playing cricket only after a military operation (in 2009) cleared Swat Valley," he said.

"Now life is normal in Swat and we can go the grounds." Imran was also the best bowler when Peshawar won the title last year-and has now been picked to make his national debut in a two-match Twenty20 series against Zimbabwe in Harare later this month. Peshawar opener Raffatullah Mohmand hoped more of his fellow players would get a chance at national level. "It may be too late for me but I am sure these two Twenty20 titles will go a long way in establishing Peshawar players as international stars," said Mohmand, 38.

Pakistan's national cricket academy head coach Mohammad Akram said he was looking forward to tapping the groundswell of talent. "The north-west is an untapped area and with the improving situation we can get good players from there," he said. — AFP

FOOTBALL, PRIDE BACK IN TOWN AFTER 27 YEARS COMETS RETURN

ALEXANDER, ND: As a blanket of gray clouds rolls over the prairie, the grunts of scrimmage, the shrill chirp of the referee's whistle and cheers from the crowd fill the Saturday afternoon air. This is how a small town turns a page in history. After 27 years, football is back in Alexander. The Comets have returned. The first high school football game here in a generation comes thanks to the oil boom that's reversed the fortunes of this tiny school. Enrollment is up after years of decline. And 13 young men in cardinal red, gray and white - some recent North Dakota arrivals - are new celebrities in this rejuvenated town.

"High school sports - that's what people live and breathe for in small-town North Dakota," says Jerry Hatter, Alexander's mayor. "It brings back a sense of pride to the community. ... To see football again in our own little town ... I think it's just neater than hell."

Alexander's return to the gridiron is a story of revival and resilience - for the school and the latest Comets team. Like many rural schools, Alexander has struggled to keep its doors open. Enrollment from pre-kindergarten to 12th grade dropped to just 41 in 2006-2007. The Bakken oil bonanza changed all that, luring new workers and their children to the area. The school, where all grades attend in a single building, now has 210 students, a number projected to grow. But the Class of 2016 - with just four members - is still small enough to fit at a card table.

Now that football is back, there's buzz all around town. Old-timers are reminiscing about their glory days. The new Comets, whose coach is also an oil worker, are bracing for a tough season. And most everyone else knows where they'll spend Saturday afternoons this fall. "Having a football team to rally around strengthens the community," says Leslie Bieber, Alexander's superintendent, who spearheaded efforts to rebuild the team. "It allows us to have our identity again."

Official launch

A lot of townsfolk helped make it happen. Last May, a few hundred people gathered at a semi-formal ball at the firehouse and, on a single night, raised more than \$50,000 for jerseys, helmets and other equipment. Some of that money also will go to the girls and boys basketball and girls volleyball teams that are resuming after 11 years.

The official football launch came on the first Saturday in September as Alexander celebrated Old Settlers' Day for the 70th year with a parade along Elk Street, past the post office, the Hard Ride Saloon, the Lions Burger Fry grill and the Ragged Butte Spring that was a watering hole for cattle in pioneer days. Horse-drawn open wagons led the way, followed by a clown in a miniature yellow car, vintage autos and fire department vehicles. Then came the floats with the Class of '65, marking its 50th anniversary, and after their long absences, the girls' volleyball team and the Comets, who tossed candy to kids in the crowd. Taking it all in, Jim Jacobson recalled how Comets football is in his family's DNA. His father, Garvin, was plucked from the wheat fields when he was 15 to play in the first game, around 1925. Jim followed, starting in the late 1950s, and his son, Todd, played the last season in 1987. Now his grandson, Dayden Rafferty, is wearing the uniform.

"Family has been here since '05 and we're still a part of the community," Jacobson says proudly. "Having a team that's your own is something special. We've been missing that for a long time." — AP

NEW MALAYSIAN BODY TARGETS MATCH-FIXING, HOOLIGANS

SINGAPORE: A new Malaysian football body will launch a drive to stamp out match-fixing and hooliganism when it takes over the running of domestic competitions next year, its chief executive told AFP. Malaysian soccer has been repeatedly hit by scandal, most recently last week when flare-throwing fans brought a World Cup qualifier with Saudi Arabia to a halt.

But Football Malaysia's CEO Kevin Ramalingam said a reorganisation and a lucrative new TV deal could be the start of a new era, comparing it to the English Premier League's advent in 1992.

Football Malaysia will operate the country's top two divisions and cup competitions from January, in a set-up similar to the Premier

League and Germany's Bundesliga. The new TV rights deal with sports media company MP and Silva guarantees a minimum of 1.26 billion ringgit (\$297 million) over 15 years-double what was previously earned.

"I see it as a starting point," Ramalingam said on the sidelines of the Sports Matters conference in Singapore. "I think we're at a position that's very exciting in terms of what lies ahead... This is the first year of the EPL in that sense."

However, Ramalingam said domestic football needed an image boost if it wants TV income to rise still further, with eradicating match-fixing high on the list. Football Malaysia will use betting tracking systems and life bans

to crack down on corruption, while also warning players that games are under ever closer scrutiny. "We've come to a point where we have to make sure we're serious about kicking these kind of things out of the game," Ramalingam said. "I think it's (match-fixing) a problem that's happening less now but certainly the possibility of it being there is very strong. Hopefully in the next two of three years we'll be rid of this stigma."

He added that Football Malaysia would also try to stop hooliganism before it happens by monitoring social networks and talking to fans to calm their frustrations.

Militant fans had warned they may disrupt last week's World Cup qualifier, which came

after Malaysia's record 10-0 defeat to UAE a few days earlier. The defeat has had major repercussions, with the national coach quitting and Malaysia's governing body, Football Association Malaysia, launching a review to raise standards. Domestic football has also seen outbreaks of violence with angry fans clashing on the streets with tear gas-firing police. "Normally when these things rear their head, it's after weeks of a certain campaign on social media for example. So it's more or less predicted," Ramalingam said. "Maybe when these things happen we need to take these early warning signs seriously and tackle the issue instead of waiting to see whether it (trouble) does happen." — AFP