



## **THE MAGNIFICENT, MAJESTIC MUSHTAQ ALI BY HARESH PANDYA**

Elegant and stylish on and off the field, Syed Mushtaq Ali breathed his last in sleep at his abode in Indore on 18 June 2005. An attractive, adventurous right-hand batsman, Mushtaq was liked by ordinary cricket-lovers and cognoscenti alike. 'He was the Errol Flynn of cricket, dashing, flamboyant, swashbuckling and immensely popular wherever he played,' gushed Keith Miller. The mercurial Australian all-rounder knew that Mushtaq was capable of changing the very complexion of a match in the twinkling of an eye.

At his best Mushtaq could even be an aesthete's delight. 'There was suppleness and a loose, easy grace which concealed power, as the feline silkiness conceals the strength of some jungle beauty of gleaming eyes and sharp fangs,' said Neville Cardus, the only knight among cricket writers, waxing lyrical about Mushtaq's batsmanship. 'At times his cricket was touched with genius and imagination.'

The delightfully dynamic Mushtaq had forged a fruitful opening pair with the more patient and pragmatic Vijay Merchant. It all began in the Second Test at Old Trafford, Manchester, where the two made history on India's tour of England in 1936.

Mushtaq was run out in bizarre circumstances in the first innings when Merchant's drive rebounded off his bat at the non-striker's end to Arthur Fagg at short mid-on, who threw down the stumps. England declared at tea on the second day at 571 for 8, having made 398 in the day.

When India batted again, 368 behind, Mushtaq and Merchant simply went berserk and added 190 runs without loss in the final session against an attack comprising English captain Gubby Allen, Alf Gover, Wally Hammond, Walter Robins and Hedley Verity.

While Mushtaq was his usual aggressive self, it was a pleasant surprise for many to see Merchant, of all batsmen, take a leaf out of his partner's book and go after the bowlers.

Batting like a man possessed, Mushtaq let loose a flurry of exciting shots and set the historic ground ablaze. His forceful drives to the off, rasping cuts, full-blooded hooks and lusty pulls, among others, sent even a partisan crowd into raptures. He spared none, including Allen, whose one over cost him 15 runs.

As Mushtaq reached 96, the great Wally Hammond moved from his position in the slips, patted him on the back and said: 'Young man, you need only four runs for a memorable hundred. Don't throw it away.' Mushtaq duly completed his hundred, becoming the first Indian to score a Test century abroad. When he returned to the pavilion unconquered on

106, his delighted, grateful captain Vizzy (Maharajkumar of Vizianagram) presented him with a gold watch.

But the ultimate tribute came from C.B.Fry. The great man told Mushtaq: 'Ranji would have been the happiest man to witness your innings.' While Mushtaq and Merchant were relaxing and basking in the glory of their individual and collective tours de force in the evening, the headline writers in the Fleet Street had a busy time.

The next morning's papers were full of praise for the Indian openers' scintillating batting display. As usual, the peerless Cardus led the gushing eulogies, calling Mushtaq and Merchant 'the poetry and prose' of Indian cricket.

It was, of course, too good to last and Mushtaq was consumed by Robins for 112 the next morning after putting on 203 (in 150 minutes) with Merchant, who made 114. But India, already trailing 1-0 in the rubber, managed to draw the Test without much difficulty.

Incidentally, halfway through the tour the whimsical Vizzy sent back the team's finest all-rounder and also its stormy petrel, Lala Amarnath, for 'insubordination'. Vizzy detested C.K.Nayudu but there was no way he could drop his key player. As if that were not enough, Vizzy rewarded Baqa Jilani, an average cricketer, with his India cap in the Third Test simply because, acting on his skipper's advice, he had insulted Nayudu in front of all.

When Merchant began batting in fine mid-season form and started scoring centuries, his 'jealous' captain instructed his partner Mushtaq to run him out. But Mushtaq, ever a gentleman cricketer, did not obey Vizzy's command. Mushtaq scored 1,078 runs, including four centuries, and Merchant 1,745 runs on the tour.

On the 1946 tour of England, too, they were worthy competitors. The more mellowed Mushtaq and ever compact Merchant put on 124 at Old Trafford and 94 at The Oval.

In an association that lasted just four Tests and seven innings, they averaged a remarkable 83.4 as an opening pair.

How one wishes the two had opened regularly and in more Tests! But it was not to be. Mushtaq was never a blue-eyed boy of the selectors despite his obvious talents and proven track record. He was a consistent, heavy scorer in domestic cricket and also against the visiting foreign teams. Yet, his place in the Indian team was always predictably unpredictable.

But there was not a shadow of doubt about his popularity. The Calcutta crowds in particular had a special liking for Mushtaq after he scored a superb century against Lord Tennyson's team at Eden Gardens in 1937/38. One incident, the like of which has not often been seen anywhere in the world, should suffice.

The Australian Services squad, led by Lindsay Hassett, visited India soon after World War II. Mushtaq missed the first unofficial Test as he had been indisposed. But he was not selected for the second Test at Calcutta even when he was fully fit and admittedly raring to go.

This infuriated Mushtaq's fans in Calcutta to such an extent that they got together to protest, carried out a rally holding banners and placards and shouting slogans like "Bring Back Mushtaq" and "No Mushtaq, No Test" and barged into the pavilion at Eden Gardens.

Kumar Shri Duleepsinhji, the chairman of selectors, became a victim of their ire. Some of them caught him by his tie and started manhandling him. But for the timely intervention of Mushtaq, who was present there, anything untoward could have happened to Ranji's illustrious nephew, so deadly were their designs. Realising that their demands were fair and just, the selectors had no other option but to eat humble pie and include him in the team at the 11th hour.

Mushtaq may have had the last laugh, but it did not last long, as the selectors resumed their favourite pastime: playing football with his career. Of course, he was selected in the Indian team for its maiden tour of Australia in 1947/48. Merchant was named captain but he made himself unavailable for the tour itself. Amarnath replaced him at the helm and Mushtaq became his deputy.

But Mushtaq lost his elder brother, Iqbal, precisely at the time. He decided against going down under. The team was about to set off when Mushtaq expressed his willingness to accompany it. But it was too late as the new squad had already been announced.

Now accustomed to being in and out of the national team, Mushtaq made yet another comeback and, as if to repay the affection of his admirers in Calcutta, played two outstanding innings of 54 and 106 at Eden Gardens in the Third Test against the star-studded West Indies in 1948/49. 'If ever Mushtaq comes to the Caribbean and plays like this, he'd be adored and idolised,' said the West Indian speedster Prior Jones.

Unfortunately, it turned out to be Mushtaq's last hurrah on the big stage, as it were. Although he continued to perform consistently well in first-class cricket, including against the two Commonwealth teams that toured India after the calypso charmers left the shores, there was just no place for him in the official Test side.

But inscrutable have been the ways of Indian selectors since time immemorial. They recalled Mushtaq for the Fifth and final Test against Nigel Howard's England side at Chennai when least expected. But the aging lion could not roar and was dismissed for 22 in India's only innings. Though the match was dominated by Vinoo Mankad with his amazing bowling performance (eight for 55 and four for 53), Mushtaq had the distinction of being a member of a team that engineered India's maiden Test triumph.

The selectors did not consider Mushtaq for the 1952 tour of England. It marked the end of an all-too-brief Test career of only 11 matches in which he scored 612 runs at 32.21, including two centuries and three fifties. Although not unimpressive, these figures hardly reveal the real genius of Mushtaq. A batsman of his class and stature surely deserved a better deal.

Mushtaq last donned the India colours, albeit in an unofficial series, against the Silver Jubilee Overseas Cricketers' team which was invited by the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) to celebrate the 25th anniversary of its formation in 1953/54.

This time, too, he was ignored for the first four Tests. But he celebrated his return in the Fifth and final Test at Lucknow with two breezy fifties at the age of 40.

Born in Indore on 17 December 1914, Mushtaq had a flair for field sports and ball games, particularly athletics, cricket and hockey. His father, Khan Saheb Syed Yakub Ali, was a police inspector. He was Mushtaq's biggest supporter. He always encouraged Mushtaq, as he did his other three sons, to excel

in sports but, like all sensible parents, advised him never to neglect studies if he aspired to become a good sportsman and gentleman.

Fortunately for Mushtaq, his brother Altaf Ali and maternal uncle Bashir Ali were reputed cricket and hockey players, both having represented Indore in the prestigious Aga Khan Hockey Tournament in Mumbai. A product of Aligarh Muslim University, Mushtaq had his schooling, including cricketing, in Indore. In those years, most genuinely talented cricketers enjoyed the blessings of the princes. Mushtaq also received plenty of princely patronage from Vizzy and the royalty of Holkar.

But his greatest source of inspiration and encouragement was Nayudu. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say the first Indian captain was a towering influence on Mushtaq's overall development as a cricketer. 'Nayudu's hold on me was almost similar to that of Ranji's on Duleep,' he told this writer during an intimate conversation at his home a few years ago.

It may surprise many that it was not as a batsman but as a left-arm spinner that Mushtaq first caught the eye. Of course, he would often show flashes of his brilliance with the willow while batting down the order. He was an important member of Vizzy's private team that featured Jack Hobbs and Herbert Sutcliffe, among others, at one particular time. When Mushtaq took 11 wickets in a match, Hobbs presented him with a pair of silver hair-brushes. So consistently effective was Mushtaq with the red cherry that he was chosen to play for India against Ceylon (today's Sri Lanka) in Delhi in 1932.

He justified the selectors' faith by taking ten for 129 in the match. Mushtaq subsequently made his official India debut in the Second Test against England at Calcutta in 1933/34 – as a left-arm spinner, of course. He did not set the Hoogly on fire, though. He bowled 19 overs in England's first innings, gave away 45 runs and accounted for the English captain Douglas Jardine as his first Test victim. He was not required to bowl in the second essay.

As a batsman, he scored 9 in the first innings batting at number seven. Promoted to open with Naomal Jeomal in the second innings, he made 18. He was not picked for the Third and final Test. It was his association upfront with Merchant in England two years later that made him a star – and that too as a batsman!

An Allah-fearing soul who did not know the art of diplomacy, Mushtaq's vast experience was never utilised by the BCCI. 'The BCCI seems to believe that experienced retired cricketers exist in big cities like Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi, Bangalore and Chennai only,' he said bitterly.

A devout Muslim who was a true sport, Mushtaq always believed in playing the game, literally and figuratively. He was humbly proud of his India cap and blazer.

'It is a pity Mohammed Azharuddin has given a bad name to India and the Muslim community in particular by his alleged involvement in the match-fixing scandal. Even prostitutes have certain ethics and morals. Is money so important for today's cricketers that some of them have to stoop so low?' he lamented.

Handsome, tall and still upright, there was an unmistakable aura about Mushtaq even at the age of 90. His sonorous, manly voice accompanied him till the very end. His handwriting was beautifully delicate and he was a prolific, punctual letter-writer. He penned an interesting autobiography, Cricket Delightful, in 1967.

He was awarded the Padma Shri by President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan in 1963. The Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) honoured him with honorary life-membership. The hallowed Wisden also conferred a Special Award on this famous son of Indian cricket. Visiting England after 56 years to receive the honour at a glittering function, Mushtaq was as much 'smitten' by 'nostalgia' as he was 'ravaged' by what he thought was 'a change in culture'. In a first-class career that took off in 1930 and closed in 1964, the stalwart graced so many teams: Holkar, Central India, Muslims, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Bharat, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and, of course, India. He scored 13,213 runs at an average of 35.90, hit 30 hundreds (the highest being 233 for Holkar versus United Provinces at Indore in 1947/48), claimed 162 wickets at 29.34 apiece and held 160 catches. Howsoever impressive, these figures do not unfold the genius that was Mushtaq Ali.