

Jonathan Agnew



Bangladesh is a remarkable country of stark contrasts, most obviously that between the rich and the destitute, with the one constant running through the lives of everyone being a passion for cricket. Close up pictures of the crowds here reveal an interaction with a cricket match that becomes quite manic – as if it is a welcome outlet for the frustration and hard-

ship of day-to-day life.

There are very few open spaces in Chittagong, and those that we pass on the way to the stadium are filled with bare-footed children playing some form of makeshift cricket as the teeming traffic noisily trundles past. This hunger for the sport exists despite the regular failings of the Bangladesh national team, whose form in this tournament has been particularly disappointing, and is a regular source of grumbles among our hotel staff.

And yet while your first few outings through the choking streets are so mind-blowing that there is simply too much to take in, it is not long before you notice the football shirts. Here, there and everywhere in this cricket-crazy city

you will see Arsenal, Chelsea and Liverpool shirts, but the most popular is Manchester United. It is the same wherever we travel on our international circuit – there is no escaping the fact that football is making serious inroads where cricket has, traditionally, always been the number one sport. It is estimated, for example, that there are 35 million Manchester United supporters in India, which is

cricket's most powerful stronghold in the world.

That is not merely due to the global reach of the television broadcasts of our Premier League, which last season generated a cumulative audience of three billion viewers, but the clubs are also investing time and effort to sell themselves to their new supporters. Two years ago, two former Manchester United stars, Bryan Robson and Dwight Yorke came to Bangladesh to play a friendly match with underprivileged

children – thousands turned out to watch. And only last month there was huge publicity here when one of the club's sponsors ran a competition to select 12 under 16-year-old players for a coaching session at Old Trafford.

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So the impact of success or failure is felt far beyond Manchester, Liverpool and London, and having sold more than two million shirts worldwide last year, it will be interesting if United's disappointing season impacts upon the loyalty of its overseas fanbase.

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