

## HE'S BACK, AND HOW

*15 September 2006*

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Of all the cricketers I have met, or seen, over the years, nobody resembles the child more than Sachin Tendulkar does. Three hundred and sixty-four games old, he still approaches every match with the excitement with which a kid might navigate an old dinky car round the dining table. Indeed the game and its implements are his toys and without them he is lost, listless. His mind wanders, like Calvin's might, only in this case he is Spaceman Spiff himself.

Take away his toys and there is no Tendulkar.

And so while we were looking forward to this game, it would bear no relation to the restlessness within him. He wanted to play this game far more than we wanted him to. This excitement, eighteen years into his profession, separates him from those that, on some days, look upon playing cricket as a job.

You have to admit he managed his comeback just right. There were many, including me, who thought he would be best served playing some county cricket in England where decent bowlers would try their best to get him out. He chose instead to go on a little picnic playing cricket at Lashings. He knew his

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On 14 September 2006, Tendulkar returned from injury to score an unbeaten 141 against the West Indies at Kuala Lumpur. This was his fortieth ODI century.

shoulder wasn't good enough yet, he knew that if he was playing a serious, competitive cricket match, he would get into the mood of it and let fly a ripper from seventy-five yards. He wanted to play himself in at a more relaxed pace.

Some of you might remember a little line from Tatenda Taibu that was tucked away in the midst of those easy runs he was scoring for Lashings. 'His shoulder didn't seem right,' Taibu said. Tendulkar knew what he was doing.

It reminded me of a story Navjot Sidhu often tells about Sunil Gavaskar. In the build-up to the Reliance Cup of 1987, Gavaskar, now thirty-seven, wasn't too keen to bat in the nets. He'd knock a few balls every day and that was it. Sidhu says that on the big day, his first scoring shot was a delectable straight drive off Bruce Reid. Great players know their body and their mind better than most, they know when to rise to the challenge for truth be told, they sometimes get bored if there isn't one!

In some ways, this was a programmed hundred from Tendulkar. The hypothesis has always been that if Tendulkar bats 40 overs, he will get a century. And in pretty good time. Forty overs is normally about 250 balls and since Tendulkar rotates the strike better than most, he normally ends up getting no more than 110-120 balls out of 250. And that means a century from about 120 balls or less with the promise of more in the last few overs.

In this game, he got his century from 119 balls on a rather moody pitch and, with great poise, ensured that he was there at the end. Interestingly, that is something he hasn't always done. If there was one thing we did not know enough about Tendulkar in one-day cricket, it was his batting in the slog overs.

By batting through, he has now climbed another peak, only a little one compared to the many mountains he scales regularly but one that will satisfy him and drive him in the last stage of his career. It might seem a small goal for one so imposing, but as people grow bigger and more successful their goals diminish. I won't be surprised at all if batting beyond the

40th and as close to the 50th becomes a motivator for Tendulkar in the games ahead.

It is a goal that the team will endorse heartily. But as we celebrate, we need to tuck away at the back of our minds the fact that this will not happen everyday. Tendulkar is in a reality show, not a scripted blockbuster, and he will slip. This is not Amitabh Bachchan with Salim-Javed, or to be more relevant to a newer audience, this is not *Jhalak Dikha Ja*.

Let us not package him like the movies, just savour him for what he has done and is doing for as long as he can.