

The former Leeds manager is starting to find his feet at his new club, writes Dan Washburn

Wilkinson's Shanghai surprise

Every time Howard Wilkinson leaves his five-star Shanghai hotel, he thinks about Flash Gordon. Overlooking the Huangpu River, the Oriental Riverside Hotel sits in the shadow of the Pudong skyline, a scattershot vision of the future that feels about as humanistic as a set for a science-fiction movie.

One of the otherworldly skyscrapers reminds Wilkinson of the Saturday morning trips to the cinema he used to make as a child in Sheffield, England. To him, the building looks just like Flash Gordon's rocket ship. The building, and those surrounding it, look nothing like China – or at least the China he was anticipating when he arrived in Shanghai last month.

But the taxi drivers standing outside the hotel remind Wilkinson where he is, and why he is here. They recognise him and smile. Then they swing their feet at an imaginary ball and shout “*ti*”, Chinese for “kick”. They do this because they know that Wilkinson is the famous Englishman brought in to guide the Shanghai Shenhua Football Club to their second-consecutive Chinese league championship. What they may not know, thanks to a major PR gaffe by the Shenhua club, is that Wilkinson's stay in Shanghai may be over before the Chinese season even starts this fall. “I signed a three-month contract,” a relaxed and gracious Wilkinson explained, sipping a cup of green tea in his hotel lobby. “Both parties knew. There were no misunderstandings. That was perfectly clear.”

But someone obviously did not understand. In mid-February, nearly every major news service in the world was reporting the 60-year-old former Leeds United head coach had inked a three-year deal with Shenhua, attributing the news to an announcement on the club's website. Wilkinson learned of the report from his children – a daughter in Sydney, a son in New York – who wondered why dad hadn't told them he was moving to China. The following day, the very same news services said Wilkinson had backed out of the deal. And nine days after that, the story was Wilkinson was indeed headed to China, this time with what was being a called an “open contract”.

“I wasn't very pleased,” Wilkinson said. “[The initial report] wasn't true. And it all creates a perception. I got phone calls from journalists in Shanghai asking me, ‘Why have you done a U-turn?’ The speculation being that I have been delaying to up the ante, when nothing is further from the truth. I'm here to help this football club.”

The Shenhua club, who have been without a head coach since Wu Jingui resigned in January to assist China national team coach Arie Haan, express confidence they would be able to entice Wilkinson to help their football



club beyond the initial three months. But Wilkinson said he had “personal reasons” for insisting on the short stint. He declined to discuss what those personal reasons were, but said that if they did not change he would be unable to extend his stay in Shanghai. If they did change – which Wilkinson said was possible – he said he would consider staying.

Still, all the question marks concerning the Shenhua head coach position have many observers of Chinese football scratching their heads. “Only three months?” asked a puzzled Thomas Liu, assistant general manager of perennial Chinese league power Dalian Shide. “If you ask me, he can do nothing in three months. It's too short.”

Added Larry Shi, editor of sinosoc.com, an English-language site dedicated to Chinese football: “Shenhua has a tradition of having a famous foreign head coach. I think Shenhua faced very, very big pressure. At that

At least in China, Wilkinson will have no problem ignoring all the bits – good and bad – because most of it will be written in Chinese.

“Here, it's a bit of a sensory vacuum,” he said. “But I guess the games are different, because they can throw the oranges and the cabbages.”

Right now, the two-time caretaker coach for England's national side simply views himself as caretaker for Shenhua, comparing his role to that of David Pleat, acting manager at Tottenham, and Peter Reid, interim coach at Leeds last season. “It's happening in Europe increasingly,” Wilkinson said. “But we're under pressure here. We've got a lot to do in a short time.”

Wilkinson inherits a Shenhua side who bears little resemblance to the team who won the Chinese league championship just four months ago. Seven starters are missing from that squad – four off with the China's Olympic team, two playing for China's international side and one foreign player forced to sit due to a contract dispute. Under acting coach Mao Yijun, the ragged team registered five losses and no wins in eight matches this spring. Wilkinson will be on the sidelines for the remainder of the club's Asian Football Confederation Champions League games and the start of the Chinese Super League. His first test comes on Tuesday when Shenhua fly over the East China Sea to face Japanese League powerhouse Jubilo Iwata in a

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time, they had to get a coach to explain to fans and media. I think Shenhua just wanted to save face.”

Nearly a quarter-century spent coaching English football has taught Wilkinson how to deal with critics and naysayers in the press. “Don't look at the good bits. Don't look at the bad bits,” is the mantra he goes by. Wilkinson's last foray into coaching, an ill-fated stay at Sunderland from 2002 to 2003, put that creed to the test. After nearly six years away from club coaching while serving as the England FA's technical director, Wilkinson thought it time to get his “hands dirty again”.

He signed on for what he was told would be a long-term rebuilding project at the Stadium of Light. Wilkinson now calls it “the worst professional decision I've made in my life”. He was fired after the Black Cats managed just two victories in 20 matches. He was criticised for being old fashioned and out of touch with today's professional players. But his younger replacement, former Republic of Ireland boss Mick McCarthy, did just as poorly, and the Wearside boys lost their place in the Premiership.

crucial AFC Champions League showdown for Shanghai, loser of their first two tournament contests. “I got here on Sunday night [March 7] at around 10.30pm, and we started the next morning,” Wilkinson said. “It feels like much longer. Because, at the moment, one day blends into the next. And looking at the squad I've got, most of them are very inexperienced boys. We're eating and sleeping in the saddle at the moment. You have to.”

That's just the football part of it. It took Wilkinson nearly two weeks to figure out his players' names. And at practice, everything takes twice as long as he'd like it to. Coaching through a translator can be tough.

Still, Wilkinson says he's been happy with the results so far. “I don't know what the other seven are like that I haven't got, but they are great to work with,” he said of his players. “I mean, their enthusiasm, their willingness, is refreshing.”

Wilkinson has coached at every level. He has earned big salaries. He has won big trophies. He lead Leeds United to the English Premier League championship in 1992. To this day, Wilkinson remains the last English

coach to accomplish that feat. But, he says, what keeps him in the game today are the simple things. “The biggest kick I get in coaching is seeing people get better,” Wilkinson said. “I'm not here to indulge myself in some football fantasy experiment. I've been in it too long. It's about the basics. Football is not the far left contemporary art that some people like to think it is. I'm working on principles that will always hold true in football.”

Xs and Os on the pitch are one thing, however. Human beings are another thing, entirely. People from Shanghai think differently from those in Sheffield, and Wilkinson realises this more and more every day.

It took him less than a week to notice that coaching players raised with a Confucian value system can be tricky. He's got a 20-year-old player who is afraid to tell a 28-year-old teammate that he is doing something wrong – because he was taught to respect his elders. “On a football field,” Wilkinson said, “that can be a problem.”

The cultural divide can be a difficult one to cross. Shanghai Shenhua have had six foreign managers since 1996 – none has lasted longer than one year.

“So many foreign coaches, they fail in China – maybe our cultures are bumping together sometimes,” said Dalian Shide's Liu, noting his club's coach of the past four seasons, Yugoslavian Milorad Kosanovic, was successful because he took an interest in his surroundings. “He read so many books about Chinese culture. So speaking to Chinese is much easier for him. Especially for a head coach, you are a teacher. To be a successful teacher, you need to know where your students are from, what they are thinking.”

But, Liu added, even with their relatively high turnover rate, foreign coaches are still coveted by Chinese teams. The football knowledge of Chinese coaches was “too limited”, he said. Indeed, when Kosanovic recently told Dalian he was leaving the team, the Shide brass immediately began searching for “a famous head coach from Europe”.

This is a market Wilkinson would like to see more Englishmen explore. He believes football in Asia could “explode”, and hinted at a little regret that he hadn't gotten into the international coaching game earlier in his career. “I'm 60,” he said. “I'm not looking for a five-year journey. I wish I was 40. I'll go back and say to young coaches in England, ‘Forget the Third Division in England. Why don't you go and have a try out there?’”

Right now, however, Wilkinson is happy serving as England's Asian ambassador. He says it helps keep him feeling young. “We can all settle into that comfort zone,” Wilkinson said. “And at my stage in life, that's something you've got to guard against, I think. So this is personal challenge for me.”

And, who knows? Maybe everything will work out. Maybe Wilkinson will be sporting Shenhua blue this autumn. And maybe, just maybe, he'll have time to catch a glimpse of a China that doesn't remind him of the science-fiction movies of his youth.

Venkat still keeps his eyes on the ball

Alvin Sallay

After 40 years of listening to cricket's cry of “Howzat” – first as a player and then as an umpire – Srinvasaraghavan Venkataraghavan is ready to step away from the international arena, albeit a little reluctantly. If he had his way, undoubtedly he would continue to stand in the middle.

But time has caught up with India's best known umpire. Turning 59 later this month, Venkat as he is known universally among cricketing circles, says he has had to retire from the International Cricket Council's elite panel of Test umpires because of his age and not because of ability. “The Board of Control for Cricket in India says an umpire has to step down between 58 and 60. In England, the retiring age is 65 and that is why you see David Shepherd still continuing,” says Venkat, with perhaps just a hint of envy. The Tamil Nadu stalwart – he played from 1963 to 1985 – retired last month.

In town this weekend to celebrate the centenary of league cricket in Hong Kong – along with the Tamil Nadu team – Venkat is as watchful as ever when the *Sunday Morning Post* caught up with him.

The burning question is what is his views on Sri Lankan off-spinner Muttiah Muralitharan. Is Murali a chucker or not, we ask Venkat. He is well qualified to answer as in his playing days, Venkat too was an off-spinner and as he has stood on plenty of occasions when Murali has been bowling.

“It is a touchy subject and very controversial. I don't want to comment too much at the moment because I want to see what action the ICC is going to take over Murali. But I can reveal that during my tenure as an umpire, I have reported quite a few players for chucking and Murali was one of them. This was much before he was called in Australia. Of course, the ICC cleared him after that,” he says.

The champion Sri Lanka bowler was reported by ICC match referee Chris Broad at the end of the last month's home series against Australia. Broad believes that Murali's controversial “doosra” delivery was suspect.

Venkat is guarded. He does not want to fan the controversy. “The ICC has got their hands full,” is all he adds. Venkat does not want to dwell on this topic, even though he has now stepped out of the ambit of the ICC.

Venkat and the rest of the cricketing



Former Test umpire Venkat is in town this weekend to celebrate the centenary of league cricket in Hong Kong. Photo: K. Y. Cheng

“I remember walking out for the first time as an umpire in a Test and Alec Stewart was alongside me. I told Alec ‘I played against your father Mickey’ and he couldn't believe it”

world will leave it up to the ICC to decide Murali's fate scientifically. Last Wednesday, Murali underwent comprehensive tests – for the second time in his career – at the University of Western Australia. He bowled five overs strapped with reflective markers and watched by 12 high-speed cameras. His fate now lies on the outcome of a computer analysis.

Perhaps this is all for the best with Murali on the verge of overhauling Courtney Walsh as the highest Test wicket-taker. Walsh's record is 519. Australian leg-spinner Shane Warne has got 517 wickets while Murali has 513. But the latter is tipped to reach the record mark first as Australia's next series is some time away while Sri Lanka tour Zimbabwe soon.

A computer can see what the human eye can only believe happened. Even Venkat admits this is so. “No one is infallible. I have made decisions that while not glaring blunders, might have been mistakes. Fortunately for me, my strike rate is around 94.

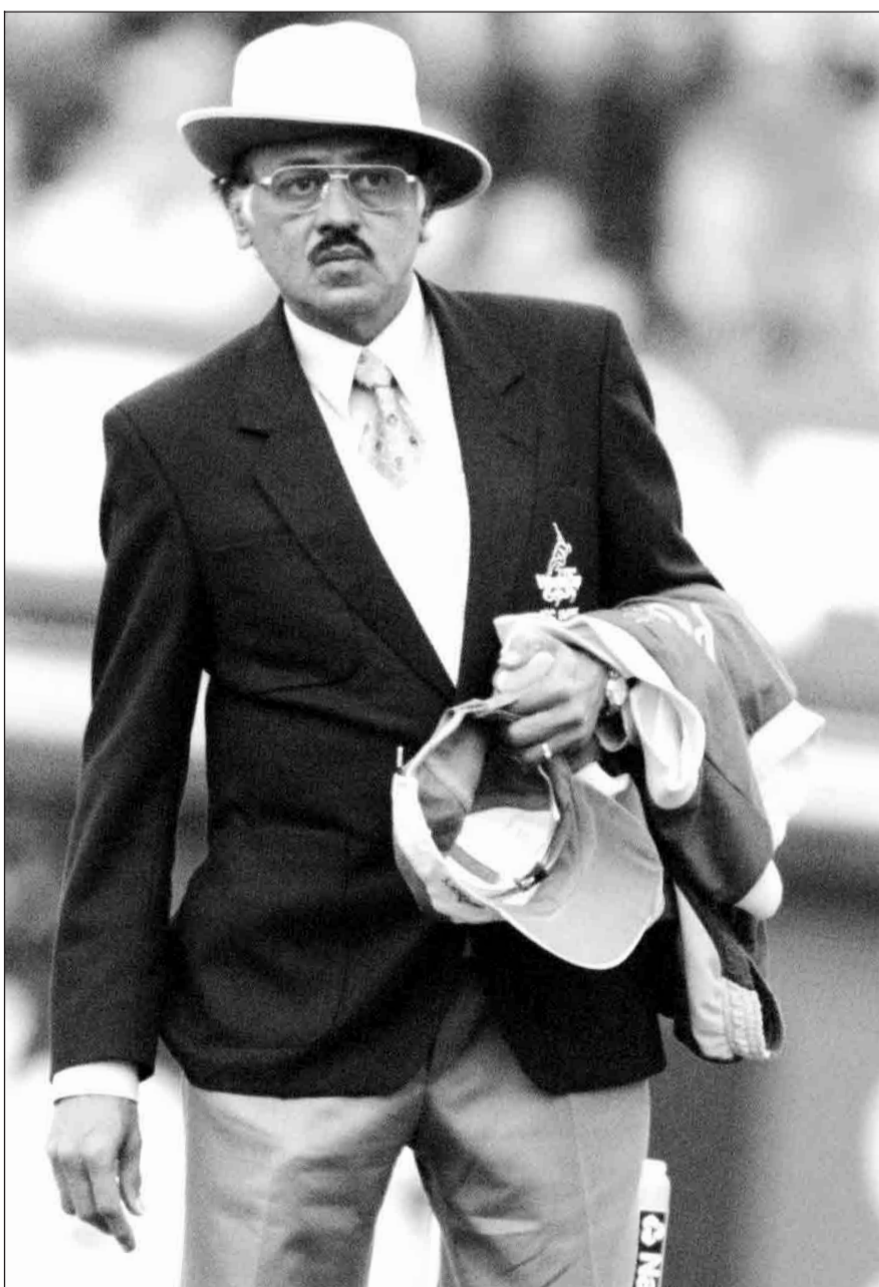
That is for every 100 decisions I take, I have got 93 or 94 right.”

Umpiring is a fine art where decisions must be made instantly. Venkat recounts how even the television pundits were caught out. “This was during a series in Australia and Channel Nine had an impressive lineup of commentators, among them Tony Greig, Ian Chappell, Keith Stackpole and Bill Lawrie. I bumped into them the night before one day's play and I asked them, the next time they commented on the umpire's decision, to commit themselves before the slow-motion replay. They all agreed. When I met them at the end of the day's play, I asked how they had fared. Tony [Greig] told me that he had tried four times and had been wrong on all four occasions. Ian said he tried three times and got it only right once while the other two didn't open their mouths,” recounted Venkat.

Venkat was part of India's Famous Four spinners – Bishen Singh Bedi, Erapalli Prasanna and Bhagwat Chandrasekhar – during his Test career which spanned 57 Tests from 1964 to 1984. He made his debut as a 19-year-old against New Zealand and after an on-off career (having to compete against the rest of the spinning quartet for a place) he bowed out at the age of 38 against Pakistan in 1983-84.

“It was a golden era for spinners. I don't think it will ever happen again because present day cricketers lack the hard work ethic. Spin is all about hard work. It is all about being able to bowl a good length all the time,” said Venkat who took 156 Test wickets in his career.

Venkat captained India on five occa-



Venkat may have retired, but he's still keenly interested in the game. Photo: Empics

sions, including four Tests on the 1979 tour of England. He also led India at the inaugural World Cup in 1975 and then in 1979. He was a world class fielder and was a specialist in the gully position where he took most of his 44 catches.

He made his umpiring Test debut in India's 1992-93 home series against Eng-

land at Eden Gardens. “Graham Gooch was captain and Keith Fletcher was the manager of that side. I remember walking out for the first time as an umpire in a Test and Alec Stewart was alongside me. I told Alec ‘I played against your father Mickey’ and he couldn't believe it. I could feel the whole perception of the team changing when

they knew the umpire was a former player himself.”

The advent of slow-motion replays has placed umpires under the spotlight in the past decade or more. But Venkat says his past experience as a player helped him a great deal in making decisions. “I made my decisions as I saw it. There is more pressure on the umpires now made worse by the fact that there are instant replays at the ground. The third umpire helps but still there is one area of concern which I hope can be addressed in some way.”

Venkat is talking about the delivery pitched outside the leg stump. “I wish there is a way and means to let umpires know of the ball pitched outside the leg stump. For as the law stands now, a batsman can't be given out to such a delivery as the theory is that every batsman has a blind spot on the legside. It is very difficult to make a decision based on whether the ball was pitched outside leg. Say a bowler is bowling at 90 miles per hour. This means the ball reaches the batsman in less than 0.4 seconds. We have to watch out for the no ball too and this leaves us very little time to judge if the ball was pitched outside the leg stump.”

Apart from this area of concern, Venkat feels cricket has got it right as far as the third umpire is concerned. The third umpire can be asked to adjudicate in run-outs, stumpings, hit-wicket and boundaries. “But most recently, they can be referred to in a case of a bounce ball, where the batsman hits the ball into the ground first before it is caught by a fielder.”

The third umpire has alleviated some of cricket's difficulties. But with decisions having to be fraction fast, umpires are always at the centre of controversy. Venkat knows that all too well. “The thing about umpiring is you have to try and be correct and to be seen as consistent. The batsmen have to be convinced they are out.”

Forty years after travelling the world as player, manager and umpire, Venkat has finally called it a day.

“He has stood the test of time in an exceptionally demanding profession,” says Malcolm Speed, ICC chief executive. “His integrity and passion for cricket are of the highest order and he has helped ensure that the spirit of the game remains intact for those that will follow.”

Added Venkat: “I thoroughly enjoyed it. The game has given me so many great memories and I'm grateful for that.” You can tell that he will miss his time out in the middle.