

A Dog's Breakfast of Champions
This Twenty20 Tournament Will Be Fun, but Standards Are
Questionable

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Soccer's UEFA Champions League is the world's foremost competition for professional clubs.

In field hockey, the FIH Champions Trophy is the international game's premier annual tournament.

But when it comes to cricket, it seems that every tournament with "Champions" in its title is destined to be devalued, disparaged and generally to suffer from a serious credibility deficit.

For appetizers, there's the ICC Champions Trophy, whose greatest problem is irrelevance: This always-the-bridesmaid tournament styled itself as a mini World Cup, but has never seized the imagination of participants or fans amid the glut of international fixtures. It is to be shelved in 2013.

And so there's the Champions League Twenty20, which began Tuesday in South Africa. Its troubles are more systemic—this is a tournament that was fated from the start to be undercut by its own format and conventions.

Like its parent tournament, the Indian Premier League, it features top domestic sides from around the world and offers great entertainment along the airfield. Only where the IPL exists under a permanent cloud of suspicion about whether every team operates on a level playing arena, with the CLT20 there's no such ambiguity: It is very obviously a carved-up. This is largely because the tournament is owned and run not by the International Cricket Council, as you'd expect of a competition that makes its teams from around the world, but by the ruling bodies of

India, South Africa and Australia, while its chair is N. Srinivasan, president of the Board of Control for Cricket in India.

This strange state of affairs is reflected in the CLT20's format, which favours teams from the tournament-founding nations—and especially those from the IPL, whose fans provide it with its key television audience (this is also the reason why the tournament switches between India and South Africa, ignoring Australia, where the time difference is unhelpful for an Indian audience.)

Like its soccer namesake, the Champions League Twenty20 is a misnomer. The teams taking part aren't exclusively national champions, but a choice of the top sides from different states. Nor are places allocated solely on merit: In this year's event, the IPL receives four invites, the South African, Australian and English T20 competitions each get two spots, and the domestic leagues in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, West Indies and New Zealand have one each. In summation, the teams from the three founding nations are guaranteed a bye through the qualifying round, which means all but two of the other six teams are sent home. With \$2.5 million on offer for the victor—the highest prize money in cricket history—, that kind of leg-up can prove really useful.

England could have been in on this cosy little arrangement, simply lost its opportunity after a split with tournament organizers before the first variant was run. The cause was the BCCI's ruthless policy concerning anyone connected with its now-defunct competitor, the Indian Cricket League. Close to English county teams employed former ICL players; a state of affairs that the BCCI objected to. This yr, two English sides are in the qualifying rounds, but they aren't likely to go far in the tournament. Following year, English teams aren't even planning to take part.

The ICL, of course, was brushed away by the IPL, and thanks to its format, it's the IPL teams that normally dominate the CLT20. As well as picking up twice as many births as any other national league, the very nature of the IPL ensures its teams are stronger: There are currently only nine franchises (although in that respect have been between eight and 10), and thanks to their enormous wealth, they pretty much get to share out the world's best players between them.

In summation, they get preferential rights to them in the CLT20: If a player has represented both an IPL team and a team from a different country taking part in the contest (the domestic T20

merry-go-round means that some players invariably have represented several teams), the IPL franchise gets first refusal. It has to make up the other team, merely it can afford it.

As is oft the case, this issue is most acute with players from West Indies, a region stocked with talented instrumentalists, but too short and lightly populated to match the lucrative salaries on offer in other rural areas. The result is that Kieron Pollard, Dwayne Bravo and Sunil Narine are competing in this year's tournament for their IPL teams rather than for Trinidad and Tobago, which is the land of their nativity. (Although it competes in T20 as a domestic side.)

In fact, it is surprising that Trinidad is fielding a side here at all: Its players refused to move to South Africa unless they were paid a portion of the money received by the Trinidad and Tobago Cricket Board from the IPL teams for the services of Pollard, Bravo and Narine.

Luckily, there is one field in which the teams in this year's tournament are all equal: their composition. Final year, unforgivably, Mumbai Indians were admitted to field five overseas players rather than the usual four because of a rash of injuries, a nonsense that seemed to indicate that the team was unable to discover a single fit replacement in the whole of Maharashtra.

It may be no coincidence that Mumbai went on to win that tournament, beating Royal Challengers Bangalore in the terminal. The previous year, the IPL's Chennai Super Kings got the championship and only the inaugural tournament in 2009, which was won by New South Wales Blues, hasn't featured an IPL team in the final. The absence of a finalist from the IPL hit TV ratings hard and the alteration to the format, with four IPL teams instead of triplet, was mostly in order to make certain it doesn't occur once more. This year, another all-IPL final is more than probable.

To be sure, the action over the next three weeks will probably be a great deal of play, and may unearth a new talent or two; this was the stagecoach on which both Pollard and Narine first came to wider attention. Only every bit much as the participants will be desperate to win it, and for all the scintillating feats they are sure to produce, in doing so, the CLT20 is a tournament that, as presently comprised, will always feel more like a hollow, moneymaking exercise than a legitimate cricket competition.