

Hajj Stories

Captains and Leaders

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‘Did you hear that he resigned as the captain of South Africa?’ my friend asked. ‘He is still going to be playing but has relinquished the leadership position. Perhaps not having the burden of captaincy will allow one of our best players ever to scale even greater heights. His averages are amongst the best in the world, he is currently ranked amongst the top ten global players and he's universally respected as a superb human being. I wonder why he resigned as captain?’ he added. I thought of all the reasons I saw bandied about. The team’s results and his own were not the best over the last few months even though injuries and physical conditions contributed immensely, and his reported quiet demeanour contrasted sharply with his successful and relatively extroverted predecessor. I then heard his reason and it simply reaffirmed the words of someone who shared his leadership thoughts: he said that he thought there was someone more capable as a captain than him. The words of a true leader.

I first met him on Mina and virtually everyone was aware that he was on Hajj. Word quickly spread of the presence of the famous personality, and colleagues and friends related their interactions with him. Someone reminisced the time he was recognised whilst performing his Umrah. I could picture South African fans as well as thousands from the Indian sub-continent swamping him. Another told of a request that no photographs be taken of the leader but at the same time showing a shot sneakily taken. Of course I would have loved to have met him. My children, friends and acquaintances would have been thrilled to see a picture of me with the great sports personality! However I literally only had a week for Hajj, having arrived two days before its commencement and I was scheduled to depart on the last day of the pilgrimage. Performing Umrah and trying to get to Makkah to perform additional Tawaafs from the outlying area of Azizyah

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- where we stayed between seeing patients - was taxing. The scorching heat added to the discomfort.

There have been many well-known personalities on Hajj that I have interacted with. The vast majority were distinguished for merely being on Hajj. They were dressed in Ihram like the other millions of pilgrims, shared the same food, tents and ablution facilities, and those that I interacted with had the same or similar duaas as all the others. They were indistinguishable from all other Hujaaj. That was Hajj, the greatest leveller of them all. It is the spiritual, physical, emotional and human journey uniting Muslims and elevating all to the same humble status. True, there has

been the occasional offence taken for not being recognised. I can vividly recall the fuming fury of a very irate “celebrity” who considered it improper to wait in having his blister seen to. Clearly the matter of a collapsed and dehydrated patient being urgently attended to was deemed inappropriate. But such an incident is rare amongst the ocean of goodness that Hajj inevitably blesses all with.

No one informed me that he was in one of the medical staff tents on the first day of Hajj on Mina. We had two tents; one used as a consulting premises and an adjacent one as a sleeping area. I was busy throughout the day in the former and retired to the other relatively late in the evening. He was sitting very solemnly with some other staff members. Of course I immediately recognised him and, after introducing myself, sat on one of the mattresses and joined the conversation. He was in need of a quick shower and as we had our own ablution facilities inside our tent, we offered him the usage of it. He thanked us, and a few minutes later emerged looking distinctly refreshed. He then discussed how he should approach the next few days.

He, his wife and another family member were thinking of walking the next day from Mina to Arafat, a distance of about fifteen kilometres. I strongly advised against the walk and reflected on my experience over the last few years. Temperatures were expected to soar up to fifty degrees. The journey entailed starting immediately after sunrise and moving easterly, facing the full glare of the harsh sun. By the time our pilgrims reach Arafat after a few hours of walking, they are normally drenched in sweat and physically exhausted. I dished out my standard advice of preserving our energies for the ultimate engagement with our Creator during the time of Wuqoof, just after midday. Surely walking in these conditions would leave the average person physically and mentally drained and not to be in the optimal state a mere few hours later. Even our beloved Prophet (peace be upon Him) undertook His journey mounted on the back of His camel.

He listened attentively. ‘What do you do Doc?’ he asked. I explained that I take the bus to Arafat but walk back in the evening. He looked regal standing tall in his Ihram. I then recounted that I walked to Arafat for a number of years, but realised that I had to attend to sick people once there. The physical demands of the walk

left me unable to be at my competent best. I knew he had to depart for a long tour of India almost immediately after hajj. Physically he was at the peak of his powers and I fondly recalled a ninety year old lady sprinting past me one year as I neared Arafat during one of my previous walks. I knew that we would pass hundreds of thousands, if not millions of walking pilgrims as we travelled in the comfort of our air conditioned buses. He listened attentively. ‘I have not decided what to do yet,’ he said after a long discussion,



The hearts and souls of all Muslims are lead to Arafat.

‘but I value your input.’ I was struck by the honesty. Here was someone appreciating the advice of those around him and then making an informed decision. What struck me were the signs of a true leader; listening attentively, asking the relevant questions, and then assimilating all the information and then deciding. An atmosphere of a calm and rational serenity was evident around him.

I do not know whether he decided to walk or take the bus to Arafat as it was not of importance. Now, that he has relinquished the captaincy of his team I realised he merely was going to stop giving instructions and manage other members. He was going to lead though. He was going to lead by his superb application to his art, by leading youngsters to follow his example, and by leading the life he was comfortable with. Captains partially attempt to control the sequence of events by making decisions. Leaders set an example whilst others would give their all while following them, whether on a sports field or on the battle front. I have been privileged to meet pilgrims ranging from Ministers and Grand Muftis to street sweepers and seamstresses. The unifying factor was their religion and one of the few distinguishing factors was their leadership abilities. I strongly suspect that, though he is very well known already, he was going to lead with an example that would leave an indelible footprint in the sands of the sport. Captaincy is temporary, leadership is permanent.

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