

Cricket Success a Childhood Dream Come True

Author: [IWPR Afghanistan](#)

Team captain says qualification in the Asia championship brings pride to Afghanistan and hope for the future.

The odds were initially stacked against them - Oman was dominating Afghanistan in the championship match for the Asia Cup.

As team captain Nawroz Mangal surveyed the crowd at the stadium in Kuwait last month, he saw fellow Afghans hanging their heads, their national flags hanging listlessly by their sides. Realising his country desperately needed a win, Mangal spearheaded a turnaround that put his team in the lead by the end of the match.

Elated supporters poured from the stands, lifting the champions onto their shoulders.

"All the Afghan spectators and our team members were weeping and shouting, 'Long live Afghanistan!'" recalled Mangal. "They hugged me so much I almost passed out."

The game was officially declared a draw because the fans had flooded the pitch before the umpire had a chance to declare it finished. But Afghans interpreted it as a triumph as it qualified their team for a slot in the 2010 World Cup.

For Mangal, it was a moment he had dreamed of since he was a 12-year-old refugee in Pakistan.

During an interview at Kabul's Huzori Park, where he and three other team members were watching youngsters play a match, Mangal remembered the day he decided to become a cricketer.

Pakistan had just won the World Cup and the air was filled with the sounds of celebratory fireworks and gunfire. People were giving sweets to strangers in the streets and the name Imran Khan, Pakistan's team captain, was on everybody's lips.

"I wished to God I could win such pride for my homeland," said Mangal, now 26. "I thank God for fulfilling my dream."

As someone who had to leave his country as a small boy, it was especially heartening to return a hero to his home province of Khost in the south of Afghanistan. During the drive, Mangal kept his head out the window the whole way. When his friends asked him why, he told them he wanted to be covered in the dust of his native land.

Cricket is a relatively new arrival to Afghanistan, as it was never colonized by the British who popularised the sport throughout their empire. But Afghans who fled to neighbouring Pakistan to escape the civil wars of recent decades picked it up, and some, like Mangal, excelled.

Returning refugees brought their passion for cricket back with them, and Afghanistan's victory in Oman has further stoked the fire. Now Afghan cricketers are hoping for more support from the government.

"Other governments provide facilities and accommodation for players on the national team," Raees Khan, a member of Afghanistan's cricket federation, pointed out. "But we're asking only for a regular salary. There are some players whose children are still short of clothes."

Coach Taj Malak Alam said Afghanistan's performance surprised many, but he is confident the team can go even further with the right kind of backing.

"I am sure Afghans can win the world championship if they are provided with the facilities they require," said Alam, who credited the team's success to unity, discipline and enthusiastic fans.

During their stay in Kuwait, team members were supported by Shah Muhammad, a wealthy Afghan businessman there. He put them up in his house and presented them with 1,000 US dollars each after the match, according to Alam.

Education Minister Hanif Atmar has promised to allocate 100,000 dollars for the team, while President Hamid Karzai has promised to give each member 2,000 dollars, Alam said.

He argued that further investment would be worthwhile because the team is such a source of national pride.

"The emotions of our team and the Afghan spectators were so high that I was afraid our team members would lose their control of their mental faculties due to their excessive joy," he recalled of the match against Oman.

The match generated a lot of excitement back home too, according to Kabul taxi driver Shah Noor, who said his eyes filled with tears upon hearing of the team's victory that night on television.

"In addition to traitors in our country, we have some heroes, too, who win honour for our country," he said.

Hafizullah Gardesh is IWPR's local editor.

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