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BROADCASTING FEAR

Is Test cricket dying? Apparently it depends on which teams are playing, say the men who bring the game to you

ONE OF the best ways of explaining new things to people is with analogies (you know, "the car is as fast as a bullet" or "stop being such a monkey." So when Twenty20 cricket first arrived on the scene many people came up with various analogies to describe it. For example, Former India opener Navjot Singh Sidhu said, "If one-day cricket was pyjama cricket, then Twenty20 is underwear cricket."

But what started out as a medium to take cricket to the masses has quickly overtaken whatever growth projections were made for it and has actually started threatening the future of Test cricket itself.

So while the Indian Premier League is promising to get bigger with every passing year and laughing it's way to the bank, the ICC isn't resting easy.

Boards are business entities and as such there should be no expectation from them that they will preserve Test cricket just for its historic value.

Indeed, the same argument holds true for the broadcasters — as long as Tests help them make more money, they will be keen to support the format but once that stops happening, then the real trouble will begin.

Peter Hutton, COO, Taj Television Pvt. Ltd, Ten Sports, is holidaying in United Kingdom, where Test cricket has knocked football off the back pages, but his mind is on a Test series that simply interests no one.

STILL VIABLE

"I THINK Test cricket as a whole still has a viable future but what concerns me is the amount of games that draw little attention from Indian viewers. The recent West Indies v Bangladesh series is a good example — where we had a sizeable number of emails complaining that we showed the cricket rather than the Tour de France," said Hutton.

His views are echoed by Nimbus CEO Harish Thawani, whose company has the rights for domestic cricket and other international matches that are played in India under the aegis of the Board of Control for Cricket in India.

"The long term future of Tests is a source of concern," said Thawani. "Especially Test series between teams that are not iconic. I think we will see the

world of Test cricket slowly get polarized towards iconic series like the Ashes.

"We may very well see a two-tier system appear in which India, Australia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, South Africa and England will be in the first tier and all the other countries will be in the second tier," Thawani added.

Surely, Test cricket has its own appeal. But do the television channels have any way of gauging whether the appeal of five-day format is actually increasing or decreasing?

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advertisers look away from Test cricket but the current Ashes is rating well and I think it's too early to make sweeping judgements on the future of Tests as a whole," said Hutton.

Thawani feels that we need to give things at least five years to settle down. Twenty20 is new to the market and a true indication of where it stands can only be obtained after a five-year period. "The preliminary trends, however, are very clear," said Thawani. "It is eating into the pie a bit."

For example, Hindustan Unilever Ltd., India's biggest

household products maker, reported profit declined on higher advertising costs and lower income from financial investments and the sale of properties. Many of the millions that they spent on ads were spent during the India Premier League, or IPL, cricket tournament held in South Africa in April and May.

INNOVATIONS ARE GOOD

THE ICC, on its part, has been talking about various innovations (such as four-day Tests) to try and make the format more appealing to the viewers. One innovation that has, however, caught the fancy of both, Hutton and Thawani, is day-night Tests.

"I'm certainly a believer in day-night Test cricket. Boards do tend to do the game a disservice by scheduling Test matches in a way that prevents people from watching them. Matches should always include Saturday and Sunday play and/or coincide with public holidays."

"Cricket needs to make an effort to get full stadia back for Test match games — the empty seats at Indian Test matches are shocking in a country where so many want to see the game's biggest stars," said Hutton.

TESTS



Four-day Tests don't quite make the cut for Thawani. "They will only lead to more draws and we don't want that," said Thawani. "But day-night Tests as something that could secure the future of the format. Another innovation that could be tried is limited-overs Tests and perhaps they need to give the Super-Sub another go — this time in Tests."

So while many former internationals are predicting doomsday for Tests, the broadcasters still give it hope. And if the ICC can tune it well, it could very easily survive another century.

TWENTY 20

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