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TAKING A STANCE

MY NAME is Sahibzada Mohammad Shahid Khan Afridi. It's a long name and I'm proud of it.

The records say I was born on 1 March. That makes me a Piscean, although I think I am Sagittarian. But I don't believe much in such things, so I wouldn't know. No reason, really. I don't believe I know the future. Unlike many others, I don't like predicting my own future either. I like taking things one ball at a time.

I don't have many memories of my international debut in Nairobi in 1996, where I smashed that century for the record books in just my second ODI, the fastest the world had seen. But I remember being young, weightless and peerless as one feels at that age. I remember being carefree as I stepped on to the field with the very men I had revered as a kid, the cricket gods of that era. I also remember not being able to sleep much the night before that match. I remember a dream where I was hitting the big shots against the best in the world. And then I remember crowds rejoicing. Everywhere.

It is said that I ‘changed the game’ after that century but, honestly, the game changed me as well. In the public eye, I became someone else – not necessarily someone I had wanted to become.

I may have changed the game and let the game change me, but everything remained the same at home. I have six brothers and five sisters. I’m number five in the 11-member cricket team that is my family. I was four or five when I played cricket for the first time. I can’t remember which habit I picked up first, bowling or batting. But I remember playing hard and fast.

My name is Shahid Afridi. I’ve represented the Pakistan cricket team for over twenty years in some of the toughest times in my great country’s history. I’ve broken records, bats and hearts in the greatest game ever played. It might hurt some and it might not be what everyone would want to read, but here in these pages is my story. I only wish my father and mother – whom I dedicate these words to – were alive to read it.

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**IN THE BEGINNING, JUST WAR
AND CRICKET**

BY THE time I started walking, sometime in the early 1980s, Pakistan was crazy about just three sports: cricket, hockey and squash. Cricket was the most popular of them, and more accessible, as it could be played on the streets. It was more appealing too because there were a lot of stars at the time in the Pakistan team who inspired young men, even women, to play the sport.

Like millions of others in my generation, my star was Imran Khan. I started playing cricket because of him. Like him, I fancied myself as a fast bowler, though unlike many, I never tried to mimic his action. However, when I realized that my bowling action was problematic – I'd chuck the ball when I bowled pace – I quit fast bowling.

Like any other middle-class kid in Pakistan, I started playing in the neighbourhood, on the streets. The area I lived in, the roughshod Federal 'B' Area of Karachi, Pakistan's former capital and now its most troubled megacity with over 20 million people, wasn't as violent in the '80s as it is today and a lot of first-class cricketers lived there at the time.

I remember that my vicinity, Block 10, a warm neighbourhood where everyone knew each other, had a lot of cricketers. Haroon Rasheed, who played several Tests in the '70s for Pakistan and is credited for discovering Waqar Younis, was my neighbour and an inspiration. So was my elder brother, Tariq, who played first-class cricket and was a very quick pace bowler during his playing days.

Like many middle-class South Asian parents, my father, Sahibzada Fazal Rehman Afridi – God bless his soul – was not very happy about my interest in cricket. My family had traditionally always been in business or the armed forces. The ups and downs and unpredictability of cricket didn't fit into my father's world of trying to make a stable, honest living, as is the Pashtun way. He would be livid when I would come back home after hours and give me plenty of flak for wasting my day, for letting the outdoors darken my complexion and for not hitting the books hard enough at school. I think he wanted me to become a doctor or something, because on particularly angry days, he used to warn: 'Even if you don't have the capacity to walk, even if your back fails you, you can still sit on a chair at a desk and prescribe medicine.' Clearly, he wasn't a believer in my passion for cricket. Not in those early days.

My father had his reasons to be sceptical about a career in cricket. I was born in Tirah, Maidan, a valley in the mountains of Khyber. It is a remote area in the northwest region of Pakistan and home to my fellow Afridi tribesmen. Traditionally, the Afridis, who are divided into several sub-tribes, have enjoyed the reputation of fighting everyone, be it the Mughals or the British. We have defended the famous Khyber Pass for hundreds of years and have a can-do- anything reputation when it comes to protecting our land.

The Afridi tribe lives on both sides of the Pakistan–Afghanistan border, an area that has witnessed a lot of fighting and terrorist activities in recent decades. When my immediate family was living there, terrorism wasn't rampant. But fights and feuds were common and that made them move to Tangibanda in Kohat, another hub of Afridi tribesmen. Kohat is also a part of the unruly

northwest, but it's located more towards the mainland and is therefore less volatile as a region.

Migrating was easy. It's in our blood. All Pashtuns take pride in being warring tribesmen. But we also have a very strong work ethic and always go where work requires us to. It's true: we Pashtuns love to work. We are up for any sort of labour. In Pakistan, Pashtuns dominate the construction and transportation industries, and also make up a good chunk of the army. Our hardiness is an asset that has made us the finest bricklayers and the toughest soldiers. That's why it is said that when a Pashtun isn't working, he's fighting.

In the precarious '80s, as the global superpowers faced off in Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas became the frontline for what would become the longest war of our time, there wasn't much work in Kohat. In search of a living, my father shifted to Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and the 'promised land' for many Pashtuns because of its free, entrepreneurial spirit. Once he was fairly settled in Karachi, he brought the rest of us there.

My father started off humbly in the city. Karachi has always had a water-shortage problem and he joined the water-tanker business, supplying water to those who could afford it. Along the way he received some help from cousins and friends, as is the Pashtun way of networking within the family. A couple of years later, he got into car sales and started dealing in used and new cars. He set up what they call in Karachi a 'showroom', and in Peshawar a 'bargain'. Despite their hardiness, trade comes easily to Pashtuns, especially Afridis. My father kept on expanding the business and even invested in a bunch of small ventures here and there. By the end of a decade in Karachi, we weren't doing too badly for a middle-class family in a middle-class neighbourhood.

And then rushed in the military. My paternal uncle, Colonel Akram Afridi, was a decorated infantry officer of the 19th Baloch Regiment. As my father never had the time for sports, 'Kaka' Akram must be credited for introducing sports to our family. He

had seen the world outside Tirah and Kohat, having been posted all over Pakistan. In the army, he had played some cricket and volleyball, the latter being a typically army sport – soldiers would set up a net anywhere and play. When he would come back on vacation to our village, he played cricket with my other uncles and relatives. Cricket was like a gift he brought with him every time he visited. That's how I picked up the game, in the mountains of northwest Pakistan, thanks to an exposed, well-travelled, soldiering uncle. That's where the influence came from – not from my father. No, definitely not from my father.

Honestly, my father wasn't so much against cricket as a sport. He was angry with me for hoping to play cricket as a profession, making it a long-term career – not as some sort of pastime. I remember the scolding and beatings I got from him because of my obsession with the game.

I guess it's understandable. I mean, him working hard and sending us to school, and me bunking school – private school, that too – and playing cricket wasn't exactly a good deal for him. To be honest, I'm pretty sure I deserved the beatings, at least from his perspective. But that didn't mean that I gave up the sport. Pathans are like water. The more you push us, the bigger the splash we make.

In Federal 'B' Area, my local club was Shadab Sports. At the time, Shadab was one of Karachi's finest. It housed some of the best first-class cricketers in a city that's at par with Lahore in producing the finest cricketing talent for Pakistan. Unlike today, back in the day, even the stars of first-class and club cricket commanded respect. And those guys got appreciation too.

I'm not exaggerating when I say that at the time, the value of a first-class cricketer was more than that of any international Pakistan player. In the neighbourhoods and clubs, people knew first-class players by name. They had street cred and were local legends. People would line up to see them play in their neighbourhoods,

even if for a casual game. They were the gods of the homegrown cricket circuit.

At Shadab, Haroon Rasheed and his brother, Mohtashim Rasheed – who eventually became the national women’s team’s coach – would watch me in action.

Although a melting pot for cricket lovers in the neighbourhood, Shadab Sports wasn’t much of a club when it came to facilities. Before the matches, we had to turn up with a broom and clean the pitch ourselves. Then around 2 p.m. we would start the nets.

They say there are two types of climate in Karachi: hot and very hot. For me, though, it was all the same. I remember it always being hot. Perhaps because I was a fast bowler in those days, I remember really feeling the heat. During the peak of summer, and especially during Ramadan, the matches would be moved to the night shift. Streets would become cricketing bazaars. Electricians would be hired to set up and take off the naked T-bulbs, set up via illegal ‘kunda’ connections to light up roads, alleys, even empty plots and garbage dumps. They say that in Karachi’s blazing summers, only cricketers and thugs stay up at night.

Despite my chucking, or *wutta* – meaning ‘throwing a stone’ – as they call it in Pakistan, I continued with pace bowling. No coach or senior ever bothered fixing my bowling action. Pakistan’s cricket clubs aren’t exactly known for their coaching acumen – the talent of the players possibly makes up for it. I remember what brought an end to my pace bowling stint. One day, in the nets, a ball I bowled hit a batsman younger to me in the chest. He was almost knocked out and was barely breathing. That’s when Mohtashim Rasheed, who was watching us, came to me and told me to stop *wutta* pace and try some proper spin, otherwise the kid would get hurt again. I didn’t take his suggestion personally and just followed his advice. I was young, around twelve or thirteen years old, and needed the directive. I apologized to the kid and chose a shorter run-up.

I don't know why but in my next delivery, I ran in to bowl in the style and run-up of Abdul Qadir, a popular Pakistani leg-spinner from that era whom I used to watch on TV. Qadir would famously dance up to the crease, left and right and up and down, a waltz of confusion and strategy. As if on cue, I imitated him and threw one in. It was a pretty good ball: quick and a fast turner. The kid, already scared, couldn't do much with it. That's when Mohtashim Rasheed turned around and said, 'From today, you're only going to bowl spin. This fast-cum-spin thing you're doing is your style now. But fix your stupid dance. And remember: mix it up.'

From that day onwards, I continued bowling that way. At the U-14 level, I was selected as a bowler. But the batting bug remained in me. I could deliver with the blade from time to time – some of it had to do with my strength. I remember in a club game, I once went out to bat at No. 7 and slammed a century. I even took three wickets in that match. It was a proper cricket ground, quite large, and I hit a lot of sixes in that match. Professor Siraj-ul-Islam Bukhari, a legend in the Karachi City Cricket Association, was watching that game. He later called me over and asked, 'Those were some big sixes. Are you really a U-14 player?' By then, I had got used to the question and replied, 'Sir, all Pashtuns are strong. You need to make a ball of stone, not cork, if you want me to hit smaller sixes!'