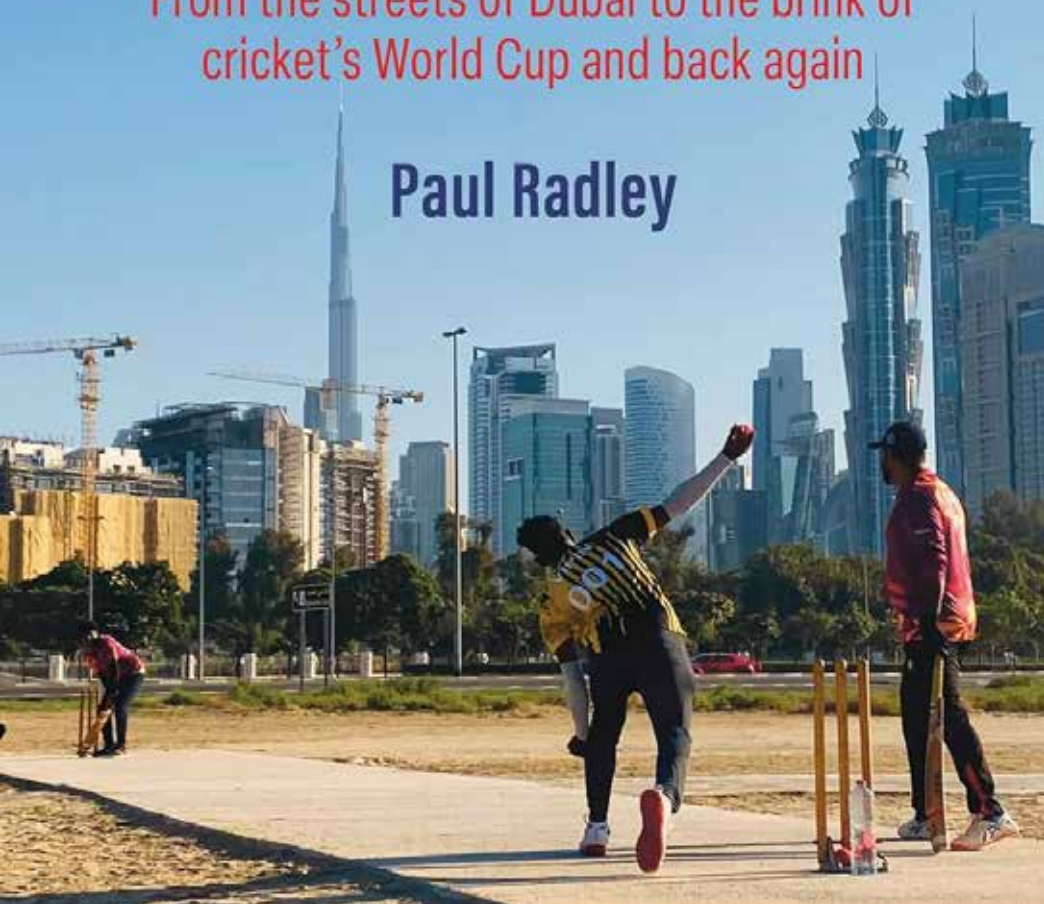




# PLAYING TO FIX

From the streets of Dubai to the brink of  
cricket's World Cup and back again

Paul Radley



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# THE FIX

## The pick-up

*Thursday, 10 October 2019 – Eight days  
before the tournament*

IT IS a three-minute stroll from the International Cricket Council's back gate to the home team dressing room at ICC Academy Oval No 1 in Dubai Sports City. It is an unremarkable walk. Through a car park. Past men who offer to wash vehicles for 20 dirhams (around £4) a time. Then through the academy's reception area and equipment shop, past the indoor nets, through a corridor, and up to the small steel partition used on days like this to mark the entry to the players' area.

Today is an unremarkable day, too. Expats alight from their 4x4s to use the high-spec Fit Republik gym next door.

Parents bring their children for swimming lessons at the Olympic-standard pool, or to train at the soccer school run by Michel Salgado, a former Champions League-winning Real Madrid footballer. Young professional people sit in front of laptops in Nathalie's Coffee Shop,

munching acai power bowls, or drinking skinny lattes, or shots of goji berry juice.

Few even have a passing interest in the cricket that is taking place on the field at the back. Much less that the players are all tapering down their final preparations for what they hope will lead to the attainment of a dream: namely, to play in a World Cup.

This is only a low-key practice match, but there are still guards on duty at each of the entry points to the players' and match officials' area. For international matches, the ICC have a 12-page document mandating who can enter, and what can be done in this space. Admission is strictly limited to the players, team support personnel, scorers, umpires and match referee. There must be no static, landline or other telephone communication devices within this area on a matchday. The players have to hand over their own mobile phones before entering. The only people exempt from this are the match referee, team managers, plus the specified security and media officers from each team.

The stewards policing this area have to be security vetted. CCTV cameras cover all access points to the team dressing rooms. The footage is supposed to be copied at the end of a day's play to a hard drive or portable storage device and retained by the national governing body for at least 12 months.

The only other people permitted into this zone are the ICC's anti-corruption managers. They are the ones who make the rules. Only at their discretion can any temporary visitors enter. They have access-all-areas passes to international grounds all over the world. Including this one, which is within sight of their own office.

On days like this, with an unexceptional game going on the other side of the white picket fence, the measures do feel overbearing. Not even the parents of the players are permitted to pass to check up on their sons.

The match that is going on is a 20-over friendly between the UAE, who play most of their games on this ground throughout the year, and Namibia. Both are among the 14 sides going for T20 World Cup qualification at a tournament starting in just over a week's time.

The UAE have been completely outplayed and are about to lose with a whopping ten overs to spare. Still, there is not much damage done. This is, after all, just a tune-up before the important business to follow. There are still two more official practice friendlies to come before the real action starts. So a dropped stitch today should be nothing to worry about.

The UAE are the second-highest-ranked side entering the competition. The event offers six places for the T20 World Cup in Australia in 2020. The country has only been to that competition once before, back in 2014, and the 50-over version of cricket's World Cup twice. Three appearances at cricket's big shows, which will be difficult to repeat.

Because of the way international cricket is structured, their chances of making it to major global competitions, to mix with superstars like Virat Kohli, Rohit Sharma, Steve Smith and Ben Stokes, are limited. But they are confident this is their time, and with good reason. The matches are to be played in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, so they know the conditions better than anyone. They are a talented side, and especially canny at closing out wins

in this, the shortest format of international cricket. And within their squad they have the highest-placed players – from beyond the Test-playing elite, at least – in each of the ICC rankings for batting and bowling.

One of them, their fast bowler and captain Mohammed Naveed, has not been playing in this practice game. Had he done so, things would most certainly be different. He is one of the most feared quick bowlers at this level of the game. He has just reached the brink of the top ten of the world rankings for bowlers in T20 international cricket. On that metric, he is above many of the gilded household names from cricket's mainstream nations. Just lately he has started carving out a niche for himself in franchise league cricket, too.

All of which is quite a feat for someone who had not played formal cricket with a hard, leather ball before arriving in the UAE from his native Pakistan as an adult. He had only come to Khor Fakkan, a small resort town on the country's east coast whose name translates as 'the creek with two jaws', on a tourist visa.

He stayed with friends, the idea being he could bolster their team in the highly competitive street cricket matches that are a ritual of remittance workers' lives all over this country. His mates pointed out he had a talent for the game and encouraged him to try to take it further. He found out when and where UAE were training and took a three-hour public bus to get there. He impressed, and a career as an international cricketer was born.

Although he is not actually playing in this practice match, access to the players' area is easy. His face is recognisable as one of those accredited to enter. He does



so, and chats with a couple of the players left over who are not out on the ground fielding while Namibia go about the easy job of their run chase.

He strikes up a conversation with Qadeer Ahmed, who is wearing a high-vis yellow bib. That is often the case, what with it being the uniform of the 12th man and drinks carrier. Although he has a good record in his three years with the UAE team so far, and is well regarded as an accurate and skilful seam bowler, Qadeer regularly finds himself doing 12th-man duties. With his cheery and undemonstrative demeanour, he seems like the sort of guy who would be easy to tell they have not made the team.

Having to ferry drinks to the players in the starting XI never seems to sully his mood. In fact, he seems to revel in it. If he sees someone he knows beyond the boundary edge, Qadeer always stops to say hello. Usually, he offers up one of the bottles of water or isotonic drinks that are meant for the players. He just seems grateful to be here. Like Naveed, he is only a couple of steps removed from street cricket, and now gets the chance to travel the world as a pro cricketer.

Naveed and Qadeer have a lot in common. They had similar upbringings in army garrison towns, not far from each other in Pakistan. In fact, Qadeer studied in Naveed's hometown of Jhelum, although their paths never crossed. Now they are team-mates in the national team of their adopted country, each of them fast bowlers and former tape-ball cricketers made good.

Promptly after Naveed's arrival, they walk from the players' viewing area, move inside the picket fence on to

the grass, and start a seemingly relaxed circumnavigation of the boundary edge.

At that moment, members of staff from the ICC's anti-corruption unit begin their own walk, from their office to the ground.

\* \* \*

Much was made of the ICC's decision to up sticks from the ancient headquarters of the game at Lord's and head instead to a yet-to-be-built office in the Middle East in August 2005. Specifically, they were relocating to the UAE, the country where the sport's most explosive corruption controversy had erupted five years earlier. OK, they would be based in Dubai, the emirate neighbouring Sharjah, which had been the epicentre of the investigation that exposed a number of the sport's most beloved players as corrupt. But it was still close enough to be damned by association.

Initially, the sport's governing body took an office in Al Thuraya Tower, an office block in the Media City area of 'New' Dubai. From the ICC's temporary boardroom, there were clear views out to sea, and to the dredgers that were rainbowing sand into the Arabian Gulf as Palm Jumeirah – one of a number of planned man-made islands off Dubai's coast – started to take shape.

Cricket's ruling body was just another company, in just another high-rise, in a city that was sprouting many such edifices at breakneck speed. It was boom time for construction. Depending on who you listened to and how taken you are by hyperbole, there was anything between 5 and 95 per cent of the world's cranes in operation in the

city at the height of its construction boom. Whatever the actual number, there were cranes, JCBs, and hard hats near enough everywhere you looked.

As the ICC staff flew in, the Burj Khalifa was still going downwards, a huge hole in the desert in which foundations were being set. The construction was hidden from the drivers on the adjacent Sheikh Zayed Road behind a colossal billboard proclaiming 'history rising'.

It did not take long for it to soar to its full height of 828 metres, making it the tallest building in the world. Dubai specialises in stuff like that. Among other things, it also has the world's largest indoor ski slope, the tallest twisted tower (a stone's throw from the ICC's temporary home at Al Thuraya Tower), and the world's largest shopping mall shaped like a dragon.

For all the ideological issues of taking cricket's governing body away from the sport's traditional home, the economic, geographical and logistical reasoning made sense. It meant its operations team from Lord's would share the same base as their colleagues in the commercial department, who had in recent times been stationed in Monaco. It was tax efficient. Crucially, it also meant they would now be less than a three-hour flight away from the sport's financial and political powerbase in Mumbai, and in a more favourable time zone. Plus, they were going to get their own purpose-built offices. At Lord's, they had been based in an outhouse at the Nursery End of the ground called The Clock Tower, which, for all the allure of its surroundings, was actually part of a converted toilet block.

After first decamping to Dubai, it took four years for the ICC to take delivery of their office. Al Thuraya Tower

was well appointed, had great views of the Gulf, and was near to all the modern conveniences of the expanding Media City. Just across the road in front of the building was an agreeable park and pond precinct, the other side of which housed many of the world's leading media organisations. On the floor above them was a security firm run by Nelson Mandela's former bodyguard. None of which bore any relevance to cricket, though.

That changed on Sunday, 19 April 2009, when they moved 15km inland to the new site in Sports City. The move to a home they could finally call their own for the first time coincided with the ICC's 100th anniversary. Not that the neighbours would complain if they threw a massive party. There were none. There was no one else for miles around. ICC staff who did not bring their own packed lunches to work had to call in deliveries from afar. The food was often cold by the time it arrived.

That said, the first shoots of development were starting to show at Sports City, a vast project whose initial budget was forecast at US\$4 billion. The plans for it resembled the sort of sporting utopia that is usually the blueprint for hosting the Olympics. Although that was never the stated aim for Dubai, the vaulting ambitions of the city made it seem possible the Games would be a target in the future.

Three days after the ICC had moved in, the inaugural match was played just down the newly laid street at the 25,000-seater Dubai International Cricket Stadium. Pakistan faced Australia in a one-day international, in front of a crowd that was enthusiastic, albeit the stands were only two-thirds full.

If the organisers could have picked a star to hang the first game on, it would have been Shahid Afridi. The firebrand all-rounder, who at the time held the record for the fastest century in international cricket, was the darling of Pakistan supporters. Particularly, of the Pathan ethnic group who originate from the north-western border with Afghanistan, which make up a large percentage of the UAE's imported labour force.

In his autobiography, Afridi himself describes how migrating for work is in the blood of his people. 'We are up for any sort of labour,' Afridi writes in *Game Changer*. '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.' Which might explain why so many have ended up in Dubai to assist with its urban expansion.

With such a ready audience of Afridi devotees, his performance was just the ticket for the owners of cricket's newest international venue. He took what were then his best ODI bowling figures in the course of setting up an easy win over the world champion Australians.

The ground officials could not have stage-managed a better opening night. Dubai International Cricket Stadium was up and running – although it has since dropped the 'Cricket' from its moniker. Officially, this is to reflect the multi-purpose status of a venue which has also played host to football, baseball, music concerts, and a packed-out audience with Narendra Modi, the Indian prime minister. Unofficially, it was because someone noticed the earlier acronym – DICS – was sub-optimal.

The fact cricket was the first sport to be catered for at this mega project in the desert was instructive. Cricket is by no means the sport of choice for sheikhs. Traditionally, that would be horseracing and endurance equestrianism. Neither is it the sport of the general Emirati, who are the indigenous Arabs of the UAE, and account for around 12 per cent of the country's population. As a very broad rule, their passion is football. Few Emiratis have played cricket at all. Of the handful or so that have, they have either had one parent who originates from the Indian subcontinent, or picked it up from school friends. Or, in the case of Alawi Shukri, the Emirati player most recently capped by the national team, learnt it from his Sri Lankan nanny.

Cricket is, though, the game of the masses. Around 27 per cent of the population are Indian nationals, while there are also more Pakistanis than Emiratis. Sri Lankans and Bangladeshis also contribute a large chunk of the workforce. The fact half of the country originates from the subcontinent goes a long way to explaining cricket's popularity. And yet, when the ICC arrived, there was little formal provision for the game.

At that point, there were four turf grounds in the country, and that was soon to be cut in half. The grass ovals owned by the Dubai Cricket Council were consumed by the construction of Healthcare City, a development which, as the name suggests, focused on medical facilities. It left just Sharjah Cricket Stadium and Zayed Cricket Stadium in Abu Dhabi with grass wickets – each available for public hire, albeit at a cost. As such, almost all organised recreational cricket was

played on cement wickets, with sand outfielders rolled flat, and boundary lines demarcated either by rope, bitumen or lime powder.

The Emirati businessmen behind Dubai Sports City spotted a gap in the market. Cricket was going to be the centrepiece of their ambitious project in the desert. International matches would be played at the stadium. There would be two more ovals at an academy endorsed by the ICC, and adjacent to the new home for the game's governing body.

There would be no expense spared for a project that was to be the most technologically advanced in the world of cricket. Between the stadium and academy, 380 tonnes of clay had to be flown in from Australia, the same amount from Pakistan, and 180 tonnes from England. That was one of a number of reasons for the construction being slightly delayed. Securing a pass for all that earth at customs was no easy job. Laying the soil in land as barren as the desert was a testing process, too. The utilities companies were struggling to keep pace with Dubai's urban growth, which meant no pipelines went as far as the Sports City site. The costs of irrigating the newly seeded fields with sweet water trucked in by bowsers, even for the very rich, were prohibitive.

If the cricket grounds overshot their target date for completion, then at least they were built eventually. The same cannot be said for all the items on the grand plan. At the entry point to Sports City there remains the relic of a planned football stadium. It was supposed to be a 60,000-seater work of art. There are 15 plastic seats in so far, 14 years after construction started. A few samples,

on the skeleton of a stand that has long been left derelict. It looks like a concrete coliseum in the desert, without a history to speak of just yet.

The fact the ICC Academy had employed three coaches of great renown long before there was even a facility to work at was another clue to the fact money was no object. Dayle Hadlee, a former swing bowler from a famous cricketing family, came in from New Zealand. Mudassar Nazar made the short trip from Pakistan back to a country he knew so well having played years of international cricket in Sharjah. At the apex of the vaunted coaching trio was Rod Marsh, a legendary former wicketkeeper who had come to be regarded as the ultimate academy supremo having headed up both Australia and England's versions in the past.

Marsh was so well thought of that people attempted to prise him away long before the Dubai project was up and running. When he was part of a small delegation who went to the 2006 Champions Trophy in India to press the flesh and promote the ICC Academy while India's voracious cricket media were gathered, he got a job offer. A brash young administrator called Lalit Modi wanted him to head up Rajasthan Cricket Association's new academy in Jaipur. Marsh politely declined. He had a job to finish. Or, more accurately, to start.

In the months before they actually had a place to work, the three coaches were occupied more by promotion than actual coaching. On one occasion while they were waiting for the stadium and academy fields to be signed off, Marsh joined a guided tour of Sports City. Halfway round, he wound the window down on the air-conditioned 4x4. As



the heat rushed in, he shouted some advice to a group of workers who were testing out one of the newly tarmacked roads with a game of tape-ball cricket. 'Keep your eye on the ball!' he bellowed, before closing the window and cheerfully adding the rider, 'That's my coaching done for the day.'

Like with so many things in this city of man-made grandeur, the finished product is a triumph of ambition. The ICC Academy has facilities that are the envy of anywhere in the world, many Test nations included. Even more so in the strata of the international game just below the mainstream, in which the UAE national cricket team participates.

It has become exactly what it was designed for, and more. It is a stop-off point for teams to train on their way to tours of the subcontinent. Everyone who is anyone in cricket has been there. The academy fields have staged a number of full international matches of their own. That was unforeseen when the plans were first drawn up, but it is a happy by-product. Neither is recreational cricket overlooked. Aspiring young players get to train there – either at a price, or, for a lucky few, on bursaries. Darjeeling, a club of social cricketers which started in 1969 and ranks as the UAE's oldest, call the academy their home ground.

Even Lalit Modi, the Indian cricket board official who had made that cheeky bid to recruit Marsh to his academy in Jaipur, made it to Sports City. Having become just about the most powerful administrator in world cricket in quick time, he wanted to see whether the place was worthy of staging his billion-dollar baby

– the Indian Premier League. He was given a guided tour of the complex. Maybe he might even have noticed that people were fawning over him, too, had he looked up from his two smartphones at any point on the way round.

And when the IPL clashed with India's general elections in 2014, it was indeed briefly relocated to the UAE. Eighteen of 20 matches, the majority of which were played at the stadium in Dubai, were sold out. The Indian diaspora turned out in droves. Dubai lapped it up. But Modi was not there to see it, this time. By now, the Icarus of cricket administration was already well into an exile of his own, having been jettisoned from the sport amid accusations of misconduct, indiscipline, and financial irregularities.

\* \* \*

By the time Alex Marshall has made it from his office at the ICC to the oval, Naveed and Qadeer have reached the furthest point of the ground.

Beyond them is the picket fence marking the edge of the playing area. Beyond that, a narrow footpath, then a hedgerow, then a 15-foot-high fence. The other side of that is some dusty wasteland, then Hessa Street, the road that funnels traffic away from Sports City. Just a mile down towards the coast is the old Emirates Road. From there to Sharjah, to Abu Dhabi, to the northern Emirates. To anywhere.

Still, though. There is that hedgerow, and that fence. This is no obvious route to a getaway. No way to do a bunk.

Naveed has no place being here. He has not been absent from the starting XI for today's match for tactical reasons. Not because he was being rested ahead of the serious business to follow. Not because they wanted to give others game time as they already knew what one of the world's top-rated fast bowlers can do.

Instead, he was being interviewed by Marshall, the former Metropolitan Police officer who now heads up the mission to keep cricket clean as the ICC's general manager of integrity. Accusations have been levelled against Naveed that he is conspiring to fix matches, both in the tournament to follow and others.

He is in trouble. Big trouble. The last thing he should be doing is consorting with Qadeer on the boundary edge of a match involving the UAE team. Marshall relays his message to Dougie Brown, the coach of the team, in unequivocal terms. 'Get Mr Naveed off this field. Now. If you don't, we will have him forcibly removed.'

Naveed is not known for being a brawler. Not within this team, anyway. Belligerent, sometimes, and often shouty. But they have never seen him trade blows with anyone. They don't know that, in a dimly lit corner of Sharjah near his home, nine days earlier, he was involved in an altercation that centred on an offer to fix cricket matches.

But they do know he is agitated. And when someone is scrapping for survival, who knows what they are capable of? He is broad-shouldered and strong, despite being no gym bunny. In fact, it is often a job to coax Naveed into weight training. Part of the motivation behind making him captain of the side was the hope it would

automatically compel him to make an effort. It worked, too, after a fashion.

So Peter Kelly is detailed to remove Naveed. Kelly is a former professional rugby player from West Auckland. When cricket permits, he stills plays amateur rugby to a high standard. He is an open-side flanker, one of the toughest positions on the field. It means he is one of those people who takes a perverse enjoyment from getting roughed up. If Naveed did kick off, he would be no match for Kelly. The New Zealander is dog-toy tough.

Kelly's involvement in cricket for the UAE is many and varied. If this were a Test-playing cricket nation, with funding more readily available, he would specialise in strength and conditioning training. That is what he was recruited for in the first place, and it should be his one job. But it isn't, and instead he wears many hats. As dirhams need to be stretched, he needs to multi-task. So the team's fitness sensei is also the country's performance manager for cricket. He helps with fielding drills. Even though his background is rugby, he is just as proficient with a side-arm – the stick that was invented for dog owners to throw balls for their pets but has been commandeered for batting drills the world over – as those former cricketers on the coaching staff.

And for the World Cup qualifying tournament, Kelly will also be the team manager. Primarily because he is well organised, but also because they knew trouble was on its way. The backroom staff received word ahead of time that there was going to be a raid by the ICC's anti-corruption unit (ACU) imminently. They did not know

who specifically, but they were aware some of their players were under the scanner.

It could all be traced back to earlier in the year when the UAE had travelled to Zimbabwe for a one-day international series. Ahead of the first match, the ACU had been tipped off that a group of cricket corruptors had a meeting planned for a specific location in Harare. They did not know the identity of the fixers at that stage. But, at two hours' notice, they arranged for local law enforcement to attend the meeting.

The group were detained, and it included two people who the ACU already suspected of involvement in a variety of efforts to corrupt cricket matches around the world. It set in train an investigation that also implicated a number of UAE players in corruption.

Now, six months on, the ACU felt they had reasonable grounds to believe some players were planning to corrupt aspects of the Qualifier. To head it off they staged a surprise raid on a team meeting a couple of days before the Namibia game. Led by Steve Richardson, the ICC's head of investigations, six members of their staff – one for each player under suspicion – entered the team room at the ICC Academy.

The players, both the clean ones and the suspects, were stunned. One later likened it to being 'like an FBI raid you see in movies'. There was a reason it was designed to be unsettling.

The ACU's aim was to retrieve the maximum information possible. They provided no advanced notice to make sure the suspects had no chance to destroy or conceal evidence.

They issued each of the players with paperwork demanding their phones. They proceeded to seize the electronic devices they had on them, then led them one by one to their lockers. Any other devices they had in their bags also had to be handed over for analysis. The suspects were then each led away for interview.

The majority of the ACU staff have a background in policing. In this instance, the detention of the players is referred to as an 'interception' rather than an arrest as it would have been in their previous jobs. They employ almost identical procedures to UK police, even though the cases they are involved in are disciplinary ones rather than criminal. They follow the principles of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act, which demands fairness and no oppression of the suspects.

The format is also the same. Each suspect receives a caution, telling them there would be an adverse inference if they do not answer questions, or if they fail to mention in interviews something they later rely on if the case goes to tribunal. It also informs them they are entitled to legal advice. It is all recorded by audio, and ideally on video, too.

By the time of the Namibia game each of the six players have been questioned at length, but Naveed is fresh from his latest interview. He has no place colluding with other suspects.

The management had known Kelly would have to act as a sentry at some point during the tournament. No one knew it would be this early. Or that he would have to turf one of their own players out, rather than keep outsiders from coming in.

'Nedo!'

Naveed is beckoned, by his nickname, back to the dressing room. It is not done forcibly. The message is relayed via the fielders.

Who among them knows what is going on? All are briefed regularly on cricket's anti-corruption code. All of them know who Alex Marshall is. Many know the other ACU officers who have just arrived, too.

Naveed looks agitated. But he does not protest. There are no punches thrown. There is no cursing or raised voices, even. Anyone beyond the orbit of the home team would not have the slightest clue there is anything untoward going on at all. None of the handful of spectators who are milling about under the trees near the sightscreen. Not even the opposition players. They are more concerned with putting the finishing touches to their win, which they do in hasty fashion.

The post-match handshakes are lifeless. Barely a word is spoken. One team, Namibia, have done what they set out to achieve, albeit with an ease that surprised even them. The other is maudlin. And not because they have just been thrashed in a game of cricket.

At the conclusion, the UAE's players mill about the outfield in small cliques, feigning interest in the idea of warm-downs and stretching. As they do so, the ACU officers take their pick of the players. Naveed knows he is condemned, and it is Marshall who takes him in. This time, the burly fast bowler does snap.

'Why, motherf\*\*\*\*\*? You want to give me a life ban? OK, give me a life ban,' he growls at Marshall in front of two of his team-mates, Rohan Mustafa and Mohammed Usman.

If Naveed's language was threatening, Marshall was hardly likely to fret. Before moving to Dubai to head up the campaign against corruption in cricket, he had spent years of distinguished service in the Metropolitan Police, rising to the position of chief constable, and at times dealing with criminals armed with sawn-off shotguns. The idea he might have felt alarmed by Naveed is laughable to him.

'He wasn't very pleased to see me, and he wanted me to go away,' Marshall later says. 'But bearing in mind, before coming here I had done 37 years in the police, plenty of people have told me they are not pleased to see me. He was just another grumpy person.'

Naveed's closest friend in the team, the gun batsman Shaiman Anwar, is also brought in. Then Qadeer, the quiet and respectful 12th man, is also picked up. The trio are led away for more questioning in the ICC offices in relation to a string of allegations of corruption.

And the UAE's chances of making it to the World Cup start to bleed.