

CHAPTER 1

THE BOY FROM THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT

I grew up watching videos of Wasim swinging the ball both ways, bamboozling batters all over the world. Perhaps even more impressive to me was seeing him just recently still able to do it in the nets on cue. I was lucky to have Wasim as a bowling coach at Kolkata Knight Riders for two years. For a young fast bowler just starting out on my career, I found his insights as entertaining as they were helpful. His love for pace bowling is infectious and he is a giant of our game.

Pat Cummins

There is nothing like sitting down to tell your story to make you realise how much you don't know.

My father Chaudhry Mohammad Akram was born in Chawinda Devi, a village outside the Indian city of Amritsar. After partition, the family settled in Kamoke, 50 kilometres north of Lahore, where my father would later move to work. He had two brothers and five sisters. I am not sure I met any of them. Apparently he had a first wife, and maybe children with her. I do not know. But that was typical of his self-containment. He was a quiet, reliable, patient man who said very little, and nothing about himself. He was my first hero.



Baby face: one-year-old, with two older brothers set to pull me into line.

My father's first job was as a court proofreader. For many years he ran an automotive spare parts business. My parents' marriage was arranged. My mother Begum was very beautiful, more emotional than my father, and significantly younger: she was only fifteen on her wedding day, and bore her first child nine months later. I'm the third of four, born on 3 June 1966. My brothers Naeem and Nadeem are six and four years older respectively. My sister Sofia is three years my junior. Another child was lost. My early years were spent in Model Town, a comfortable residential suburb south of central Lahore founded as a cooperative along the lines of England's 'garden city' movement.

Every day my father put on a jacket and tie and went to work; and every Sunday evening he would pour himself a single Scotch, which was his sole indulgence. Perhaps the only exotic thing about him was that for a time he ran a single-screen cinema, the Niagara, in Ferozpur Road. He advertised coming attractions by means of a donkey and a cart with billboards on the side, which my brothers and I would ride, preparatory to watching the movies ourselves, from both Bollywood and its Lahore counterpart Lollywood. I loved Amitabh Bachchan and Zeenat Aman. Everyone did. I loved Sultan Rahi and Mustafa Qureshi, particularly locked in their great rivalry in *Maula Jatt*. Many years later, I would perform in a spoof re-enactment of that movie's climax with Shoaib Akhtar. It came completely naturally.

When I was born, Pakistan was divided west and east, and ruled by a military dictatorship. I was four when the first multi-party elections were held, securing power for the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in the west; I was five when India sided with insurrectionaries in the east, leading to the breakaway of what became Bangladesh. A strong imprint of colonialism

also remained and, because my parents had some ambition for me, I started at Lahore's Cathedral School, riding there each morning on our donkey cart. At home, we spoke Punjabi. Now every class save Urdu was in English; every male teacher was addressed as 'Sir', every female teacher as 'Miss' – Sir Lawrence, Miss Sonia and so forth.

My first preferred sport, as it was for Naeem, was probably table tennis, which was huge in Pakistan at the time: thanks to the feats of Saiyid Mohammad Sibtain in the Asian Table Tennis Championships, it eclipsed even hockey. But cricket loomed large, mainly for a single reason: Imran Khan had attended Cathedral School before going to the elite Aitchison College. His name was on the honour boards; his face, at the time, seemed to be everywhere in Pakistan. I read about him in *Akbari e Watan*, an Urdu cricket magazine; I cherished a Wills cigarette card bearing his image. There was a particular television advertisement at the time for Laurensphur Clothing Company featuring Imran's action in slow motion. I loved that advertisement. When it came on the screen, I would stop whatever I was doing to look. It was so spectacular, so beautiful. How did you get to be like him? I got a taste one day when I made 100 opening the batting at school. Everyone the next day knew who I was. I liked that feeling; I wanted it again.

• • •

In Pakistan, the ground beneath you is seldom solid. I was ten when the military, under General Zia ul-Haq, ousted the PPP. More significantly for me, my family crumbled.

My parents' separation was tense, sudden and unexplained. I remember raised voices, muffled conferences, and moving.

Boys club: I'm the smallest, with Naeem and Nadeem in their matching chequered shirts, and my cousins Khalid, Pervaiz and Tariq.



My mother took Sofia and me to live with her parents in Mozang, 10 kilometres north. For reasons never entirely clear, although apparently to do with income tax problems, my father went to England for a year, while Nadeem and Naeem were left to fend for themselves in Model Town. I would visit them at weekends.

It was a strange, disorienting time. Mozang was a comedown. There were no parks and gardens there, just very narrow streets, very near neighbours, and always frenetic activity. Money was scarce, and we were often hungry. To this day I don't like to see plates pushed away with food still on them. The idea of waste upsets me. I was also an active boy. Because space was at a premium at home, a lot of life was spent outdoors, in the streets and on our rooftops: in summer, I would even sleep under a mosquito

net on the roof, to slightly ease the relentless heat. Everyone knew everyone else. You could knock on any door, play with anyone. Cricket, of the six-a-side variety with a tape ball, became my great outlet. Day and night, there was always a game somewhere, occasionally interrupted by rickshaws and motorbikes, regularly collecting a little crowd. I formed a team with five other local boys: we called ourselves 'The British Government'. What was I saying about that imprint of colonialism? We thought it sounded powerful, impressive. And – who knows? – maybe it worked on some opponents because we won a lot, in games in Ahmed Pura and in tournaments at the Waris Road ground.

I had other hobbies too. Left-handedness is not all I have in common with the Australian Bill Lawry. I was a teenage pigeon fancier and erected a coop on top of our house for the birds I would buy for a few rupees from Lytton Markets. But my grandmother could see that it was cricket I lived for. I shared my charpai with her, and was her favourite. 'You're so innocent,' she would say. 'How are you going to live?' She was always ushering me out to play, even as my mother looked on severely. I played a lot with Nadeem in the garage at Model Town when I visited my father at weekends, and I went to my first big cricket matches, which included seeing Imran for the first time in the flesh, playing for Pakistan International Airways at Gaddafi Stadium; when I queued for his autograph, I was almost speechless. In the first Test I saw, at Gaddafi Stadium in November 1980, he made his maiden Test 100.

There were notable cricketers in my area too: cousins Ameer and Sajjad Akbar, who between them played more than 300 games for Lahore, hailed from the next gali. And that world was nearer than I imagined. One day, in the hiatus between school and college, I was playing in the

streets with my friends when a man in his early thirties on a bicycle stopped and called us over. 'Why don't you play with a proper cricket ball?' he asked us.

'Please uncle, we can't afford the fifty rupees,' I replied.

'Well, if you come to my club, you can play with a real cricket ball,' he said. 'How would you like that?' He looked at me: 'You've got something. You could be a cricketer.'

I was surprised. I had not thought of myself as standing out, except for my left-handedness, and maybe being a little taller than average. I was hardly even aware there were such things as cricket clubs. But the offer sounded enticing.

The man's name was Khalid Mahmood. He was a medium-pacer who had played four matches for Pakistan Customs, and who was now a member of Ludhiana Gymkhana CC, one of the city's stronger clubs. When I accepted his offer, he started picking me up every day at 2.30 pm for the forty-minute cycle to their ground, New Chauburji Park, where there were fifteen practice pitches, half turf, half concrete. As an habitually early arriver, it became my job to help water the surfaces and erect the nets. Then, as other players began to appear, I would bowl, and bowl, and bowl – basically until there was nobody left to bowl to, which might be four hours. Nobody was monitoring my 'loads'; nobody was telling me to vary my activity. I simply bowled as fast as I could. I seldom got a bat, and the hard, bare ground at Ludhiana made it inadvisable to practise fielding.

There were, nonetheless, eyes watching. There was Saood Khan, a long-haired left-armed. There was Sadiq Khan, a former Test umpire. They offered encouragement in the form of new balls, paid for from their own pockets, which I learnt to swing in, at increasing speeds. In Pakistan, you must swing the ball. The pitches offer nothing for someone

simply hitting the seam and nibbling the ball round. There is no alternative.

Having returned from his year in the UK, my father bought me a motorcycle, a Kawasaki GTO. The weekend would find me zipping through the narrow streets, already in my whites, spikes over my handlebars, on the way to games. Eventually, inevitably, I came off it. The gash on my right arm was so deep that you can still see the mark left by the many crude stitches. I played the next day anyway with one arm. Nothing was going to stop me.

Ludhiana Gymkhana is gone now; Waris Road no longer hosts cricket; vanished also is the University Ground, where I would climb over the railing and play with my friends Zulfiquar, Shahid and Shahbaz on the days I wasn't at Ludhiana. Urban sprawl and the elimination of precious green space has more or less annihilated sporting clubs in big cities like Lahore; it is a key reason for their decline relative to regional cities as cradles for cricket talent. But in the early 1980s there was fierce competition for the Gymkhana Cup, a two-day, 150-over tournament. I started to play well. I started to get noticed. I could feel my progress. One day I was bowling to Nadeem; I would have been fifteen or sixteen, which means he was nineteen or twenty. At the time he was my idol, my benchmark – proud, a fighter. Suddenly, I hit him, in the head, in the midriff. I was too quick for him. It was an important moment. He decided he would bowl to me also, so I got my first chance to work on my batting. I began to allow myself fantasies. Around this age, I bought a pair of white pants from Lambda Bazaar and had my grandmother sew on a Pepsi logo – the dream of my first sponsor.

Constant competition benefited my cricket. I applied successfully for admission to Islamia College, a ten-minute

ride from Mozang, on essentially a sporting scholarship – they were so keen to have me that they did not even return my examination papers. Actually, I was not best pleased. I had wanted to attend the co-educational Government College across the road from Islamia; accustomed to my mother, grandmother and sister, I found it hard adjusting to Islamia’s all-male teaching staff. Nor, at first, were there the cricket opportunities I sought. The captain of the first XI, Zahid Khan, was himself a left-arm pace bowler, and resentful of a rival, he kept me twelfth man for an entire season. I was a poor student too. Nominally, I was studying fine arts, a course carefully chosen for involving the least work; mostly, despite my parents’ strictures, I was truant, because the playing fields of Lahore were my real school, my cricket school. Lahore Gymkhana’s home in Bagh-e-Jinnah, for instance, was the Subcontinent’s second-oldest cricket ground. Before partition, it had been an Indian Test venue. It was the club of Imran Khan, and of Nawaz Sharif: Imran would later accuse Sharif of insisting on his own umpires so as to ensure he got a reasonable knock. The ground had a beautiful, rambling pavilion, formerly a British colonial club; the outfield was a grass carpet of a thickness seldom seen in Lahore. This was the place to succeed, and one day, aged seventeen, I did, taking three prize wickets in a spell: Intikhab Alam, the Test all-rounder; Ramiz Raja, younger brother of Test player Wasim; and Ahmad Raza, Imran’s uncle and a former national selector.

Pakistani cricket had its eyes peeled for speed. Sarfraz Nawaz had just retired. Others, like Saleem Altaf and Sikander Bakht, were fading. This was also during the period when chronic injury was keeping Imran out of Test cricket, leaving Zaheer Abbas in charge. When I went to Gaddafi

Stadium for the Test against England in March 1984, the toast was Abdul Qadir, who took ten wickets. But soon after, the Board of Control for Cricket in Pakistan foreshadowed a training camp for the best hundred teenage players in Lahore – and thanks to Sadiq and Saood at Ludhiana, I was invited. The night before, in my shared bedroom in Mozang, I could hardly sleep for excitement. I would be treading the same turf as the cricketers whose posters I gazed on at home.

At first, it did not go well. I arrived tired from lack of sleep, and for three days I was too intimidated by the company to go near a ball. There was Ramiz, who at the time was regarded as the city's brightest batting talent; there was Shoaib Mohammad, son of the great Hanif; there was Mohsin Kamal, who had just earned his first Test caps; there was Ejaz Ahmed, about to earn his. On the third evening I returned to my club and complained to Saood that there was no point my going back. I would never get a go. 'We'll sort it out,' he said patiently. Saood must have rung the camp commandant, Agha Saadat, because the next day he threw me first an old ball then a new one, which I began to swing, sharply. Again I bowled Ramiz; I got Ejaz; I troubled everyone.

When Agha and his colleagues chose those players who would go on to a second under-nineteen camp in Karachi, I was one of them. Our family was overwhelmed. My father had always been strict: education came before cricket, business before pleasure. Now he relented somewhat. He would not let me travel to Karachi by train, insisting instead on buying a plane ticket. I had never travelled by air before. When I met my fellow colts Ramiz, Mohsin and Azmat Rana, they had to show me how to buckle my seatbelt. When the food came round, they had to assure me it was free.

The coaching centre at National Stadium was part of a precinct containing hockey pitches, table tennis courts, a gymnasium and an athletic track – now, alas, like Ludhiana, long gone. We stayed in a dormitory but it seemed palatial – I slept in a bed rather than on a charpai. Again, there was no thought of anything but learning by doing. The sixty of us practised in the morning and the evening, which for me just meant bowling, as I hardly conceived of batting beyond a token slog, while fielding was something others did. Still, the little coaching I received was priceless. I was introduced to the great Khan Mohammad, then fifty-six, who had delivered Pakistan's first ball in Test cricket. To that point, my action had been completely untutored. I ran twenty-five paces for no other reason than that it felt right. Mohammad pressed me to reach up higher with my right arm and to uncoil my left from a cocked position. He described the act of bowling as a kind of 'cartwheel' – an expression I had never heard and that needed to be explained to me. But he was right. The longer I stayed side-on, I discovered, the later the ball would swing.

Just as I was enjoying this revelation, there was a commotion on the other side of the ground. Javed Miandad, Pakistan's premier batsman, had arrived. Like Imran, he had also been troubled by injury; he had come along for a convalescent session in the nets. When I was asked if I wanted to bowl to him, I could not say yes fast enough. With some other youngsters we ran in at him for two hours. Of course, I had never bowled at someone so good, but I forced him to study my swing, and every now and again was sharp enough to hurry him.

That spell probably changed my life. I stayed in Karachi a few weeks after the camp, lodging at the YMCA while being paid 600 rupees a month to play for PACO Shaheen, the

Pakistan Automobile Corporation under-nineteen team. We reached the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy semi-final, finally losing to Lahore City Blues. I gained my first mention in *Pakistan Cricketer*, which called me 'Wasim Ashraf'. Then one day my father opened a newspaper and there was my name, correctly spelled, in a fourteen-man squad for the BCCP Patron's XI to play the touring New Zealanders. My father, usually so phlegmatic, could not hide the excitement in his voice as he told me: 'You're going to Pindi!'

Javed was the reason, of course. He was an avid talent spotter. Four years earlier he'd faced Tauseef Ahmed in the nets before a Test at National Stadium, and cajoled the selectors into picking him: Tauseef had taken seven Australian wickets, none of whose names he knew. I was a bit the same. Bar Martin Crowe, I had no idea who any of the New Zealanders were, although that didn't seem to matter because I was sure I wouldn't play. I was barely eighteen, skinny and wild; and Tahir Naqqash, who had opened Pakistan's bowling with Imran, was in the squad. I was wrong. The night before the match, Javed told me that I had been chosen ahead of Tahir. I returned to the room I was sharing with Hafeez-ur-Rehman at Rawalpindi's Flashman Hotel reflecting on the chances involved in my being about to play first-class cricket: first being spotted in the street, then being singled out in the nets. I've had those same thoughts many times since.

The first over the next day was delivered by Asif Faridi, a local quick; I was thrown the new ball for the second. I was in my fourth over when John Wright, New Zealand's captain, nicked to Ramiz at second slip. For all his batting skill, Ramiz was at slip for reasons of rank – he dropped

more than he caught, frankly. Fortunately, Saleem Malik grabbed the ball as it bounced from Ramiz's hands, and I had my maiden wicket. Crowe, in the first of many battles, added 100 with Bruce Edgar, but in my third spell I had Edgar caught at the wicket, trapped John Reid and Ian Smith, then went through the tail. My seven for 50 seemed so magical, so providential, that my brothers back in Lahore donated seven bags of rice to the poor in thanks.

I hardly knew what I was doing; I was just running in and bowling. I did not expect to continue my advance. As Pakistan's captain, Zaheer already had the services of an excellent left-arm pace bowler, Azeem Hafeez, and in the home Tests against New Zealand chose as many as three spinners. Nor did I really feel ready. When I was chosen for my first one-day international, in Faisalabad on 23 November, Zaheer gave me the ball for the final over with the New Zealanders needing 24 to win. I bowled four consecutive short balls, each of which Jeremy Coney pulled for four – by the end of the over, our victory margin had been reduced to an uncomfortable five runs. Zaheer was telling me to bowl a yorker, but I had never heard the word, and nobody explained it later. I was as flat afterwards as I had been buoyant in Pindi. When you're young, every setback feels like the end. Maybe Pakistan Automobile would give me a job because cricket was obviously over for me.

In fact, I was shortly to be chosen for my first tour, to New Zealand. Again, I had Javed, now restored to the captaincy, to thank. I was immediately anxious. I could not drive. I had neither money of my own nor even a bank account. I rang Javed and asked him how much it would cost me to go on the tour; he replied deadpan: '100,000 rupees.'

My heart sank. 'Javed *bhai*, my dad would never give me that amount of money,' I said gloomily. 'I'm sorry. I won't be able to come.'

Javed burst out laughing. 'You idiot!' he said. 'You don't have to pay; you *get* paid.'

I couldn't believe it. 'I get *paid*?' I said. 'To play for Pakistan? Unbelievable!'

Perhaps because he could see what a naif I was, Javed took me under his wing. He sat next to me on the plane, gave me his food. When we landed in Christchurch, I immediately went for a jog, then asked where I might find a curry. Curry? Javed told me there was no point looking. He introduced me to steak and chips. Like most Pakistanis, I ate with my hands; suddenly I had to learn how to handle a knife and fork.

It was fascinating getting acquainted with these players who not long before I had known only as names. But I had a tough time with my roommate, Saleem Malik. Though only twenty-one, he was an established player, with five hundreds in twenty Tests, and keen I should know my junior status. He was negative, selfish, treated me like a servant. He demanded I massage him; he ordered me to clean his clothes and boots. I was pleased when some of the younger team members in Ramiz, Tahir, Mohsin, Shoaib Mohammad and Anil Dalpat invited me to a 'nightclub', even though I had no idea what they were talking about and was amazed when they explained. 'Do you mean girls dance as well?' I asked. Not only that, I was told. Indeed, no sooner had I arrived than a girl introduced herself. I could see the others fuming: he's arrived last night, he doesn't even know what a nightclub is, and already he's chatting a girl up. To their further consternation, she took me for a drive, and after parking on a hill we snogged all night. It went no further.

When she rang the next day, and I asked Saleem if I could have the room on my own for a bit, he sneered at me: 'You met a girl? That's not nice, and it's against your religion. So forget it.' That, as I learnt, was Saleem: wonderful player, miserable teammate.

Team manager Yawar Saeed, by contrast, was a lovely man: organised, soft-spoken, a veteran of county cricket in the 1950s. Zaheer was always the perfect gentleman. Mudassar Nazar was the epitome of the team player: calm, dependable, reassuring, and, married to an English woman, worldly. He also introduced me to Western customs – little niceties like holding a door open for people, waiting for passengers in a lift to get out before you got in. I needed encouragement for the first few weeks. I went wicketless in the three-day warm-up match against Canterbury because I could not get the Kookaburra to swing, and was then picked for neither the one-day internationals nor the First Test. By then, I could not see how that would change, so it was a shock when Javed came to me in Auckland on the night of 24 January 1985 and said I would be making my Test debut the next day. I was not sure I was ready; the experience suggested I was right.

The pitch was green. So was I. We were sent in against a classic New Zealand attack of Richard Hadlee, Ewen Chatfield and Lance Cairns, who knew exactly the lengths to bowl and the fields to set. When I came in, Hadlee hit me hard on the knee. I was wearing an old pair of pads that Javed had given me, in addition to the new spikes he had helped me find, and unfortunately they afforded little protection. I could hardly move, was caught soon after, and limped painfully through my first Test spell. I finally got a wicket in my second spell – again John Wright, again caught by Saleem. But my figures of two for 105 in a heavy

defeat left me convinced, again, that it was all over for me. When Javed confirmed the night before the Third Test at Dunedin that I had been left out, I rang my father from a payphone, crying down the line as I tipped in coin after miserable coin.

Pakistan on tour, however, is never predictable. Our leg spinner Abdul Qadir was a genius, albeit a volatile one, especially in the absence of his great supporter Imran. His relationship with Zaheer was a tense one, and resulted in him being sent home early from the tour. When New Zealand rolled out another green top on the morning of the Third Test and packed their team with seamers, Pakistan decided to do the same: Azeem, Tahir, Qadir's replacement Rashid Khan, and me.

It proved to be a classic Test match, under cold, dark skies, with nothing between the teams. Sent in, we wasted a solid start by losing our last five wickets for 10, mainly to Hadlee. New Zealand had reduced their arrears to less than 200 with nine wickets in hand when I bowled my first successful Test spell: in a crowded half-hour I bowled Geoff Howarth off an inside edge and John Reid behind his legs, then trapped Jeff Crowe well back on his stumps. Jeff's brother Martin held us out with Coney for a while, but I came back to have him and Lance Cairns caught in the cordon, ending with five for 56 in twenty-six overs – in a game I had never expected to play.

Before tea on the third day, we were 126 ahead with nine wickets in hand. But their seamers kept winking us out and it needed me as last man to hang round for an hour in a last-wicket partnership of 42 with Rashid Khan to set the home team 278 to win. New Zealand looked a lost cause when

I had Reid caught down the leg side, Howarth skewering to slip, and this time pinned Jeff Crowe first ball. The last day opened with the hosts needing 164 and us needing six wickets. Martin Crowe took a lot of shifting, but when he fell to Tahir just before lunch, we were able to work around Coney.

I was confused when Cairns came out without a helmet. He could bat; he used to hit big sixes. 'Should I bounce him, Javed *bhai*?' I asked my captain. He said yes, but, when I did, umpire Fred Goodall warned me for intimidatory bowling – a statute I'd never heard of and had to ask Javed to explain.

'It means you're not allowed to bowl him another bouncer,' said Javed. 'But don't worry about it. Bowl a bouncer anyway. I will sort it out.'

The bouncer hit Cairns in his unprotected temple as he turned away, and he sank to the turf. I'd never minded hitting batters. I once hit five in a club match and, I have to admit, I loved it. But this bothered me. Everybody knew that Lance was a top guy, and the injury looked serious – his legs were twitching as the St John Ambulance men came running, and the rumour was that he'd suffered a fractured skull. In fact, when number eleven Ewen Chatfield came out to join Coney with New Zealand needing 50, Lance sat groggily with his pads on in the tunnel in case he was needed. These days he'd have been instantly subbed out.

The last pair played well. We grew frustrated. Chatfield was one of those tailenders who play forward to everything, so we bowled short. When I hit him in the helmet, Goodall again told us off. 'If he continues to do it, I can take him off and by God I will,' he said to Javed as I stood to one

side. The last ball before tea, with Javed's encouragement, I bowled another bouncer. Goodall wagged his finger at me, then gestured angrily at Javed that I had been given an official warning.

Funnily enough, in his autobiography, Chatfield said that he sympathised with Javed and 'felt' for me: 'Akram must have been put off when Fred Goodall warned him for bouncing a few at me. I was fair game ... It was not the bowler's fault I couldn't handle his bowling.' We felt the same, and were in disarray when play resumed with New Zealand needing 25. Dalpat immediately dropped Coney at the wicket, and so fixated were we on Chatfield that we let them take singles with impunity: no fewer than 43 in what turned out to be a matchwinning partnership. So we had thrown away a Test we had the winning of.

With ten wickets for 128, nonetheless, I had had my first international impact. After the game, Glenn Turner made me man of the match and I gave my first tongue-tied television interview. When we landed in Sydney, I was even more overwhelmed. Waiting in the airport lounge, having just finished a season regaining his fitness with New South Wales, was Imran. The closest I had been to him before was getting his autograph as a boy; now he was coming up to me.

'*Salim aleikum* Imran,' I said haltingly.

'*Wale cum salaam*, Wasim,' he replied in that deep, resonant voice. 'You really bowled well in New Zealand.'

I don't remember any more, but with Imran you don't always, so overwhelming is his presence, his beauty. In 1985, he looked like a god: the face, the hair, the physique. I simply couldn't take my eyes off him. And for a young fast bowler, this was a very good thing.