



# A FIRESIDE CHAT WITH ZAINAB ABBAS

**What did you make of the recent series with Afghanistan, in terms of standout performers, squad selection, and areas for improvement?**

I grew up in a joint family system, so I was surrounded by a lot of people. We had two adjoining houses where we had our extended family without a wall in between, so you can imagine the amount of people sort of living together and growing up together. And it was a very fun loving, entertaining environment that we were provided with. And I think because I was surrounded by boys, all my cousins were boys, and that it was a predominantly male household, sport was something which was very much part of our lives. It was something that united the family. We would watch all the cricket matches. There was a bit of football, all the tennis Grand Slams were broadcasted on our television screens and we used to follow all of it. So I think because cricket was the biggest sport in the country and my father used to play cricket while he was growing up, he went to, you know, he went to that length where he played first class cricket and, you know, he's played against some of the greats of the game. Sunil Gavaskar, I think, toured here and he's played against him. And he was somebody who was a left handed batsman and reasonably decent leg spinner – or so I get told by all his peers. But then that is something that didn't really translate into his profession from there onwards, because that's just how life had it for him.

So I think it was very much in my genes that I carried from him. And then my mother was also a cricket fanatic. Not many people know that. She really knew her numbers and she really knew a lot about the cricket team. And growing up, she was as crazy about the sport as I was. It's another thing that her career changed and she didn't get that much time to follow it to that level. But anyway, my point being that my environment and the kind of childhood I had was very much dominated by sports. We used to play outdoors just in our driveway. Cricket used to be something that was always there. It used to be all the cousins, the staff members, and so on. We somehow managed to put up an eleven. I was at best a very good fielder. I don't think I played the sport particularly well, but I've gotten the opportunity to talk about it, something which is certainly a privilege. So yeah, I think that was that. I had a keen interest in watching movies and films and dramas and it was pretty much a mix of everything.

It was just a very fulfilling childhood, I would say. And as far as getting into the world of cricket, I think while I was growing up, with the passage of time, I realised that this is something that I am really, really getting into. When you're watching a side game between Zimbabwe and Bangladesh, and you have an exam the next day and you get told by your parents, "What are you doing? You've got an exam tomorrow, you're watching Bangladesh versus Zimbabwe or something," that's when you realise that it's deeper than you think.

I went abroad to England to study – I graduated from there in business and sociology, and then I did my masters from Warwick in Marketing and Strategy. In between, all the games that Pakistan played within England, I used to buy tickets, I used to pay out of my skin (because, remember, I was on a budget) to follow the game. I watched the 2009 World Cup victory that we had under the leadership of Younis Khan. I was present at most of the games. I saw the semifinal, I saw the final, I saw some of the preliminary games and I was obsessed.

And I would sit and blog. I used to go on the ESPN blog in those days and write about it. So I think it was a very natural thing. Anybody who knows me knew that I was always into it. And eventually, when I got back, I started doing a bit of side stuff, like I was very passionate about beauty so I started my own makeup studio, and I used to do all kinds of creative makeup on the women that used to come to me, and I was making – to be honest – a fair bit of money as well. As luck had it, there was an opportunity with a news channel and I gave an audition. They really liked my work, because they thought I was confident on camera and I also knew my cricket. So that was a good combination to have, as someone who had never been on screen – with no background whatsoever in the field of media. I feel like that's how it all started for me.

**Young women in Pakistan really look up to you as a model for success, whether that be in journalism or otherwise - especially in light of all the toxicity and discrimination women have to face. What career advice would you give them when it comes to establishing a presence for themselves, breaking the glass ceiling, and having a unique personal brand?**

I think the first thing that women who want to come into this field need to realise is that there's no shortcut to success. I know it's a cliché, but you have to work very hard. I was so into my work that I, for the longest time,

remember sacrificing personal events, weddings, you know, a lot of family commitments because I was away on tours, I was covering those tours. I was sometimes even paying out of my pocket to be reporting from England, Australia. I really went the extra mile to be present at these doors because it was important for my growth to be there physically to see what it's like to cover a test match.

You can never be a proper cricket presenter or a cricket broadcast journalist if you've not done test cricket. I'm purist at heart, and I feel like you need to really appreciate that format to understand what the sport is all about. And my advice to them definitely would be, first, make sure that you're in love with the sport. It's very important. You need to be having that extra knowledge that nobody else has, and you need to be genuine about it. It shouldn't be something which you do because you have to. You do it because you want to. And breaking the glass ceiling is something I am told a lot, that you were the one who broke that glass ceiling. I had my fair share of challenges.

People think that it was all smooth sailing for me, but I know that it wasn't. And having a unique personal brand is something one should not, I feel, actively or consciously strive for. But it is something that develops over a period of time in itself if you are on the right path and making the right decisions and are creating an individual space for yourself. Like I always tell people, I don't want you to be me. I tell a lot of young girls who write to me, come up to me and say, we admire you and want to be like you. And I say, I don't want you to be like me: I want you to create your own career trajectory. Yes, I've given you some inspiration. But you need to be able to create your own path. And you will, provided you have the basics covered. It's not really about appearing on the television screens and looking good. That's something that's a requirement because of the television medium, but it should not be the priority.

So my message to them would be: work extremely hard, do your research, and carry on building your profile - and someday you'll get somewhere and reap the rewards.

The PCB Chairman recently vacated his post due to alleged interference in his domain. This has been a regular occurrence for us in our history. How do you think excessive politicisation has impacted our national team's sense of continuity and overall morale, and what are some measures you would propose to mitigate it in favour of more merit-based approaches?

Yeah, I think it's really unfortunate that consistency is something that has rather been lacking in this board of ours. I mean, this is probably going to be our third Chairman in a span of what, one year. And I think it's unfortunate that we don't have consistency. It does affect the team, it does affect the players because when your leadership at the top changes, it changes everything. Your management changes. When your management changes, decision-making changes. When decision-making changes, there is job insecurity within the camp, within

the players. They're scared for their jobs and their places, and they're not able to deliver the way they should be. So, that's the unfortunate part.

I feel like, yes, the players have also kind of got used to it in a bad way, that's the probably the worst thing to come out of it, that you sort of become immune to it. But at the end of the day, when you are held accountable for your performance, you look back and you think, actually, I don't know if I will be retaining this spot of mine in the [playing] eleven tomorrow because you don't know if there'll be a new Chairman, with his own likes and dislikes, what will happen then. So there is a lot of job insecurity when there is a management change. And I feel like there needs to be continuity, just like we hope that there's continuity and consistency within our country.

I'm not a legal person, I'm not somebody who's a lawyer, I'm not somebody who is well-equipped to talk about the constitution, but I feel the PCB should be an independent body. It should be run like a private organisation, like a corporation with an internal hierarchy - which will mean a proper structure, delegation of power, and operations similar to major multinational companies. Unfortunately, it's so politically affiliated with the authorities that there is so much influence and there is so much that shouldn't happen but happens. But that is just how it is. But if you're looking for merit, then you need to have a system which is independent and run on its own as opposed to having any kind of political interference.

**The PSL has really made the waves in recent years, growing in popularity with each subsequent iteration. What are some ways in which you feel the tournament can be further expanded in scope and are there any areas of improvement that you feel we can work on?**

It's great to see that the PSL has really managed to put itself on the global map. It's a league that has only grown bigger in size and has come a long way considering it started its journey in the UAE and then moved to Pakistan when cricket returned. It's great to see the way it's helped our players. We've discovered so much new talent through it and these players have then gone on to represent Pakistan on a national level where they've been playing in different tournaments, World Cups and bilateral series. So the PSL has been a fantastic initiative and I've been associated with it for the last eight years since the time it started.

When it did start, I don't think any one of us were really aware of all the advantages that Pakistan cricket would get in the future due to this particular league. I think one way of growing it is definitely by adding more teams because the more the number of teams, the more the amount of money that will be invested in the league and the more the sponsorships and that's something which will be fantastic for our cricket economy. Also, the more the amount of money, the more the quality will improve.

You get to hear from all the players around the world, all the ones that I've spoken to, that it's the best bowling league in the world for sure. The kind of fast bowling talent that we've seen here, it's really, I think, unparalleled and that is due to the HBL-PSL giving a breeding ground to all these fast bowlers which possess sheer, raw talent. And I think by adding more teams, it will only grow more and we'll have a lot more opportunities for many stakeholders that are involved.

What are your thoughts on the upcoming Asia Cup being a 'hybrid' model, with some games played in Pakistan and others in Sri Lanka? Is this an instance of Pakistan being pressured by the BCCI and the broader international community to incorporate India's preferences or will it make for a better and more diverse overall tournament? Additionally, what do you think the implications of this will be on Pakistan's involvement in the upcoming World Cup in India?

I think I'm just glad that we have at least some games happening within Pakistan. It was always going to be a very political decision, considering the relationship between India and Pakistan on a political level. And initially we were hearing that it's going to be entirely in Sri Lanka. So I do feel like it's just the fact that we have some games happening in Pakistan is going to be a reason to rejoice for the people of Pakistan. The remaining games are in Sri Lanka, but India is obviously not coming to Pakistan to play, which was always going to be expected because at this point of time. A lot of things are decided on a government level and unfortunately, cricket and politics are interlinked. So that's just how it is in terms of how the tournament is going to be. Asia Cup last year was extremely interesting and if you remember, there were some very good games that we had between India and Pakistan, and it's always exciting when these two rival teams meet, no matter where it is, which part of the world.

And I do feel like in terms of implications of Pakistan's involvement in the World Cup, I think Pakistan will go to India to play. I would be very surprised if they don't. It's a World Cup, a global event. It is an event where all teams will partake and I feel like Pakistan would be isolating itself if it decides to not go altogether. I think Pakistan will go, it's just that Pakistan needs to ensure that there are no safety and security concerns when they do visit. So that is something that needs to be assured by the relevant organisations. But I feel like Pakistan will go and we'll get to see a very good World Cup. Hopefully.

Your brother, Hussain, has in recent weeks been involved with the team as a strength and conditioning coach, how has that experience been like for him and does he intend on continuing? What are your general thoughts about our team's fitness levels, which always seem to be lagging behind other teams?

My brother is an entirely self-made individual who started off by doing trainings after he received several diplomas from the National Academy of America in strength and conditioning.

Then he also went on to do a Master's from the University of Nottingham in Sports Medicine, Sports Science, and I think his dissertation was specialising on athlete injuries. From there on, he also worked for the ICC Academy. He did an internship there for a few months. He worked with some of the UAE cricket players and just helped them out with their concerns following his Master's. He went on to work with Crystal Palace and he interned there for a few months.

And in between, when he was in Pakistan, before that, he had his own gym where he would train people. And I think more than training, his speciality has always been rehab. And in our part of the world, it's a concept which is often misconstrued. And it's often misinterpreted, I feel like, with him because he's practically a doctor in terms of his knowledge. I think it's great that Pakistan camp is using his services because they could really do with somebody who's local and knowledgeable.

And I think that our team's fitness levels are an area where it's in constant evolution. Over the last decade, from that we've seen, I think there's no room for complacency anymore. If we live in a world where fitness is given prime importance, then why not? In order to sustain yourself at that level and play all different kinds of formats and play all leagues and then play all the tournaments and then the test matches which require the optimum level of fitness, etc. When you're bowling a certain amount of overs in day, you have to be physically and mentally fit. And it's good to have him [Hussain] give them the opportunity to grow on that level and improve themselves and become the best version of themselves.

So it shouldn't be taken lightly. And it's something that I feel like all the players should on an individual level realise the importance of and improve.

You've commented in the past about how journalists operating in the sports domain are 'bought' by players. How do you assess this phenomenon, and more broadly how do you think analysts/commentators can avoid falling into the traps of the media sector and prioritize fact-based coverage over opportunistic objectives that have to do with giving favours, engaging in 'gossip' for hits, and not being critical enough of things that may be going wrong with our cricket?

I think it's a topic that I've already spoken about. I think it is a relatively common practice that happens. But I do feel like in the long run, it doesn't get you anything. It doesn't yield you any kind of results, for the player and the person in concern. I'm talking about both individuals, because the player needs to thrive by delivering, by performing. Hanging on to certain names or asking people to raise their voices for them is not really going to help.

It is something that they can actually do on their own and it doesn't require much talking. It just requires their bat or their ball, which do the talking. So I feel like if they perform on their own, they will not need anyone's

help to get further. And it's the same with journalists. I feel like if you do good work, if you do good stories, if you cover things properly, if you are well informed, then you don't need to be resorting to clickbaits and severe criticism. Criticism is good if it's constructive – and I feel like commentators or analysts that we have, the good ones, you will always see that they're known for their work, the points that they make, as opposed to only criticising.

Like, we've seen somebody like Nasser Hussain: we look up to him, and now he's somebody who's known for his commentary, his analysis, the way he speaks, all of that, as opposed to somebody who just goes on criticising for the sake of it. So it's very important to have better role models as well, in that sense, and only grow better and bigger by focusing on the right things as opposed to the wrong things.

**There's been a lot of debate around Babar Azam's position as captain in all formats. Do you think he should be backed by the fans and does he have the capacity to truly lead the team and act as a mentor to the younger lot?**

I really want to ask those people who say that there should be another captain apart from Babar who their alternative suggestion is. Because the fact of the matter is that we do not have a ready-made captain waiting in the line. If it was a case that you had somebody like Ben Stokes then why not? But the fact of the matter is that Pakistan is a different country to England, it's a different country to Australia. And the reason why I'm giving these examples of these countries is because leadership is something which is taught and ingrained in you from the start when you're playing in club cricket there in schools and when you're playing domestic cricket.

Because it is something which is a part of their culture that you have to be leaders: you have to know how to dominate, you have to know how to be aggressive. All those instincts that we often see in Australians and now the England team are ingrained at a very basic level. Pakistan is a country which thrives on raw talent like I previously mentioned. And we're gifted to have somebody like Babar Azam as a batsman. And naturally he was chosen as the leader because he was somebody who is very consistent. We've often had issues in consistency in terms of the people that we select for our playing eleven, for our squads. If one player is playing one tournament we don't know if he'll be playing the next one because there is inconsistency in the selection processes – there is inconsistency in even performances. So it's very difficult to back somebody who you do not know for sure will be a feature in the starting eleven. But with Babar we know that he will always be a feature in the starting eleven. And I think Babar has grown as a leader. I think there's still a lot of room for improvement. If I may add he may not be a 'natural' but he is somebody who's learning on the job and it's important that he learns from his mistakes over the years and only gets bigger and better. So yes, I think we should back him, at least until we really feel that there is somebody waiting as a replacement.

**Where do you think our greatest strengths lie, whether that be in the form of players or collective strategies, that you feel could really give the team an edge in the upcoming Asia Cup and World Cup?**

Our greatest strength has always been our bowling. Since at least the time I've followed cricket, Pakistan has been a team that has really done well based on their bowling. Their bowling has taken them forward in every series, tournaments, you name it. We've won matches in the past based on our bowling. Right now Pakistan is fortunate because we do have an exciting crop of fast ballers and that includes the likes of Shaheen Shah Afridi, Naseem Shah, Haris Rauf, among others. We've seen others like Ihsanullah in the PSL as an emerging fast baller. There is [Muhammad] Hasnain waiting in the wings. There is Mohammad Wasim Jr. These are all guys who can clock 140+. I don't think that's a luxury that every team around the world has when you have at least four or five options which are just there because you have this embarrassment of riches as we call it, which is the base battery of Pakistan cricket.

They all bring a different level of skill. I just hope that they're all fully fit including Shaheen because he struggled with an injury and he has returned but it's never easy when you have a knee injury. It always takes a while to get back into rhythm. We saw glimpses of that in the PSL. He was particularly good but I hope he can sustain that over a longer period of time. So yeah, I do feel like our bowling is always going to be the force behind our success even going forward. We need to preserve our fast ballers. We need to look after them because these are bowlers that can bowl well in all kinds of conditions.

**Where do you think our greatest weaknesses lie, whether that be in the form of players or collective factors, that you feel could really jeopardize our prospects in the upcoming Asia Cup and World Cup?**

So I think the New Zealand series give us a fair idea of where we stand as a team, especially in Asian conditions. I think that number four, number five spot was something that we were not sure of. I think if the Iftikhar Ahmed is a great answer to that, somebody who can bowl a bit of offspin and also be the power hitter we're looking for at that number. But in terms of what our real weaknesses, I feel I just hope that the batting is not over reliant on the top order, because there will be times when Babar Azam doesn't score, there will be times when Fakhar Zaman doesn't score, there will be times when Imam ul Haq doesn't score. So we need to have a plan B, we need to make sure that our lower middle order and middle order contribute. But I think the biggest challenge for us as a team is going to be, as always, how we handle the pressure.

If I look back, in the last few years, Pakistan team has done well in tournaments by reaching the finals and semifinals and all of a sudden they've even got themselves in a position where they've dominated proceedings.

But from there onwards, they've sort of lost their way if there's been an onslaught from the other end. So, for example, Rajapaksa hitting Pakistan in the Asia Cup final to all parts, or Virat Kohli doing what he did in the World Cup match against India. So, yeah, I think that is an area they could work on.

### **Which team do you think is the Dark Horse for the Asia Cup and World Cup, and why?**

I think that would perhaps be Sri Lanka, and mainly because of the fact that they've always got certain spinners up their sleeve, which always do well in Asian conditions. We have Nepal. We have Afghanistan. I mean, you could look at Afghanistan as well. I just feel like Afghanistan, again, is a team that has some spinners that have done really well for them in the past. So I feel like both these sides, you can never really rule them out. Sri Lanka won the Asia Cup last year against all odds, so it's hard to really make predictions, clear predictions here in terms of who's going to win and who's going to be the 'Dark Horse' – but yeah, if I were to put my fingers on something that probably be Afghanistan and Sri Lanka.

### **We are currently ranked 6th in Test cricket. What are the factors, in your opinion, that make us quite weak in this domain compared to the other two formats? Why do you think the popularity of Test cricket is declining, and what do you think the future of it might be?**

I think in order to win a test match you need twenty wickets. That's been an area where we have struggled. It requires a very, very potent bowling attack which has the right balance of spinners and fast bowlers that can bowl for longer periods. Remember this is test cricket, you're not bowling four overs, you're not bowling ten overs, you're bowling many more overs than that in a day and you're expected to take twenty wickets. So first of all you need that fitness level to be there. I think we lag in our fitness in that format. And then when it comes to playing overseas in conditions like where the ball is moving a little bit, there's a bit of swing on offer, whether it's a conventional swing or reverse swing, we struggle with that.

So if we end up in New Zealand, the batting will struggle there (which is true for most teams in New Zealand) because of the pace and the seam movement that you get there. It's very, very hard to be playing and dominating in those conditions. And similarly with England as well, they have a brilliant fast bowling line up where you talk about the likes of James Anderson, Stuart Broad, Ollie Robinson, and many others. All these teams have the ability to make the ball talk. So you need batsmen who are technically equipped to be handling this kind of pressure and bowlers who have the ability to bowl in those conditions and take 20 wickets. So I think it's really an area where Pakistan needs to work on and Pakistan needs to understand how they need to adjust to that particular format.

Also, I do feel like the popularity of test cricket on the decline is a perspective that is shared by some people and there might be an element of truth to it, but having said that I also feel that at the same time you look at the Ashes: we just had a wonderful test match between England and Australia, which went right down to the wire. I mean, literally to the last hour, nobody knew what's going to happen. And for the most part, people thought, England has this, England is going to get this, they just need a couple of more wickets. And then you saw that brilliant knock by Pat Cummins, who came out as a true leader and showed resilience and positivity through his intent. So all I'm trying to say is that it's very much alive, at least in England.

You see all the matches and then most of them are sold out whenever England is playing whichever team in the summer. It's just the way they market it, right? So you have a day out in England at the Test Cricket and you enjoy it because you get some great food options, you have great stalls, you have ice cream for kids, so they make it into a whole experience, right? And the weather is beautiful, so it's just about how you're selling your product to the people. If you're going to be playing in 60 degrees with no water and no refreshments, people might not be excited to come and spend that time, because you need to remember that people go buy tickets for the whole experience. It's not just that you're going to watch cricket. I mean, you have the purists, like me, of course, who want to watch test matches. But the world has changed and the audience has changed, and now people don't have that much time in their life to be dedicating five days out to just watching cricket in conditions which might not suit them.

So it depends on you. You've got to sell it better. You've got to market it better. It has to be some form of entertainment for kids. It's so important to get the audience, the spectators, more involved and more engaged, and that's just the way you're going to keep it alive. And I do feel like it's the purest form of the game. So it's something which is at least very close to my heart. And I feel like the people who still love the game and have been following it do feel that it is the best format in cricket.

### **Who are some younger players that you feel have a lot of potential to go on to become global superstars and how do you think the domestic cricket scene can be rethought to incubate talent in a more structured manner?**

There are lots of players that have done really well in the PSL, but I was particularly impressed by Saim Ayub. I think a lot of people have already seen him and spoken about him. He is immensely talented, in terms of shot selection, technique, etc. I feel he's young, but he has an abundance of talent. I hope that he uses it wisely and I hope it's not a talent that goes to waste because he is supremely talented. The no-look shot of his, his stance... a lot of people making comparisons to Babar Azam with the way he plays. I think the boy has a long, long way to go and he has a long future provided he's groomed in the right way.

As far as domestic cricket is concerned, I feel like there are lots of ways to improve. Initially it was said that you need to improve the quality of balls, but I feel like we need to improve the quality of pitches. If you go to Pindi, you'll see all the pitches are grassy and very bowler friendly. If you continue to make such pitches, what happens is that you end up getting bowlers who bowl at 130 and eventually we'll run out of fast bowlers. Fast bowlers feel the need to bowl fast because of the fact that the pitches are so mundane that you need that extra bit of effort. You need that extra bit of pace to get you wickets or to penetrate through the barring line-up.

I feel we can definitely improve our soil. There was a talk about dropping pitches as well earlier on. But I think if we need to be improving our pitches, we need to be making our domestic cricket again more sellable, more marketable. We have empty stands in our domestic cricket. Hardly anybody goes to watch it.

So I think the idea is just improving the structure on every level. It's not just about the playing conditions, it's also about making the experience much better for the viewer and the person who's come to watch the game.

**If you were not a cricket presenter, what alternative career path would you have taken and why? Could it have been politics, similar to your mom Andleeb Abbas?**

I think if I wasn't a cricket presenter, I would have ended up as a makeup artist. It's something that I was very passionate about back when I was younger, and even now. Beauty is something that comes to me. It's in the creative space, which I've always been fond of. I've always been into aesthetics. I've always been into visuals. And transforming. And playing with colours. And I think as a makeup artist, when I was working as a makeup artist, it's something that I really enjoyed doing. So yeah. I think if I wasn't a cricket presenter, I would be a makeup artist. It's something that I've always enjoyed doing.

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