

Why neutral umpires are critical in Tests

21st February 2010, Sunil Gavaskar

WHAT a Test series we have had! It's a pity that it was only a two-Test series but it was enthralling and proved to all doubters that there is no better examination of skills and temperament than in Test cricket. The limited-overs version is quick and exciting alright, but it does not adequately tell you how good a player is.

The manner, in which the Indians bounced back after the mauling that they got in the first Test at Nagpur, was praiseworthy. It told you that there was determination to make up for the loss; it told you that the captain, coach and senior players were hurt by the defeat and had exhorted the team to a bigger effort in the second Test. So, despite losing the toss yet again and after a double century partnership for the second wicket, the Indians stuck it out and did not give up, and their patience paid off in the end.

Some of the players, especially the bowlers, had come in for some unnecessary flak and had a point or two to prove. They did that splendidly by bowling South Africa out twice under 300, won the second Test to level the series and with it also retained the number one ranking in Test cricket.

It was a close thing, however, as the visitors' lower order stuck with the magnificent Hashim Amla to take the game into the last 15 minutes and almost got a draw which would have given them the number one ranking as well as the series. That last dismissal by Harbhajan Singh also indicated why it is crucial to have third country umpires officiate in Test cricket. Third country umpires were brought in to avoid the finger of home team bias leveled against the home umpires even if they did a great job.



There were four leg-before-wicket decisions that day and if even one and especially the final one had been given by a home umpire you can well imagine the uproar there would have been even if, as said earlier, all those calls were correct ones. As it turned out, Steve Davis and Ian Gould did a magnificent job and their friendly demeanor got the respect of both teams' players.

There has been some talk that with the decision referral system in place home umpires could once again officiate but since only three incorrect referrals are allowed and like it happened at Eden Gardens, if the final wicket is taken just 15 minutes before the Test ends, there would be plenty of nudge-nudge, wink-wink as if to suggest that home bias had got that call in favor of the hosts.

Those who may not have watched the Test but read only the scorecard will automatically assume that the home team won because of home umpires and so it's better to stick with what has worked and, more importantly, diffused many a volatile situation among players.

No praise can be too high for Hashim Amla as he almost took South Africa to safety. He had great support from the lower order and the Indians were getting a touch anxious when the last wicket was claimed. His batting had all the ingredients needed for a Test match — loads of patience, lovely, sure footwork and the uncanny ability to pierce the field when runs were needed. For his century in each innings, Amla is our 'CEAT International Cricketer of the Week'.