**When the eaglets dared**



[**Major General Syed Ali Hamid**](https://nation.com.pk/Columnist/major-general-syed-ali-hamid)

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In 1952-53, Pakistan sent its ‘A’ Team to England for training and acclimatisation. The team was called the Eaglets after the symbol of Pakistani sports which is the eagle. Who could have predicted that members of the Eaglets squad would dare to beard the English Lion in its den a year later. I must admit at the outset that I am neither a sportsman, nor a sports writer, nor a fan of cricket. While the nation is glued to their TVs and mobiles watching Pakistan play India in the T-20s, I am either reading or writing, or taking a walk in the garden. I occasionally Google the score and celebrate by having a glass of nimbu-pani if we stumble through to a win, or take a deep sigh if we lose and begin to feel sorry for our team. But events like when our team made history at The Oval in 1954 is worth writing about.

My interest in this particular event was triggered by a set of priceless pictures of members of the team in of all things, a booklet on Pakistani recipes. It was prepared by my cousin Sultana, with the assistance of her siblings Rukhsana and Ahmed Rashid (my childhood playmate) and the recipes were by their mother Begum Piari Rashid (known to young and old alike as Paiya). She was a founding member of the Pakistan Society in the UK which operated under the umbrella of the High Commission. In this role, she actively promoted her country’s history, culture and culinary delights by delivering talks throughout the UK. In the early 1950s, Pakistan was unknown in the UK. Having ruled the larger part of the Indian Subcontinent for one and a half centuries, the British public knew everything about ‘India’ but unsurprisingly Pakistan was a non-entity. The first Test tour by our cricket team and its final win made a great difference in placing Pakistan on the map in the British eyes, and Paiya and the Pakistan Society capitalised on their success.

[WHO urges global freeze on COVID boosters till Sept. to allow vaccinating 10% of world](https://nation.com.pk/05-Aug-2021/who-urges-global-freeze-on-covid-boosters-till-sept-to-allow-vaccinating-10-percent-of-world)

In the early years following independence, Pakistan’s struggle to find its feet in international cricket was rewarded by a tour of the MCC in 1951-52. MCC was the name under which England’s teams toured overseas till the 1970s. Though Pakistan honourably lost the first match in Lahore after scoring a massive 428 for 8 (declared), Wisden the cricket archive records that, ‘Expecting a reasonably quiet time in Pakistan, MCC found the standard of cricket higher than expected’. However, the second match played in Karachi was even more significant as the hosts beat the English side by managing to reach the target of 285 runs in the second inning. Sceptics had prophesied that it was beyond them. The 20,000 spectators burst into cries of ‘Pakistan Zindabad’ and on the recommendations of India, Pakistan was awarded a full test status by the International Cricket Conference.

The 1954 tour of the UK was difficult for a team that the British media called the ‘babes of international cricket’. Though a year earlier in their first test series they had lost to India 2-1, they had acquitted themselves well. However, the playing conditions in the UK were very different against what has been considered, the best line up of players that England ever fielded. The tour was played over three summer months from May onwards. In the early part of 1954 it was very dry, but then there was a long sequence of seven very wet months that exceeded the average.

[US rejects WHO call for booster shot moratorium as 'false choice'](https://nation.com.pk/05-Aug-2021/us-rejects-who-call-for-booster-shot-moratorium-as-false-choice)

In his book Wounded Tiger which traces the history of Pakistani cricket, the author Peter Oborne describes the general condition of the team: “There was no official scorer. Members of the team were expected to share out this duty. Pakistan did not bring a single accredited newspaper or radio correspondent. Apart from his other duties, the team captain found himself instructing members of his squad on quite rudimentary issues, like how to hold a knife and fork”. The lessons on table manners may have been prompted by ill-considered remarks by Mr Isphahani, Pakistan’s High Commissioner, at a diplomatic function. The journalist Anjum Niaz was attending the function as a young girl with her father Syed Fida Hasan, the team manager. She recollects that Isphahani “……. disdainfully called our own team ‘rabbits’ and asked what you expect from these people who need to be taught table manners?’’ But the team was not there to dine with the Queen. They had come to do what they could do best—play cricket, and had put their heart and soul into training. Anjum had accompanied the team with her father on the 20 days voyage to the UK and narrates how after crossing the rough Arabian Sea, a calmer passage through the Mediterranean enabled the team to practice in the nets set up on the ship’s deck.

[France eliminate Spain to reach Olympic semis in women's basketball](https://nation.com.pk/05-Aug-2021/france-eliminate-spain-to-reach-olympic-semis-in-women-s-basketball)

As I admitted at the beginning, I am not a sports writer so I will refrain from giving a blow by blow account. For those who are interested, I would recommend the article ‘Fazal Swings it Pakistan’s Way’ by Osman Samiuddin which is extracted from his book, ‘The Unquiet Ones: A History of Pakistan Cricket’.

On the last day, on commencement of play, England lost three wickets in less than an hour. The final pair of McConnon and Statham needed to score 30 runs for their side to win. Samiuddin writes: “On the fifth ball of Fazal’s 30th over, McConnon bunted the last ball out towards extra cover. The path the ball followed was perfect for Hanif, running in towards it from conventional cover and towards the stumps. Without stutter he picked up the ball one-handed and in his stride threw at the stump-and-a-half he could see. The ball struck and McConnon was short, adding to the misery by clumsily falling over as he ran on and slid. ……… It was a slick piece of fielding not just for the side but for the time as well. It was over; Pakistan had won by 24 runs, exactly what their last wicket in the second innings had put on”. In the words of the Duke of Wellington after the Battle of Waterloo, it was “a damn close-run thing”.

[Country's economic indicators on trajectory of growth, progress: Asad Qaiser](https://nation.com.pk/05-Aug-2021/country-s-economic-indicators-on-trajectory-of-growth-progress-asad-qaiser)

There was a fairly large crowd of 24,000 on the final day and a roar erupted from the Pakistani spectators. Amongst the viewers at The Oval who must have also clapped vigorously was Pakistan’s C-in-C, General Ayub Khan, Lieutenant General Azam Khan and the legendary Justice Cornelius who was the vice president of Pakistan’s Board of Cricket Control. As the team returned to the pavilion there was Alf Gover jumping up and down shouting “We have won! We have won!” Considered the Mr Chips of cricket teachers, Alf’s practiced eyes had convinced him that there was Test match substance in the young Pakistani players. During all the days of the final Test, Ahmed Rashid (the author and journalist) then aged 6, was at the pavilion to cheer the team as their unofficial mascot. As Fazal raced up to the balcony of the pavilion to acknowledge the cheering crowd, he swept Ahmed up in his arms and gave him a wicket to hold …. and Ahmed too found a place in the history of Pakistani cricket.

[Nation remembers Akhlaq Ahmad on 22nd death anniversary](https://nation.com.pk/04-Aug-2021/nation-remembers-akhlaq-ahmad-on-22nd-death-anniversary)

Apart from her commitment to the affairs of the Pakistan Society, Paiya was also an active member of an international kitchen club which organized annual food exhibitions. At the British Food Fair in Kensington in 1954, she established a Pakistan pavilion with the help of friends and the High Commission. After their heady victory, the Pakistani team still had a few weeks in the UK before their ship SS Batori set sail for Pakistan and the Pakistan Pavilion pulled off a public relations coup by inviting the skipper Kadar as well as Fazal Mahmood and other members of the team to attend. With the cricketers standing at the counter on the opening day, cooking some typical Pakistani dishes, hundreds flocked to the Pakistan Pavilion, much to the chagrin of the Indian pavilion.

The young and inexperienced team did a great service by not only firmly placing Pakistan in the league of international Test teams, but also establishing the country’s credentials within the British public as an independent cricket playing nation. Till then many of them thought it was a province of India. As for The Oval, Pakistan’s team has just about adopted the ground as its second home where over the years, they have amassed a win ratio of 50 per cent in Test matches, higher than any other national team’s performance over there.

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