

"THE MAN WORTH HIS WEIGHT IN GOLD - RAHUL DRAVID"

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22nd June 1996, India was playing in the Mecca of world cricket against the English and it was the third day of the second test of the series in which England lead comfortably by 1-0. A young man named Sourav Chandidas Ganguly was making a big mark in Indian cricket with his finely crafted century on debut.

Yet another interesting thing was that there was another batsman, at the other end making strokes and drives straight off the cricketer's manual -something that had would give orthodoxy in world cricket it's due credit and privilege. The beauty of Lords with the cold English breeze gently blowing across the stands was there to be enjoyed but more admirable was the presence of a slim, handsome figure in the middle who was driving the English bowlers all around the park with his exquisitely classy shots and what separated this man from glory right from his first test was 5 runs. The young man who was also making his debut the same day along with S.C.Ganguly scored 95 runs and was dismissed by Lewis and the entire Lords' royals gave a standing ovation to one of the most beautiful knocks they had ever witnessed - beautiful in the truest sense because this handsome young man played cricket the way it should be played, and at a time when unorthodoxy was at it's peak with pinch-hitters scoring runs, defying the standard shots of cricket - this man's affluent essay came out of perfection, temperament and technique.

What people did not realize obviously was that this man would go on to become the finest cricketer India has ever produced and will ever produce - in terms of style, technique and something the whole Indian cricket faculty was searching for - dependability.

The man is Rahul Sharad Dravid, presently India's finest cricketer who is worth his weight in gold. Long gone are the days when he used to be blamed for poor scoring, long gone are the days where Dravid would get close to a big score and mess it up with some shots which would reflect lack of confidence. In present day Indian cricket he is right up there along with the stalwarts Sachin Tendulkar and Sunil Gavaskar. Dravid has made an indelible mark on Indian cricket and his heroics would stay till the day crickets play cricket.

What has made this man so remarkable? Dravid's career can be divided into three stages - as a shaky starter with the right technique, as the patient sheet anchor around who batsmen used to score freely and now Dravid has assumed the new avatar of being a destroyer - not just with sixes that would go out of the park but with a temperament that would make him reach the skies.

A brief look at his history suggests that this man started his career very shakily. Bugged by lack of confidence the only thing this man had to answer to all his critics was his patience and technique, but

little did people realize that these were the most valuable assets which were required for Indian cricket or for any good test player. Dravid's debut in the 50-over version of the game wasn't too impressive, he scored a 3 and got out to the spin wizard Muttiah Muralitharan in the second match of the Singer cup-96 between India and Sri Lanka in Padang, Singapore. In some of the innings that followed Dravid took a firm resolve to remain at the crease but runs didn't flow so smoothly either and his efficiency in the shorter version of the game was questioned.

Then came the catharsis - Dravid redeemed himself in the World Cup-99 and went on to become the highest scorer in the English edition of the world cup scoring 461 runs at an average of 65.85 and more importantly at a strike rate of 85.52, which convincingly silenced his critics. Dravid notched up 2 centuries and 3 half-centuries in just eight innings. England has always been an acid test for batsmen and the phrase - 'survival of the mightiest and well-equipped' applied to any batsman who wanted to score runs in England.

Batsmen of world cricket found it hard to face the English conditions in which the ball moved early on and bowlers like Wasim Akram were able to extract swing and seam off the bowler-favoring pitches, but Dravid with his compact technique thrived in such conditions. Dravid put on the mammoth partnership of 318 with Ganguly scoring 145, which went onto become the highest by any pair for any wicket at that time and they combinedly annihilated Sri Lanka out of the World Cup. There was no looking back for Dravid ever since that phenomenal rise and by that time Dravid had proved himself not only to be a patient test player but also as a person who could belt the ball as good as any other hitter. Dravid was no longer confined to the test arena. Dravid continued his excellent form in New Zealand too.

Dravid in a personal interview later confessed that it was the self-confidence which he had instilled in himself before the World Cup that made the difference. Success can elude a person with the right talent and skill only when combined with wrong attitude.

Dravid had set himself right and was on his way to make bigger scores and by means of his swashbuckling sixes and fours in the world cup, Dravid had firmly cemented his place in the Indian ODI side as a sheet anchor around whom other stroke makers like Sachin Tendulkar and Sourav Ganguly could revolve around and belt the bowlers out of the park. Dravid followed up that colossal knock in Taunton with another Blitzkrieg against New Zealand in Hyderabad where he joined with the mighty Sachin Tendulkar to erase and re-write many records. Sachin scored 186 and this overshadowed the mastery of Dravid who scored 153. Dravid continued his wonderful form in all the one day series that followed and notched up centuries in great class. But to his team, Dravid meant much more. He had answered nearly every call of crisis, and had saved the Indian side from the jaws of defeat in South Africa, West Indies and England.

Then came the defining phase of Dravid's career which equated him with the all time greats of Indian cricket. Time was the only factor that stood between Dravid and greatness. The time had come for greatness to meet Dravid and it was in the year 2002. It all started with the monumental 148 he made

against the English at Headingley in 2002 to give India a much wanted overseas victory, from then onwards it has been a roller coaster ride for Dravid and the Indian team. India won the 3rd test against England by an innings and 46 runs. Dravid then entered the select band of cricketers who had scored 500 or more runs in a single test series by scoring 602 runs in the n-power test series in England and also notched up three 100s and a 50.

Records went on accumulating for himself and tumbling for others, during Dravid's innings as he became the first player in the calendar year 2002 to reach 1,000-run mark in Tests and he had a tally of 1,078 runs at a healthy average of 67.37. Dravid rewrote the script at The Oval in the following test, hitting a flawless 217. India had amassed 508 and the next highest score was Tendulkar's 54 and Dravid shed the tag of being a batsman who had been overshadowed the most number of times.

Dravid struck a century against West Indies in Bombay in 2002 and went on to become only the fourth player in test history, after Everton Weekes, Jack Fingleton and South African Alan Melville, to score hundreds in four consecutive innings.

Then came the most awaited moment of Indian cricket - Dravid led India to a convincing four-wicket victory over the mighty Aussies led by the gladiator Steve Waugh. Previously Dravid scored 180 in India's greatest-ever test partnership of 376 but it was Laxman who grabbed all the praise for his 281 in Calcutta, 2001. But beating the kangaroos in their own land was something that had remained taboo until the ghost buster Dravid did the trick for India in Adelaide. Dravid scored 233 and 72 in the match to beat the Aussies comfortably. Dravid had branded himself as a gladiator by then and what followed were repeat telecasts of his heroics. India had got itself a gladiator - a tag which Steve Waugh held for Australia and world cricket. At the end of the Steve Waugh era, Dravid rose to assume the mantle of a fighter who will not go without a fight and in the case of cricket - Dravid would not go without a victory.

Dravid led India to its greatest series victory ever - beating arch-rivals Pakistan in their home and scored a colossal 270 to give India a much needed innings victory overseas and more specifically against Pakistan. With his 270 Dravid has reached the peak of reliability and there are no down curves in this peak.

Dravid will move from heights to greater heights, strength to strength and that means India will move from victories to greater victories.

Not much of elucidation is required; a simple glance at the TV channels and the print media would reveal Dravid's heroics in Pakistan. This has been Dravid's history till date.

Talent and character combine to make up consummate greatness. Flawless technique is just one of the several assets that Rahul Dravid possesses which make him the gem he is. There are several artistic nuances in his flawless technique that make him superior - some of them being his head/hand/body positioning during strokeplay, wristy shots, sense of timing and his 'cuts' and 'pulls' as a person from the sub-continent. All these have gone on to make him a technically superior player.

A deeper scrutiny of his character reveals his commitment towards Indian cricket. He has always been a team man whose fair share of personal records have been overshadowed by his team heroics which have directly contributed to almost all of the Indian team's victories in the past 3 years.

One of Dravid's greatest most admirable features, has been the way he has climbed up the mountain called success. His career has been an exponential curve, right from his 95 on debut to his present day 270, right from being called as 'Jammy', "The rock of Gibraltar" to his present day designation of being "The Wall" of the Indian team, from being called a slow player to the Messiah of consistency. Dravid has always answered to India's need and this has been the feature which makes him the most adorable member of this Indian side.

His cricketing career is an inspiration to anyone and his catharsis has been like that of a phoenix bird. In spite of his heroics which have saved India umpteen times, he remains a humble man looking ahead to make greater contributions and bigger scores.

To bowlers, his wicket is prized more than even Sachin Tendulkar's because of his ability to stay at the crease and score runs quickly whenever necessary. The Indian scoreboard becoming 30/2 no longer produces happiness to the opposition because that means Dravid, The Wall would occupy the crease and make it a score in excess of 300. He has been the most dependable, most consistent and the most solid player Indian cricket has ever produced and he can destroy any bowling attack on his day - not with brute force but with his solid technique. Dravid will not edge a fast bowler to the boundary behind the wicket to get a scratchy boundary but give him the greatest insult of driving him straight over his head for a six. What makes Dravid more lethal is his ability to deliver the good ball to the boundary with his effortless drives and penetrating his defenses is one of the most difficult things for a bowler. Infact the most demoralizing sight for a fast bowler could be his best ball being hit straight off the middle of the bat to a boundary and anything more the bowler attempts could be blocked by a solid impenetrable defense. What more would you bowl?

Dravid assumes monstrous proportions to bowlers when his patience and watchful eye turns into arrogant elegance and the way he scores quick runs and demolishes bowling attacks like he did in England, Sri Lanka and Australia is artistry combined with power of the highest form. Orthodoxy and quick scoring are no longer oxymorons, thanks to Dravid who has redefined it.

His 60+ average in tests abroad dominates his 55+ average thereby making him the most valuable player in the Indian side when touring abroad. Dravid's redefining of himself after the World Cup-99 has seen him assume more of the role of a destroyer and annihilator than that of the sheet anchor in the ODIs.

In my opinion Dravid's greatest asset has been the way in which he has answered critics and come out of the shadows every time his position in the team has been under jeopardy and every time his efficiency has been questioned. This was something Steve Waugh did every time making his 18 years of test cricket being branded as the Steve Waugh era and someday in the not-so-distant future Dravid will

be a living legend and his playing days will be titled as the consistency era, perfection era or more simply the Rahul Dravid era.

Presently, Dravid is the finest batsman in Indian cricket and it is going to be extremely interesting watch him bloom and become one of the greatest batsman in the history of world cricket.

So welcome to the Rahul Dravid era and enjoy it! - S.N.Sudharsan.

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