

COVID 19 Pandemic – Lessons Learnt and the New Normal as I see it

I grew up dreaming of having a stance like his – measured and balanced, standing cross legged supported by the cricket bat at the non-strikers end – poised yet contemplating, watching the ball go past the off stump or over the shoulders – deliberate and disciplined, defending with the middle of my willow to a ball that could turn or swing – confident and reassuring, driving, cutting, flicking – aggressive yet safe. He was all I wanted to be. The philosophy underlying his batting taught me lessons in life. He taught me then, and now he continues to educate me with his attitude to his cause. Sunil Gavaskar was my boyhood idol. Sunny remains my mentor as I try to navigate through this COVID 19 pandemic.

The SARS COV2 is the best bowling attack that the world has ever seen. It is ferocious and menacing like Thompson and Marshall. Full of guile like Lillie, Roberts, and Botham. It has the acumen and cunning of Holding and Imran and the craftiness of Underwood or Gibbs. The attack is potent whatever the conditions. Striking in various ways, it floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee. As an aerosol or a droplet, it accesses the ACE receptors of the respiratory tract. It curls and turns and gets you bowled round the legs by faeco-oral transmission too, while perpetually trying to sneak in through the unguarded, unmasked eye, mouth, and nose.

Covid came and hit the world while it was having a big party, cherishing the thrills of instant gratification, the lure of shorter versions of the game. Humanity's guard was down. The checks and balances in public health care were found inadequate, as were their defences. The virus had a field day, devastating anything and everything it encountered. It continues to do so relentlessly. The only players who could get a semblance of control against the menace were those who were disciplined in maintaining social distancing, hand hygiene and being masked up. They were also the ones dedicated in testing, isolating and contact tracing. A laissez-faire, swashbuckling approach against this deadly attack led to disastrous consequences. Short term measures were found to be inconsequential. To win this game you needed a Gavaskar, not an Andre Russell (due apologies to KKR fans!).

To me, this match against the coronavirus, is akin to Gavaskar's batting in a Test Match. The game is not to be won or lost over a few deliveries or overs. The win is over sessions of plays over several days. You need to understand it takes just one ball for you to fail. This demands fierce focus and intense concentration. It is a tough test of character. One slip on your side, and you could end getting caught in the slips. As an anaesthesiologist, I draw inspiration from many an innings of the Little Master. Induction and intubation, which are aerosol generating procedures, are like the new ball overs from

the fearsome pacers. A sound technique and temperament to counter this initial hostility is paramount. Rapidly in sequence, induce and intubate. As the surgical procedure progresses, I need to remain on my toes so that no error creeps in. I cannot let a ball go between my bat and pad or be caught plumb in front, defenceless. Sunny would often mention how difficult it was to get back into the groove after a break. Today it is equally, if not more important to have your wits about you when you are taking breaks. The beverages area and the lunchroom are a potential minefield where the virus is waiting for the unaware top edge to catch. Gavaskar was an opener, the best the world has seen. He was also one of the best against spin bowling. His last test innings is cited as a masterclass on how to deal with the turning ball. The end game in anaesthesia is extubation. Full of twists and turns and the unexpected. It needs skill to keep the patient safe during the process as well as keeping myself safe from a volley of virus laden droplets directed on my face. You either wait for the ball to make a move and then play it or reach out and smother it before it bites and bounces. Awake, breathing, but not coughing. If they cough, I have my filters on the face mask.

Cricket, especially batting, is about the mind – body intangible. The ability to stand up and carry the day. Effective management of the covid pandemic also rests on good planning. Where am I playing? How are the ground conditions? What is the procedure that I am going to be involved with? How am I going to manage this patient for the procedure? Is this a turning, bouncy, or a green track? Do I have a negative pressure room or am I fine with positive pressure laminar flows with good air exchanges and HEPA filters? Where is the dressing room? Where are the donning and doffing areas? Has my kit bag arrived? Is my cricketing gear in good shape? My best friend today is my PPE, my Personal Protective Equipment. I check before I enter the OR. Do I have the appropriate protection? Most great sportsmen would always tell you that you are as good as your team is. I need to ensure that my colleagues, my nursing staff, and my Operating Room technicians know what their role is. Are they equipped to face this challenge? Can they play the waiting game and be prepared for a strike? As a successful batsman in all conditions, Gavaskar always had a measure of the opposition. He would carefully study the attack, the variations, and the possible plan of attack. I bring the same principles here. Careful and meticulous planning and screening is needed so that my defence is not breached. I need to have the appropriate screening tests on board so that an asymptomatic carrier does not get in to deliver a deadly spell and knock down the entire team.

Sunil Gavaskar was a master craftsman. His innings were meticulously planned. It was not about sending the ball over and across the ropes – the failing of many a modern strategy. It was, as he would say, giving the initial hour to the bowler and then devising a way for the bowler to deliver to your desires. The strategy to tackle the pandemic is similar. It is not about the hurrah of getting through one high-risk procedure with aplomb. It is about doing the routine things correctly. The fine print

perfectly worked out. Gavaskar was very particular about his batting pads and gloves. To such an extent that he personalised them to his satisfaction. On similar lines, I check whether the mask or the respirator passes the fit test and there is no leak around it. I check my face shield, goggles, gloves, sanitisers, and those of my team as well. Are they in good supply? Is there enough to take me through the days of this battle? A good team and organisation will ensure that the players and the primary stakeholders will not have to fret and bother about what they need to win the war. Sports teaches that you perform best when you practise most. Repeated training ensures that you hit the right ball in just the desired way. The essence of training and simulated drills is crucial in handling this pandemic. It needs to get into our "muscle memory". If you think right, you do the right thing. However, it must come to a point where you do the right thing, even without thinking about it. We need to get into that zone, where you can trust yourself to be correct always.

Gavaskar epitomised the ideal temperament of a Test batsman. He has spoken about how he was not allowed to have one error for the sake of his team. Possibly no other branch of sport lays so much emphasis on temperament as it does for a batsman. In our lives, our temperament is being put to test by this pandemic. In its long history, medical science has never asked for more emphasis on temperament than today. We need to be calm, collected, and safe – ensuring the safety of the patient, colleagues and family. If I stay safe, they all do.

To me the lessons learnt from the covid pandemic are the lessons that the Little Master taught me. The new normal, as I see it, is the way Sunil Gavaskar saw batting in Test Cricket. Fearless and resilient. Focussed and adaptive. Disciplined and confident. He conquered it with his indomitable will. We too will conquer with our collective wills. Sometime down the timeline, we will tell future generations how well we managed the bowling and conditions just as he does today.