



By DALE LUIS MENEZES

Sports, Political Passions, and Peace

For those who believe that sport and politics should not mix, the on-going FIFA World Cup 2018 might be a tad bit disappointing. The game between Switzerland and Serbia witnessed tense moments, leading to a few controversies. Switzerland, whose squad had many players of Balkan heritage, appeared to be the perfect team for a mixture of political rivalries in a sporting match. Especially, since the match was against Serbia, which gained independence after a bloody war fractured Yugoslavia into countries like Albania and Kosovo. Serbia does not recognize Kosovo's independent status, which made the clash between Switzerland and Serbia all the more tense given that Switzerland's star players, Granit Xhaka and Xherdan Shaqiri, have Albanian and Kosovan heritage.

What perhaps made matters worse was that Serbia lost thanks to two stunning strikes by Xhaka and Shaqiri – who celebrated by gesturing the Albanian double-headed eagle. It did not help matters throughout the game that players like Xhaka and Shaqiri were heckled by the Serbian fans in the stands. One witnessed such controversies even in the run-up to the World Cup. Argentina cancelled a friendly with Israel, which was to be played in Jerusalem on a stadium built at the site of a former Palestinian village, after global pressure and even uproar. The shadow of bloody political conflicts and wars hanged uneasily over the proceedings of the World Cup; one that is not necessarily conducive to the progress of the beautiful game or for peace in a world that is increasingly being pushed to the brink of more violence.

In such situations, the on- and off-field actions and statements of sportspersons matter. For instance, after the controversy – with a possible two-match ban and/or fine – Shaqiri admitted that it were emotions that led him to celebrate in the manner in which he did, and that he would not like to say more about the matter. Even if he did want to invoke a memory and history of the war and exile that his family faced, and indeed many others too, Shaqiri did not really demonstrate that his actions were motivated by a higher goal. In many ways, his equivocation in the matter – especially to avoid the two-match ban that would have been disastrous for Switzerland's campaign – makes the invocation of a bloody political conflict on a sporting event of such proportions seem unnecessary and superfluous. Clearly, sports and politics haven't mixed well.



But we can contrast this with other examples wherein the role of superstar sportsmen has been stellar. Think about Didier Drogba from Ivory Coast, who has played much of his club football for Chelsea. In 2005, Ivory Coast qualified for the first time in the 2006 Germany World Cup. While the team had secured the place with an away 3-1 win against Sudan, back home in the Ivory Coast there was a civil war raging. Drogba and his teammates addressed the nation live from the dressing room and, kneeling down, pleaded for peace. The results were remarkable as the warring factions actually decided to lay down their arms; the peace lasted for about five years. Closer home, Sri Lankan cricketer Kumar Sangakkara appealed to the country to maintain peace, following the anti-Muslim riots in March this year. Many have often cited the statement of former Bangladesh cricket captain, Mashrafe Mortaza, after Bangladesh's T20 victory in the Asia Cup, when sport-related nationalism borders on war-mongering and insanity. "I am a cricketer," he said, "but can I save life? A doctor can. But no-one claps for the best doctor in the country. Create myths around them. They will save more lives. They are the stars. The labourers are the stars, they build the country. ... I say, those who cry 'patriotism, patriotism' around cricket, if all of them for one day did not drop banana skin on the street...or obeyed traffic rules, the country would have changed. [If] this huge energy was not wasted after cricket and was used to do one's work honestly even for a day, that would be showing patriotism". Clearly, sports and politics can mix well.

But this mix can be a happy one only if the superstar sportsperson uses his/her stardom in the right way. What this means is that the superstar sportsperson views his/her social and political responsibility as an extension of his/her superstardom. This is not to say that every sportsperson should actively involve themselves in politics if they don't want to or can't, but to ensure that their stardom and support from millions of fans is not (mis)used for purposes of jingoism, racism, and war-mongering. The statement issued by the Swedish team, after one of their players, Jimmy Durmaz, was subjected to racist attacks online following a last-minute defeat to Germany in the present World Cup is a case in point. The entire team rallied around Durmaz, who is of immigrant heritage, to present a united front against hate speech.

There is no way that the FIFA World Cup can be held in an atmosphere where the political does not mix with the sport. In fact, the World Cups in the past were held in extremely volatile and fragile political (as well as economic) conditions; think about the world wars and the breakup of the Soviet Union. Inflamed political passions will, more often than not, be a part of sporting events. Especially because sporting events are frequently used as a

distraction from the pathetic political conditions that the masses find themselves in. The question is how the superstar sportsmen and their millions of fans would respond to such moments of hate and distraction. Sports, Political Passions, and Peace

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