

# IPL5: The Rise Of The Fan



Bags of cash and Bollywood bling, but no one really cares about the cricket or teams, do they? Nick Sadleir, already an IPL veteran, travelled to Mumbai, Delhi, Jaipur and Mohali and says he can see the emergence of real fan loyalty – as well as some interesting new tactics in IPL5.

BY: NICK SADLEIR

Seventy five consecutive IPL matches without a break seemed like it would be too many to sustain the hearts and minds of the Indian cricket-supporting public and half way through the fifth edition of the tournament, there is indeed evidence from the TV ratings statisticians that the IPL is less popular than it once was.

But one cannot take these ratings as the definitive litmus test of a good tournament. The novelty may have worn off five years in and TV audiences might be down a few percent on last years, but this tournament has finally gained traction in ways that are more important than just how many people tune in every night. Teams now have real fan bases.

Ex-IPL boss Lalit Modi may have put cinemas out of business as every man and his dog watched the inaugural IPL for the glitz and the glam each evening. Indeed using Bollywood was a brilliant catalyst for launching the IPL - marrying show business and cricket in India was no hair-brained scheme and whatever anyone says, the IPL has been a phenomenal success on multiple levels.

It may be TV audiences that bring in the money that sustains this beast, but bums on seats is an equally important measure of a competition's popularity. Last year half-empty grounds were commonplace in the wake of a World Cup cricket overdose hangover but, while no official figures are released, every game at this year's IPL has

looked a virtual sell-out. And it's not as if ticket prices are cheap. In a country where average wage estimates are a little over a dollar a day, it is only really the middle class that can afford to go to games. Tickets for any given Mumbai Indians home match range from \$15 to \$250 (behind the bowler's arm, no hospitality). Prices are not much lower at other grounds and hospitality tickets go for a fortune.

The key thing I have noticed about this year's IPL is that crowds have become significantly more partisan. In the early days of the IPL, fans didn't know whether to cheer for the home team or their favourite players on the other team. By IPL3 loyal fan bases were evident but then the bosses went and re-auctioned the entire player pool, confusing fans once more. This year the packed grounds perhaps indicate progress in this department. The fact that the show is less about the Bollywood and more about cricket backs this up.

Local newspapers continue to report that advertising revenues are down again but, as Lalit Modi told SPIN two years ago, that it would be, the IPL has proved recession-proof, much like Premier League football in the UK. Spectators are still mad for it, perhaps madder, despite the never-ending format, the Indian team's horrendous form of late and the emergence of not a few but several rival leagues boasting most of the same big names virtually all-year round. Wherever one walks on the streets

of Indian cities, knots of men can be seen crowding around the stalls that have televisions - their eyes transfixed on the box.

At the games themselves, increasing numbers of women are sweating it out watching in the stands. Facilities at grounds have improved drastically since grounds were jacked up for the World Cup and, the summer heat aside, sitting in crowded stands in India is no longer only for the strong-willed. At almost every ground, every seat is now numbered, good food and drink is on offer and the lavatory situation is chalk and cheese from the standard of a few years ago. Like India's airports, its cricket grounds have modernised to international standards.

In financial terms, the incumbent IPL Chairman, Rajiv Shukla, denies fervently that this year's edition will be any less

successful than its predecessors: "None of the sponsors have gone away. Everybody is with us. Whatever rights we are selling, it is going on higher price. I am running the shop so I know."

Apart from tedium, downsides to the length of the tournament include players' risk of injury and distraction from national duty. South Africa panders to the BCCI by never scheduling fixtures during the IPL, making it the only country that now regularly has three month breaks between Test series. This sounds good but playing T20 day in and day out is no way to prepare for a Test series.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Indian team seems to be on national duty or at the IPL eleven months of the year. Their bosses get their money's worth alright – after months losing

"Batsmen are not going hell for leather in the powerplay overs and are then going after the part-timers."

Left: .....

But does he really care?

Below: .....

Young Mumbai Indian supporters at the Wankhede Stadium.

Bottom: .....

Delhi Daredevils fans celebrate another wicket. (All AFP/Getty)



in Australia the team would have looked forward to ten days at home with their wives and aunts but the BCCI scheduled a ridiculous one-off T20 at the Wanderers. Something has got to give and usually it's the fast bowlers' bodies, something the Indian team can ill afford.

In terms of the quality of cricket played so far this year, there have been some exceptional games and some very mediocre ones. What has become obvious is that the skills gap between the foreign stars and the local lads is massive. A trend I have noticed this year is that instead of batsmen going hell for leather during the first six "powerplay" overs, they are increasingly seeing off the good bowling

upfront and then getting after the part-timers in the middle of the innings.

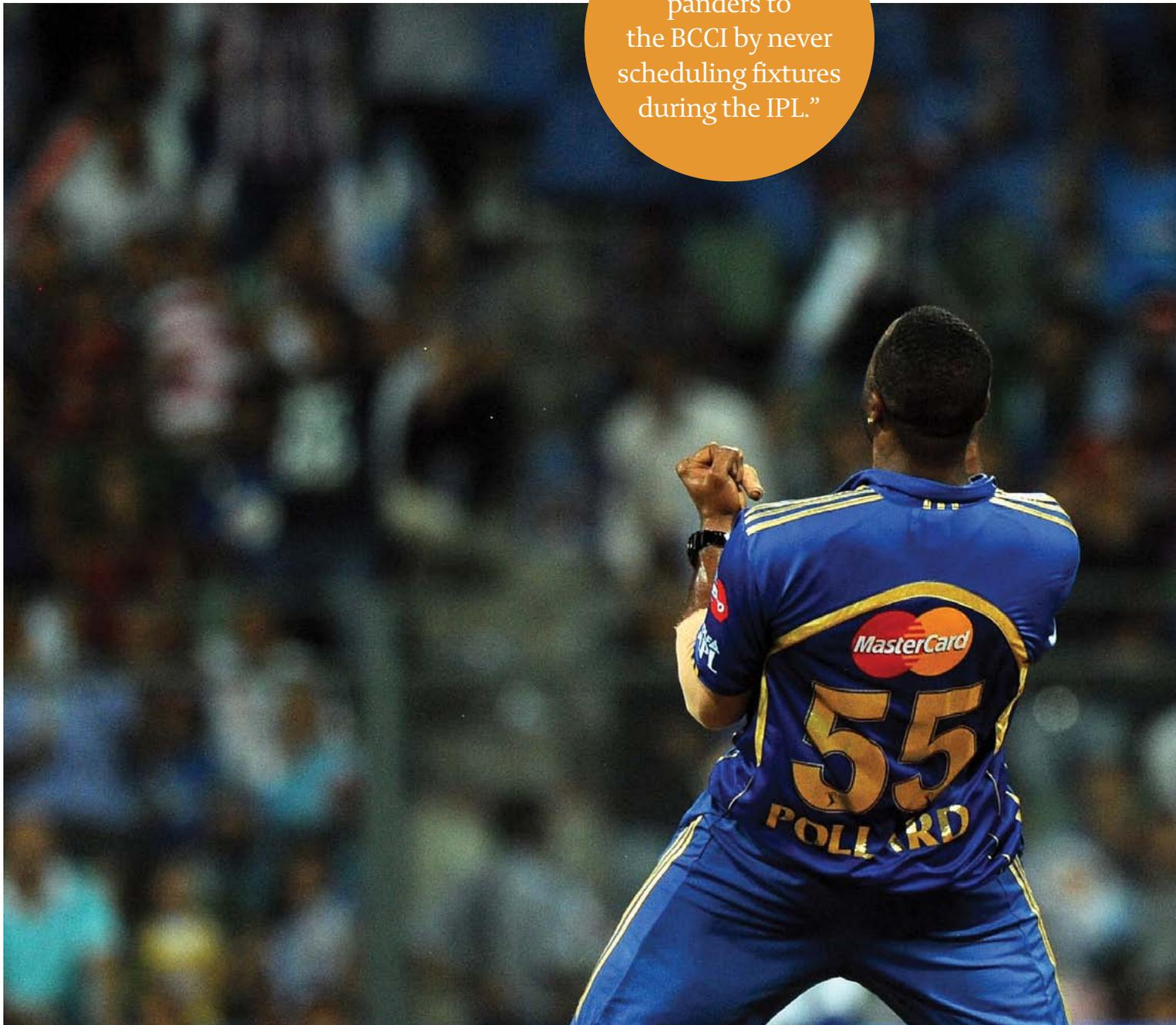
Sides without good backup Indian bowlers are being spanked around by the quality batsmen. As ever, Chris Gayle has been sending balls into orbit and AB de Villiers continues to intimidate.

Surprise batting stars at the top of the runs-getting list include Ajinkya Rahane, Owais Shah and Faf du Plessis – each of them bargain buys at \$100,000, \$50,000 and \$120,000 – a mere bagatelle when compared with the \$2 million dollars forked out for

Ravindra Jadeja. Just like any fantasy league, it is nigh on impossible to match monetary values with expected performances.

The wicket-takers

“South Africa panders to the BCCI by never scheduling fixtures during the IPL.”



list also reveals something interesting – three of the top five at this stage are West Indians; Trinidadians to be precise. Kieron Pollard, Sunil Narine and Kevon Cooper join Morke Morkel and Munaf Patel in the top five. (Figures accurate to 25/4/2001)

The Delhi Daredevils top the table at this stage but the tournament is of course wide-open, especially as it is not decided by a league but by knockout games between the top four finishers.

Whether the IPL tickles your fancy or not, it is here to stay. It's detractors early concerns were that it would kill Test cricket. The jury is still out on that, but love it or hate it, it isn't going to go away in the immediate future and it sure beats the day-lights out of most of the nonsense on TV.



Left: .....

Kieron Pollard stars - but with the ball this time.

Bargain Biffers: .....

Top: .....

Faf du Plessis launches one for the Chennai Super Kings.

And above: .....

Ajinkya Rahane scores IPL5's first century for Rajasthan Royals. (All AFP/Getty)