

AIDS awareness campaign to ride on World Cup 2007
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By Boria Majumdar

The World Cup is about cricket and high quality cricket. The World Cup is about euphoria and tragedy. The World Cup is also about showcasing multiple and varied fan cultures, often ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. At the same time the World Cup is not only about cricket. It is also about using the power of cricket to accomplish things for mankind, especially in cricket playing societies across the world. It is about using cricket to spread the message of racial harmony, advance class integration and finally create social awareness on issues like HIV/AIDS.

To their credit, the ICC, alongside the organisers of World Cup 2007, have taken up the issue of social responsibility more seriously than ever in the days leading up to the tournament. So much so that when the teams march out for the opening ceremony in Jamaica, they will, besides being gladiators on a mission, be cricket's ambassadors to creating awareness about HIV/AIDS across the Caribbean. Players from all the 16 participating nations are expected to wear the red ribbon as they walk out, making the opening ceremony of WC 2007 special.

The aim is to showcase the spirit of cricket and spread the message of AIDS awareness among underprivileged communities across the 14 Caribbean Islands. Sport and issues of social responsibility are old folks. The NBA for example has an extremely sophisticated social responsibility programme. The English Premier League too is involved in several community outreach programmes, the most notable being one that provides support to underprivileged school children across the British Isles.

Cricket too joined this league in 2003 when the ICC entered into a formal partnership with the United Nations to create awareness about HIV/AIDS. This partnership, four years old, will for the first time be used on a truly large scale during World Cup 2007.

Says Chris Hurst, corporate communications manager of the ICC, "There will be public system announcements before every World Cup match. We have already received support from stars like Rahul Dravid, Ricky Ponting and Kumar Sangakkara, players who have agreed to be our ambassadors in this initiative.

The plan is to have 16 ambassadors, one from each of the participating nations." Outreach camps are being organised on non-match days and the cricketers are expected to travel to the remote areas in the islands to meet victims and children to generate awareness. While doing so, the project is also expected to serve the cause of bringing the communities together, yet another necessity felt by local Caribbean societies for years.

The focus of the outreach programmes, as Hurst mentioned to me at the day-long conference on cricket organised by the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, on March 2, are men and women between 18 and 25 years (teens to the youth). Advertisements announcing these programmes have already been prepared and hoardings are being put up across the Caribbean.

At the same time, local media houses like the Caribbean Broadcasting Media have joined hands with the ICC in trying to disseminate the message of awareness widely. With their local expertise, the programme is more than likely to stand out in the coming seven weeks of cricket frenzy giving the tournament an added dimension.

Interestingly, the ICC plans to offer access to the advertisements to broadcasters across the world. With Sony, the host broadcaster in India, zeroing in on the concept of racial harmony in all

their pre-World Cup campaigns, it is likely that viewers in India will also be able to find out more about this much-needed ICC campaign.

The ICC's reasoning in picking up HIV/AIDS is also profound. Says Hurst, "HIV/AIDS is a huge menace in cricketing countries across the world. There are 12 million AIDS victims in the Test playing countries, essentially in the Caribbean, South Africa and India. Hence we decided to tackle this issue rather than anything else. We are well aware that we can't solve the problem. Nor are we claiming that our efforts will do so. What we are determined to do however is to create awareness, to educate people about the problem. If that is achieved our aim is fulfilled."

In an interesting initiative, the ICC has used the World Cup mascot Mello to bolster this campaign. Mello is a youthful, friendly character and is seen wearing a blue short-sleeved shirt, a golden pendant, white vest, khaki trousers and blue sneakers. He is shown leaning on a bat and tossing a white cricket ball in the air with legs crossed. The red ribbon on his shirt shows the teenager's awareness for HIV/AIDS.

With CWC 2003 using the Zebra as mascot to spread the gospel of racial unification and CWC 2007 following in its wake, that cricket has a purpose beyond the playing field is clear. While it is true that campaigns such as these can hardly ever fundamentally transform society, it is also worth remembering that every droplet contributes to making an ocean. And in this case this campaign is surely worth much more than a droplet.