PAKISTAN STUDIES PROJECT

**Football in Pakistan**

Football/Soccer is arguably the world's most popular game, played all over the globe. It is not limited to any age group thus played by everyone from kids to professional football players. Professional football is watched by billions of people all over the world. While it often depicts regional competitiveness, it has the power to unite the whole world for a 90 minutes match which can ultimately be decided by individuals in split-seconds. To sum it up, football is a team game consisting of 11 players on the field along with 7 players on the bench on each team. All in all, this team sport not only teachers values of discipline, leadership and unity but also teaches the importance of sportsmanship. Undoubtedly, it is a multi-billion-dollar-a-year industry and heartbeat of every sports fan across the globe.

Apart from the physical advantages football offers, it minimizes health and mental stress to go along with social benefits. Through the decades, football fans have witnessed century-defining talents including Pele, Diego Maradona, Gerd Muller, Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. Almost every country has been known to contribute to the history of Football. Pakistan is no different as it shares a colourful, albeit underachieving, football history. Often regarded as the ‘poor man’s sport’, it is strange how despite football’s simplicity and widespread appeal among the masses across the country, the game has failed to reach the same heights as hockey and cricket. It is not strange to ask a common Pakistani about the national football team and receive a blank stare in return. They cannot be blamed for this result given how football has been an obscure sport that not many seem to care about. For example, the ones leading the Pakistan Football Federation came to power through an election held by the Supreme Court which was not recognised by FIFA. Consequently, FIFA suspended Pakistan after the Ashfaq Group ignored the organisation's deadline for handing over the PFF headquarters back to the NC.

Moreover, this was the second ban imposed on Pakistan in recent four years. Therefore, there is no need to ponder as to why Pakistan is currently ranked **198** in international standings.

To Pakistanis, the global game is like a silent unknown, even unwanted, step-child waiting for attention inside a house already overpopulated with other noisy, attention-seeking kids named Cricket, Hockey and Kabaddi. But without a shadow of a doubt, football shouldn't be ignored in this country as it is right now. According to a report by the Football Industry Group, about 3,000 full-time vacancies have been created by the football industry in Merseyside alone. This is in addition to 1,400 part-time jobs created during match days despite the region having only two outstanding clubs, i.e., Everton and Liverpool football clubs.

However, the only thing Pakistan is famous for in the footballing world is supplying hand stitched footballs for almost all the World Cups from the 1990s to 2010. Pakistan was first chosen to make footballs for the World Cup in 1982 and has supplied footballs for 70% of the global demand of football. All the major international brands are sourcing their supply of footballs from this export-oriented city. Sialkot is the only city of Pakistan where 99 percent of the products are exported to various countries of the world. Sialkot based small and medium industries are earning foreign exchange of over US $1.6 billion annually through exports thus strengthening the national economy.

The introduction of the Pakistan Premier League (PPL) in 2004 was the first major step as the National Football Championship was phased out. However, Pakistan has never been able to step up at the international stage because of the lack of continual backing by the government of Pakistan which has been plagued with political instability. No-one has dared to think about the phrase that when a country is at its peak in sports, it is without a doubt making progress on a global level. Pakistani football has come through a turbulent and promising cross road after years of ups and downs. The standard of the game has improved, local coaches have increased in number, and the popularity of the game has found the homes of common Pakistanis. All this still is an untapped gold mine that could make Pakistan a potentially competitive side in Asia and therefore, produce enormous job opportunities and hence contribute to the betterment of our economy.

Some necessary steps should be taken by the government to make this country a champion in football as much as it is in making them. To achieve this, Pakistan should implement the models used by India and China. The very first step is to develop a competitive football league in Pakistan, which will consist of quality international players for our local teams. Perhaps we can start with dual nationality Pakistani players, and with the passage of time add in more quality players into the system. Although football is played all over Pakistan, the amount of professional coaches available can be easily counted on fingers. All kids start playing from the streetor park and need direction though. Not from critics, but from coaches. In addition to this, there is no stand-out football stadium available so as a result FIFA standard stadiums should be built to encourage football's growth. The most basic aim is to promote football at club level plus the PFF and clubs should make all efforts to bring money to further motivate the players and improve the infra-structure.

The governing bodies should make setups by which properly arranged competition is present for a player of a younger age, tournaments should be held for U-19, U-17 and U15 as well.

UEFA ‘B’ Licence Coach, Rehan Mirza advised the Pakistan Football Fans Federation (PFFF)

‘’ Use the media, run a huge campaign, create hype, and show the great goals of our national footballers. Do whatever it takes. Just drag those kids out to the grounds. The sponsors and the money would come in automatically’. Apart from this, the PFF should invite Football Legends and influential footballers to Pakistan to promote the beautiful game with help provided by sponsors in this regard.

Above all, the government should take serious interest in making sure that accountability and transparency is there. Ultimately, the very least we need to do is take the first step in the right direction, as we literally cannot get any worse. The situation won’t change in a day but if we do our best, we might achieve our targets. I believe that football is of great importance because it promotes peace and unity among different countries of the world.

**All it requires is genuine dedication, focus, commitment, sponsorships, awareness, and competitive action at home and abroad to really set the stage for a football revolution in this country.**

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