**Trying to win, but at what cost?**

By M. Shahnawaz (FootballPakistan.Com – FPDC)

 In the recent years Pakistani football has seen its National team fail to meet the expectations of fans and bow out from every single event with only themselves to blame. Four different coaches in last 4 years including a foreign coach but nothing worked. After Pakistan's failure in the recent Challenge Cup Qualifiers, there is urgency from the fans and some overseas players to include some fresh players from abroad and more importantly a foreign coach of good caliber. There are already quite a few of them playing but not all end up making it to the team at same due to injuries, club commitment or team selection issues.

 I recently caught up with a UK based player who represents Pakistan and what we discussed was quite interesting, which I believe is worth sharing with the fans. Discussing the recent failures and looking forward to the upcoming World Cup Qualifiers. He was hopeful of progressing to the next round but he disagreed that the National Team should be filled up with overseas players and that too with many with dual heritage and focus should remain on Pakistanis playing abroad like Zesh Rehman, Adnan Ahmed and Yousuf Butt. Pakistan team has already seen players of dual heritage like Atif Bashir and Shabir Khan represent the Green Kickers and do outstanding job but too many of the same are not seen as a wise move. It was argued that too many of dual heritage would lead to lack of unity or team spirit because there will be language barriers and they will struggle to fit in with Pakistani football system because they come from a professional football environment.

Since the appointment of Tariq Lutfi as the Head Coach, many journalists have written against the inclusion of overseas players, they all had their own views and angles of their stories. A prime example was Denmark based goalkeeper Yousuf Butt, who was regarded as the future of Pakistani football after Jaffar Khan’s retirement, a few weeks later the same journalist went on to question his spot in the team after he was substituted in first half against Malaysia in the Olympic Qualifier. Tariq Lufti himself had openly opposed the idea of overseas players but had to bite the bullet when the players were head and shoulders above the players he had in his camp. The example of quality and temperament brought in by these players can be seen from Atif Bashir; being played in 3 different positions in 3 matches in the recent AFC Challenge Cup Qualifiers.

FPDC has been the driving force alongside PFF's top brass in recognizing the talent and quality of the overseas players and including them in the team, although yet the coaches are to win anything but their quality is always visible. For any coach, team or federation, it is all about winning and winning at any cost. Teams like Algeria, North Korea and New Zealand have managed to qualify for the World Cup whereas in Pakistan we are yet to have clear priorities because the coaches have failed to blend the talent from home and abroad to find a winning squad.

The angle this discussion took was more to do with the state of domestic football and its players. The player argued that domestic players don't get paid very much in football and playing for the National team is often a source of good income.  A trip abroad for 2 weeks would make a player over $800, which makes around 60,000 PKR otherwise taking 3 or even 4 months to earn at their respective teams. Two to 3 trips abroad with National Team can earn the player equivalent to a year's salary he would earn at his club or department. Financial gains aside, the players enjoy good diet, relaxing environment as well as the trips abroad but the training regimes they go through could be better. To take that away from them by bringing in professionals like Adnan Ahmed or Zesh Rehman who come to wear the shirt without the concern of that $60 a day because they are on professional contracts in foreign leagues it causes problems. Rehman back in 2005 distributed his share of match fee and bonus amongst his teammates when he made his debut in SAFF Cup. So are these overseas players stealing the living of domestic players? It is important to understand that this article doesn’t suggest that Pakistani players are only there with the team for money and not to win, but the lack of quality coaching and professionals is a bigger reason for the downfall than the players because Salman Sharida was successful with the same domestic players.

I would say that these overseas players are doing their best to help uplift Pakistani football and in the process if they seem to be pouncing on the living and the opportunities of domestic players, then we should look at it from all angles and see what is important here. They are ambassadors of Pakistan, in every public forum Zesh has been in UK or in Asia he’s recognized as a Pakistan International and currently playing in Thai League as a Pakistani player and Adnan Ahmed had a stint in Iran as a Pakistani player. I have always argued that the inclusion of overseas players is important in uplifting the image of our football and winning of some matches and events because only that can lead to investment and development of the game. If we are not to do this then we are not likely to see any changes as no sponsor or investor will come into a sport which isn't winning anything. An example I always use is Philippines; a nation of 80million people with barely semi-professional football for a long time has had a remarkable turnaround in the last 12months. The country still doesn't have a semi-professional league let alone a professional one but its National Team has hit the headlines repeatedly that it has drawn investment from all corners of the country including the political leadership. The reason for their success is, increasing number of overseas Philippines; Fil-Foreigners as they are known and a foreign coach to go with the team. Currently more than 50% of their squad is of overseas players which are growing at every event. Now with the investment and the support, they plan to launch professional league and have already overtaken Pakistan in FIFA rankings if that's anything to go by. Pakistan can take the route and needs to whole heartedly otherwise the rhetoric of the last few years will continue and the disappointments too.

As much as I like to agree with this player that the inclusion of overseas players is detrimental to domestic players, I can't. Not because we recruit these players and help PFF and the coaches but because there needs to be competition for places, tougher choices for the coaches in regards to a selection policy. What happened to the theory that players learn and improve alongside good players? Sacrifices need to be made and it shouldn't be the players who make them but the administrators, footballers need to be put ahead of those who run the game because if it wasn't for footballers, they wouldn't be governing anything. The coaches need to form a good team with a mix of overseas players and domestic players and win something in order to move forward. A player earns $8 per day in Pakistan while at a training camp whereas the office bearers earn up to 6 times more than that.

Another important point raised in this conversation was hiring a foreign coach rather than spending money on the overseas players as that will help the football in Pakistan a great deal. The question is so old with no solution for it by the PFF that its better I don't discuss it any further. However the player I talked to could be a good option should PFF decide to take an overseas Pakistani coach because he would cost one third of what any other foreign coach would, yet he will be able to deliver because he has played for Pakistan, understands the culture, the team and its setup. He could be worth investing in long term for. Foreign coaches struggle in Pakistan because of power culture that exists between PFF and other football associations of various government departments and provinces. Just ask Akhtar Mohiuddin who had to lose his job because he dropped Jadeed Khan, who failed to turn up on time to the training camp for Asian Games. He went and got his provincial FA chiefs to lobby and remove Akhtar. But for the very same reason a foreign coach with strong personality and character is needed, who can deal with such political influences and pick the team on merit. Because the foreign coaches come here to win and help football and not enjoy the perks or please their affiliates, which is the case with many domestic coaches across other sports and not only football.

To conclude we must look at what is more important. Pakistan is in dire need of a foreign coach to take football forward but until that happens, the overseas based players are a good option to boost its chances to developing the national team but it is not a shortcut to any success or development of football within the country. But the overseas players shouldn’t be seen as pouncing on the living of local players because if they are better players than them and are in the team based on merit then everybody should back the team. It is not like Pakistan are getting foreigners from South America or Africa as seen with some Middle Eastern teams but utilizing its overseas citizens.

 It would be interesting to see what the team composition looks like come June the 29th against Bangladesh. But one thing we won't be seeing by then for sure is a foreign coach.