

The Virtual Wisdener

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The Newsletter of the Wisden Collectors' Club

This is a special edition of the newsletter as I have devoted the entire content — with the exception of two pages, one of which is 'The Tea Interval' which I believe gives you a chuckle or two — to your responses to my statement a few weeks ago - Why is the England Test team so awful?

I know a lot of you might feel that there are constant themes running through the views expressed, but I felt that as many of you as possible deserved to be heard. We all care passionately about our game, we love it. The vast majority of us do not like the way it is going and we feel marginalised and ignored. The suits only want the younger element who will pay to get into The Hundred and then sing and dance their way through two hundred balls of lager-induced slogging and the TV companies will show us endless shots of people dressed as cabbages, with three beers in each hand and two more balanced on their head....Prancing around like football fans.

One of the responses comments on the endless TV shots of supporters, well I am not sure if anyone noticed but there was a T20 game the other night and I assure you I was doing the man-thing and flicking around the channels and as usual with 1645 to choose from I couldn't find a single programme to watch. Brides from Alaska nearly got my attention, but then I found *'How the Third Reich manipulated Coffee output from South America: My Wife left me for a 102-year-old shepherd: What not to say on a Third Date: Long Lost Pets - Where are they now?.....'*

After much searching I rested on the T20 (for about three minutes I promise you) and what did I see? –In the crowd two men were sitting, drinking and in the two seats directly in front of them sat a man who looked a little tipsy and next to him a woman was resting her hand on his shoulder as she stood, facing and chatted to the two men behind. As she leaned a little further forward the seated man to her left turned his head to her bosom and in what only can be described as a neanderthal act, sort of 'snuggled into

If you are receiving this newsletter for the first time, I hope you don't mind receiving it and I hope you enjoy it. I apologise if it is intrusive in any way. You are receiving it because you have purchased from Wisdenworld and this newsletter is hopefully something a little different and not too salesy.

and maybe had a little bite of the' said bosom. The camera hastily moved away and not a word was said by anyone for at least 10 seconds — which in my research is an all-time SKY TV record as we all know the average commentator loves nothing better than the sound of his/her own voice.

Having SKY TV meant that I could actually re-wind the scene and I did, I called Lorraine in to have a look and her words were simple, "I suppose after all the beer he was a little peckish."

I am looking forward to the next Have I Got News For You which will hopefully show the clip to the world, but then the man and the woman will probably be interviewed, then get their own reality TV programme — 'Bosoms are Us' and before you know it both will be offering insight on Radio Four on the Covid Pandemic.

I hope you enjoy reading through the responses, there are some exceptionally insightful observations and as always I would welcome any further comments, responses or thoughts.

New Zealand is a tremendous side and for the way they played against both England and India they deserve to be World Champions. When people talk about the demise of the touring schedule, how the counties never played their full teams against touring sides, how they treated the match as an inconvenience and how (allegedly) supporters didn't go to watch — well I look at what England did in those two Tests. England totally disrespected the New Zealand side, we treated them as an inconvenience because like the county that omitted its best players in a tour match because Yorkshire, Middlesex or Surrey were next up in a competitive game, we see Australia as are next 'proper' game and any other side is an irrelevance. Shame on the people who run my game!

It looks like we are back on track for the further easing of the rules and to celebrate this I will be sending out an email in a few days that I hope you will like.

To one and all, please continue to stay safe and to keep well.

Bill and the Furmedge girls

This newsletter will be sent to 8,525 people and the Wisden Collectors' Club now has 3,068 members.

Why are England so awful?

An indictment of the ECB

by Billy Crawford @BillCrawford87

Remember the term ‘fortress Edgbaston’? Well, the best way to undermine a stronghold is to chip away at its foundations until the whole thing collapses. Billy Crawford gets to the root of the problem ...

Cast your mind back 16 years to September 13, 2005. Thousands upon thousands of people lined Oxford Street and crammed into Trafalgar Square to greet the England cricket team. Such was the clamour for the national summer game that 20,000 people had been turned away from Old Trafford for the last day of the 3rd Test and record numbers of viewers tuned in to watch on Channel 4.

English cricket was on top of the world, the centre of the national consciousness.

Since that day, however, the ECB has set about the systematic destruction of cricket in this country. If that feels too strong a statement, then let us take a look at the evidence.

The last day of that Ashes series at The Oval was the final time that the England team played a home Test on free-to-air TV. Since that beautiful moment when Michael Vaughan lifted the urn on a warm September evening the national team has never been available for the whole nation to watch.

While it is true that the deal to sell the television rights to Sky was agreed at the end of the previous summer, the ECB could have easily anticipated the bounce in interest that was coming. At the moment the deal was signed England had just won 7 home Test matches in one summer. The national football team had just failed at another major tournament, Euro 2004 and the ECB's new invention, the Twenty20 Cup, was proving a roaring success.

However, rather than see this as the beginning of English cricket reclaiming its place as our national summer sport and perhaps reaching heights of public interest not seen since the 1950s, the ECB decided this was the best moment to place all home cricket behind a paywall. It was a staggeringly bad decision and it was motivated by the one thing the ECB is always motivated by, acquiring more money.

The ECB followed this decision by massively hiking ticket prices for home Test matches, to cash in further on the team's popularity. A vast swath of cricket's potential viewers were instantly priced out of attending or viewing the game. As a teenage boy growing up in a low income family, myself and my mother had always attended one Test match every

Those of you who have patiently and not-so-patiently read my constant digs and negative comments about the England cricket team will have received my email recently asking ‘Why are England so awful’ and not been very surprised. The question came out of frustration and anger and I have to say that the number of responses I received was the most by a mile that any question or quiz that I have sent out has ever received.

I did not qualify my question or sugar-coat what I felt. It was not meant to undermine the performance of the New Zealand team that for both Test matches were simply far better than the England team. Thank you to everyone who responded and as always, a big apology to the far greater number whose comments I have not included.

The views expressed are from genuine England fans and genuine cricket fans. These views are not given space in any other publication that I am aware of, which like the current England team, is bloody awful. So, I apologise if a lot of opinion or comments follow a similar or very similar pattern, but the writers need to know that what they have to say is just as important as someone from the ECB who spends most of the day counting the cash.

I would like to thank Rob Atkinson who sent me the link to [The Full Toss](#) to the article ‘[An indictment of the ECB](#)’ by Billy Crawford and to Mr. Crawford for allowing us to reprint it in full.

summer. After 2004 we did not go together for another 11 years.

These short-sighted decisions, as well as a shocking lack of engagement with state schools, have led to English cricket becoming a sport for the elite. Of the 11 that won back the Ashes at The Oval in 2005, 8 were products of state schools. Last summer, against Pakistan at Southampton, England fielded an XI with only two state educated players.

When the ECB discuss inclusion and diversity in English cricket it is worth remembering these facts.

The chance to inspire the next generation through a successful England team would also be missed. Sadly, Andrew Strauss' side, the first England team to ascend to number one in the world rankings, were never available to watch for the majority of the population.

Following the disintegration of this team, the ECB then set about, whether by accident or agenda, to do everything possible to make the England Test side less successful. 4-day cricket, the nursery for future Test players, was marginalised to the spring and autumn of the season to fit in yet more and more of the short form of the game.

This, as anyone who watches the Test side can see, has led to cricketers being picked for England who simply do not have the technique to survive in Test cricket. Jonny Bairstow, for instance, does not have a defensive game capable of dealing with the swinging ball. Dominic Sibley may be a successful player but he has one of the worst techniques of any opener England have selected.

4-day cricket has also been marginalised for spectators. The ECB regularly schedules Championship games during the week and outside of the school holidays, making it almost impossible for working aged people and young families to attend. It is hard to imagine this is accidental. We are incessantly told that prioritisation of short form cricket is needful because people are simply not interested in the County Championship anymore. However, this is a self-fulfilling prophecy. By pushing the long form game to the margins and making it unappealing and impractical to watch they have created a fall in spectatorship and viewership. It is then easy to claim that the Championship is in decline whilst obscuring the reasons for that decline.

By doing this, the ECB have created the rationale for their worst invention of all, The Hundred. I will not waste the reader's time listing all that is wrong about this competition. If you have read this far then I will likely be preaching to the converted. All that is worth saying is that the ECB have underestimated quite how much they have alienated their core supporter base. The strength of feeling among fans of the game is something that the ECB clearly does not grasp. We have been treated with utter disdain by the very people who we trust to keep our game safe. The press releases and the quotes from the ECB and their minions that made it clear we are of no interest to them will not be easily forgotten. The comparison with football's European Super League is very apt. We are cricket's legacy fans and we are prepared to hold the ECB to account.

The situation that we find ourselves in is primarily down to the catastrophic mismanagement and staggering hubris of Colin Graves, the ECB's former chairman and Tom Harrison, its current CEO. Between them they have achieved the destruction of English cricket with the same effectiveness that Shane Warne and Glenn McGrath once destroyed English batting. They have squandered the ECB's cash reserves on the hated Hundred with the enthusiasm and recklessness of a compulsive gambler at a Las Vegas casino. While Graves is now gone, replaced by the thankfully more level headed Ian Watmore, Harrison sadly remains.

Recently he has overseen the disastrous rotation policy that destroyed England's chances of a memorable series win in India. Let us be crystal clear about this, rotation was never primarily about protecting players mental health in a Covid bubble, it was about genuflecting to the IPL and the power of the BCCI.

Players were openly rested from a crucial Test series for their country so that they would be fit and fresh to take part in a full 8-week IPL. Queen and country became subject to Kolkata Knight Riders.

Harrison's pre-pandemic rumoured salary of £800,000 a year also sticks in the throat for supporters of counties for whom that amount of money could mean the difference between solvency and bankruptcy. Each county only receives £1.3 million a year from the ECB out of the current TV broadcast deal and this is barely enough for them to survive.

All of this is before we even begin discussing Harrison's staggering mismanagement of the Ollie Robinson Twitter fiasco. By announcing a "zero tolerance policy" on any form of online misdemeanour, with no clarification of what that might constitute, Harrison opened up English cricket to the Pandora's box of the easily offended. The Twitterati scoured the internet for anything that anyone in the game might ever have said that would be unacceptable in the modern age.

Wisden even stooped to the depths of mining tweets made by players when they were still legally children. It is hard to believe that this witch hunt did not contribute to England's pitiful performance against New Zealand at Edgbaston this week.

No support appears to have been offered for Robinson's wellbeing either. Whatever one thinks of his teenage indiscretions, there has to be some level of support offered for the mental health of a young man thrown to the wolves by his employers. Protecting fragile people in the eye of a media storm is a lesson that our nation was meant to have learnt from recent events. Tom Harrison obviously has not heard of the phrase "be kind".

The ECB is on dangerous ground with those of us that love cricket. It is worth remembering that in the same way that the "big 6" Premier League clubs may well have lost many of their fans for good if they had followed through with their ESL plans, the ECB may find that the loyalty of cricket's public is not unwavering.

If they continue to marginalise the forms of the game that we love, treat fans with disdain and contribute to weaker and weaker England teams then many of us will simply stop supporting.

We will still follow our counties and it is hard to believe we can ever truly turn our back on the England team. However, once true supporters become alienated it is hard to win them back and eventually this will hurt the ECB in the only area that they genuinely care about, their finances.

By the time they realise this it may already be too late. Change is needed now.

The Full Toss - An indictment of the ECB

Over to Wisdener readers....

Steven Carlos: I respect your opinion Bill and mostly agree with it. Easy to say when I'm an Australian! Some of the batting techniques are horrible. Very few want to bat for a long time. This is how they are bought up these days. The junior coaches (and I have heard them) tell the kids to 'play your shots, don't block, hit it hard, it's ok if you get out'! We have the same problem here. Some of our Aussie boys are no better. At least you have Stokes, Archer and some useful wicketkeeper options to return.

Brian Armstrong: In answer to the question, I think there's depth in the seam bowling and the main problem is top order batting. Bumble mentioned one word in commentary on Saturday which I think is significant - TECHNIQUE. Watch New Zealand batsmen and most of the Indians and they bat in an orthodox manner. No weird stances or back-lifts. Only Root among England's top 5 can be described in this way. The other major factor is GREED for money amongst administrators with the consequences detailed below.

- *...too much international cricket — once the summer programme starts players get little chance to play in A four-day county match and to get time in the middle to rebuild confidence.

- *...too few breaks in the international fixture list and unhealthy obsession with The Ashes. Apart from Ashes Tests, our strongest eleven rarely play partly because selectors are trying to keep them fresh to play the Aussies and partly because they would get stale or injured playing all forms of international cricket and the IPL.

- *...domestic fixture list — to accommodate the T20 and now the Hundred four-day cricket is in April and May when wickets are seaming and medium paced bowlers dominate. It is hard for top order batsmen to play long innings and build confidence. They then play white ball only cricket for several weeks before going back to four-day games. No consistency.

- *...too much focus on one-day cricket resulting in a lack of patience in the red ball game (e.g., Bracey bowled off the bottom edge sweeping too early in his innings, and Crawley and Lawrence playing expansive shots too soon)

- *...batsmen picked too early in their career on potential rather than achievement. I read a while back that batsmen rarely have a Test average higher than their first class average and those with the latter below 35 rarely succeed at Test level. Youngsters are less able to escape poor runs of scores than their older peers
- *..."the Nasser effect" — over-analysing and chopping and changing little aspects of technique. Batsmen need clear heads and rely on muscle memory (the best shots are instinctive). They can't afford to be thinking where to put their feet or if their backlift is straight as the bowler is running up. Coach's need to know the player's technique and spot unconscious changes that have crept in (I once played with a guy who didn't

realise he was moving his bottom hand down the bat handle until it was filmed and played back to him) and then work to put them right in the nets.

There is also the problem of a lack of quality spin bowling due to the domestic fixture list issue I have highlighted. As well as meaning we don't develop top quality spinners it means that batsmen don't get enough practice against decent spin. Whilst leggies do well in T20 it is by using a style of bowling that wouldn't get wickets in the longer format.

Jonathan Cousens: Personally, I don't think the England Test team is so awful, it is the idiots at the ECB that are awful. (polite word for them). All this rubbish of the 100, yet we are playing the no 1 Test team in the world and we rest half the team. If we had the experience of Bairstow, Woakes and Buttler, this would help bring along the young players in the batting line up. Instead, six of the top seven are inexperienced and anyone with a brain cell can see this is not going to work. Instead, all the brain cells are working on the 100, and making the ECB money.

Also, it is time to drop either one of Broad and Anderson. Yes, their record is incredible, but Anderson has not been incredible for a while. Leach should have played, but instead our spin bowling attack was Root and Lawrence. Again, it is the idiots running the team that haven't got a clue.

Ken Piesse: Sometimes Bill you have to give credit for the other side showing up. In 10 days NZ will be the new Test Champions and there is no dishonour in losing to the world's best team (*Ken's comment came before NZ defeated India...Bill*).

David Main: In the last test match the England bowlers did not pitch the ball up as far as the New Zealand bowlers. Also the England batsmen struggled with the swinging ball. Would it not be an idea for England to employ some coaches who could advise the players of their shortcomings?

Giles Falconer: My view is that the English team underperforms due to a number of factors

- 1:-The structure of the domestic cricket season — we have increasingly marginalised 'red ball' cricket to the bookends of the season, so players have less chance to learn the skills needed for Test cricket (I'm thinking of both batting for long periods and learning for spin bowlers. This to me is the key problem in developing good Test players.

- 2: - Linked to point 1 - the concentration on white ball, esp. T20 cricket. Great fun (I was at Canterbury watching Kent score 236-3 vs Essex last evening), but how similar was it to a 5 day Test at Mumbai or Sydney? How much would the Test players on show at Canterbury - Lawrence & Crawley, for example — have gained from it as regards batting at the Gabba etc?

- 3: - The structure of the management — the chief coach should not also be the chief selector — as Mark Butcher pointed out, the players have to be able to confide in the coach and trust him; will they do that if

4: - We tend to choose the best player as Captain, even if that leads to reducing his performance. Root is the latest example of that. Maybe we should rethink this?

5: - The idea that a player (like Woakes) should be rotated vs NZ despite hardly playing a game in 12 months, is bizarre. If fit, he should have played. (Ditto Buttler... Throwing an inexperienced player like Bracey in as a keeper was a poor selection.)

However, I wouldn't say the England Test team is 'awful' — it currently underperforms (as does the English football team, or the English rugby team) but let's not get overly negative! We are currently 4th in the ICC Test rankings, and only 1 point behind 3rd placed Australia.

Cliff Williams: Thank you for the opportunity to talk about the state of English cricket. As usual with me I am going to look at this from a different angle. I see no point in wasting time on the professional game as they go their own way as per Joe Roots' continuing comments and the fact that the ECB long ago sold themselves in pursuit of money. They will not change! They are presiding over the demise of our beloved county cricket shamelessly! Look what this has left us with: Test match players with laughable technique and total inability to build innings consistently [are they embarrassed by their performance????]. A batting coach who seriously suggests that they will be helped by playing in the 100.

I would like to talk about so called grassroots cricket. School cricket [outside the private sector] where it still hangs on is all slog and hope designed to get it over with as soon as possible. Club volunteers do the job of the unwilling teaching profession but again concentrate on the short form of the game. Children do not play pick-up games of cricket any more. They have been brainwashed into only playing in the nets or in matches consequently they are missing out on the dozens maybe hundreds of batting and bowling opportunities of previous generations. To consider if this is important think about the pictures one constantly sees of children in the sub-continent playing on any old rough ground. The standard of coaching in state sector schools is so poor as to be retrogressive in many cases though it tends to be better in clubs as the volunteers are willing to give up their time to get qualified and have their own experiences to fall back on.

Slow play is ruining the game at all levels and this not only results in less overs bowled in Test matches but in grass roots games it means either longer matches — which causes disaffection in families and players — or means a shortening of the cricket by deducting overs and therefore more lost opportunities to develop. What is needed is a return to 20 overs an hour. Cut out the drinks breaks unless very hot and the needless talking and field changes. NB: 20 overs an hour is still 3 minutes per over!

There is loads more I could say, but finally despite my misunderstood views on women's' cricket previously. I should like to say how disgusted I am to see the Test match v India being played on a used pitch. Having watched some of it, the surface is a disgrace and an insult to both teams.

Iain Ramsay: You should try supporting South Africa.

Alan Harris: I think that one of the biggest factors is the complete mismanagement of cricket, and the apparent utter disdain here is for Test cricket. I live in the middle of Norfolk and so watching county cricket is a non-starter for me. I want to watch Test cricket and I find that the shorter forms of the game should be called something else. As a great example, consider the utter fiasco of this year's "Hundred": this is not CRICKET! The first class game is shunted into April and May and September, which means that batsmen never have the option of playing on a good wicket.

Steven Woolven: My thoughts on the state of English Cricket from a County Championship/Test Match point of view. When all is going well problems are forgotten. The County 3/4 day game went downhill when Test players were removed from the County scene as 'they did not need to practice by playing County matches any more'. They were excellent cricketers and did not need to hone their skills by actually playing cricket — a fallacy that seems to be coming home to roost.

In the past there was always a week (for a County game) in between Test matches for players to regain their confidence. This has been lost to the power of TV money and playing as much televised cricket as possible. Counties used to play the Tourists with an incentive to beat them rather than just putting out an experimental team. Playing proper warm-up games on Tours also used to be the norm — to acclimatise to all the conditions (both pitches and climate) but this seems to be deemed unnecessary these days.

Team bonding is difficult if the starting eleven is constantly changed for reasons other than fitness. It is good to see batsmen displaying the full range of shots but the emphasis on short-form one day cricket has led to the prevalence of cricketers not being able to knuckle-down where necessary — we see that in tail enders who 'have to score a six and then be out' rather than supporting an established batsman at the other end.

Interest has also waned since you no longer have any sense of purpose to the season — when games are played, matches started, or even, why some teams play games in a round of matches at different times or out of sequence. I suspect that this is due to TV schedules. I accept that ECB money (via TV money) is important to the County game but it is still the tail wagging the dog.

Alex Littlefair: In my view this can be related back to the sky sell out in 2005. Since then ECB have done what TV wants when TV wants. Now that that has had the effect of shrinking the audience for cricket a new

strikes me as a bit rich. They should look at themselves and how they have got rich selling out the game.

I feel very sorry for Joe Root. However, he is in affect a highly paid spokesman for the current state of cricket

Richard Mills: Are the England cricket team an embarrassment? — granted they are not very good, but then England aren't good at a number of sports and it doesn't cause the upset that the cricket team does.

Having said that the following points come to mind-

1) The England team play too many Tests, seeming to move onto one series from another with little time to rest and work on problem areas.

2) The number of series when allied to Covid has meant that England have been forced to use players who wouldn't have previously got a game.

3) The technique of a number of batsmen is sadly lacking — what ever happened to adopting a conventional stance and playing straight.

4) Players are praised too much when they do well and over criticised when they do badly. Crawley played one good innings and since then has averaged 10, he was even one of Wisden's cricketers of the year — based on one good innings.

5) I, along with most people, criticise the current England batting line up, but even though I watch a lot of county cricket I cannot offer any other standout candidates to replace those currently in the team.

6) Bowling - are Anderson and Broad past it or nearly past it ? Should we go for younger players. Spin bowling has long been a problem to England - Laker, Swan but who after that. The focus has been on the batting, but is the bowling good enough.

7) County Cricket - hasn't helped by being restricted to early and late in the season, but surely the better batsmen are spotted early in their careers and should be given special coaching. Pope is an example, going into the England setup early, but seems to lack many of the basics required.

8) The state of English cricket is a constant cause of debate and complaint — think back to the number of

There are too many Test Matches - losing doesn't hurt as much as it should because there will be another one along in a minute.

It seems that the only Tests that England really care about are those against Australia

Prioritising of the one day side ahead of the Test side — a clear strategy to win the ODI World Cup but nothing similar for Tests

Not picking the best possible side for each game — why, for example, was Jos Buttler playing 2020 for Lancashire last week and not Test Cricket for England? Picking some players too soon and persisting with them when they are clearly out of form — eg Zak Crawley who averages 19 if you discount his one big score

The other side of that coin is rejecting some players too soon, eg Ben Duckett after 4 Tests

Not playing centrally contracted players, especially batsmen, in County Championship games, where they could work on the skills they will need in Test Cricket

Allowing selection to be influenced by social media - Ollie Robinson and why Joe Clarke will never be picked.
Neil Nelson

players used in the 70s — 90s — not all of them were wonderful — far from it.

9) Schools , beyond public schools, play very little cricket hence the pool of talent is becoming smaller and smaller, perhaps cricket just isn't a major sport any more.

In conclusion I think it is fair to expect more from the England cricket team — ideally a world ranking of no worse than third — at the present time they lack players of sufficiently high standard in a number of positions, but it isn't the first time I've known this to happen. If England pick their best eleven including Stokes, Butler and a spinner they can hold their own with most teams, they lack depth in talent, but again this isn't new.

Bob Pook: Firstly, the ECB has for too long made first class cricket the lowest priority, reducing the number of matches to an absolute minimum and scheduling them for the spring and autumn. Summer is taken up with 20/20 rubbish purely for financial reasons. Finance should not be the ECB's overriding objective.

Secondly, the ECB has no incentive to make any changes which would improve the England team's performance as all the home tests would still be sell outs even if every game was lost. As long as lots of money is made who cares? It

seems the only important contest for most the test venue crowds is who can make the longest beer mug snake.

John Swain: I have been following the England Test cricket team since 1950 and have witnessed many disasters in that time, usually concerning the fragile batting! I noted that Zak Crawley was featured on the front cover of the 2021 *Playfair Cricket Annual* and that is often seen as the proverbial kiss of death for a player in the forthcoming season! Apart from his brilliant innings of 267, he is averaging under 20 as a top order batsman. Other highly rated players are simply not reproducing their county form at international level and someone like Ollie Pope continues to flatter to deceive, with brief cameos which do little to win important Test matches.

The opening pair of Burns and Sibley are the least technically sound batsmen on the Test circuit and seldom give the side a decent start.

None other than former England great, Ted Dexter, was quoted on *The Cricketer's Letters* page June 2021), saying that of the new batsmen, only Crawley has class. Well, I would go further and add that only skipper Joe Root is up to the required top level. Changes will undoubtedly follow and England will

And that is only the batting! The bowling has been satisfactory, but it will soon be time for Anderson and Broad to make way for younger seamers. The prospects for the upcoming Ashes are hardly encouraging, but, hopefully, the selections will be more appropriate for the conditions. The team at

Lord's and Edgbaston always appeared to a batter and a bowler short, a situation not helped in having a second-rate wicket-keeper.

I don't expect miracles, but this England outfit is only, **at best, a mid-table team.**

Peter Cordiner: The situation facing England in Test matches was predictable from the time the decision was made to prioritise White ball cricket over First Class. First class cricket has been shunted to the beginning and end of the season and for the two peak months of the year there is no First Class CC played. England have continued to enjoy success at home due to the decision to leave grass on Test pitches and the continued use of the egregious DUKE ball. This was to help Anderson and Broad and it certainly did. However, this was merely papering over the cracks and nothing was done to progress batsman most of who found playing the Duke ball on grassy pitches difficult.

I have been watching Test Cricket since 1961 and have never seen to ball swing and seam as much in England as in the last 7 or 8 years. A batsman in England now needs more luck than skill and judgement to survive. But while England were winning everyone seemed happy. The situation abroad was different as India have recently demonstrated when spinning pitches that were substandard were

routinely prepared. England's batsmen failed to cope with the spinning ball and could not build scores. The balance between bat and ball is out of alignment. Flat pitches are still sometimes produced and the result is dull cricket. However, when many tests barely last three days something must be wrong. First class County Cricket should be abolished. White ball cricket played by a mixture of full-time and part-time players would make all counties profitable. First class cricket should be regional. Five areas: North, Midlands, South East, South West and London would play each other twice in four day matches as preparation for Test Cricket. This would mirror the situation in Australia and hopefully produce better

Nice to hear a passionate voice for Test cricket. I respect your view of the game as well as opinions that white ball is taking over and that players cannot deal with the pressure of test match conditions. Although New Zealand and India seem to cope with all the above.

Are their organisations differently set up?

Can I paraphrase? Why is the Australian team so awful? For the same reasons — except Tim Paine as captain has been a breath of fresh air.

William Rutledge

players technically able to cope with test cricket. I understand that some players may have to decide whether they are going to be red or white ball cricketers. As things are now some are doing both but often play below their ability in Tests.

Alternatively the present situation could continue.

Matters will get worse until so few people are prepared to attend test matches that they become unprofitable and Test cricket in England dies.

The situation is dire.

Graeme Hughes: I totally agree with your comment. Bill. I cannot blame any player for trying to earn the most they can during a short career as a top professional. But I can blame the ECB for showing a total disregard for the paying public, either at the ground or via over priced television providers, who play out large sums of money to watch third choice players whilst better players are rested. Rested after being paid a fortune playing in T20 competitions around the world. If the ECB wish to rest players, then play less matches so that the standard can be maintained. Additional I am not convinced that the players are greatly interested in some of the

international matches, it would appear that only matches against India or Australia are of interest to them.

Graham King: Personally I think the county cricket structure in the UK is all wrong, too many teams, too many players, too much mediocre cricket being played so the jump to international test match cricket is a big one.

Having lived down under for 20 years now I've witnessed the Australian state (six) Sheffield Shield

format where more onus is on quality not quantity of cricket being played to be able to select a national test team from.

New Zealand are a very good side. Also England were without Stokes (have they made him Prime Minister over there yet)?, Archer and Buttler three of their best players in my eyes.

Home advantage as always will be huge and if Archer isn't back fit in time I think there will be a huge weight on Anderson and Broad to stay fit and last the Ashes tour.

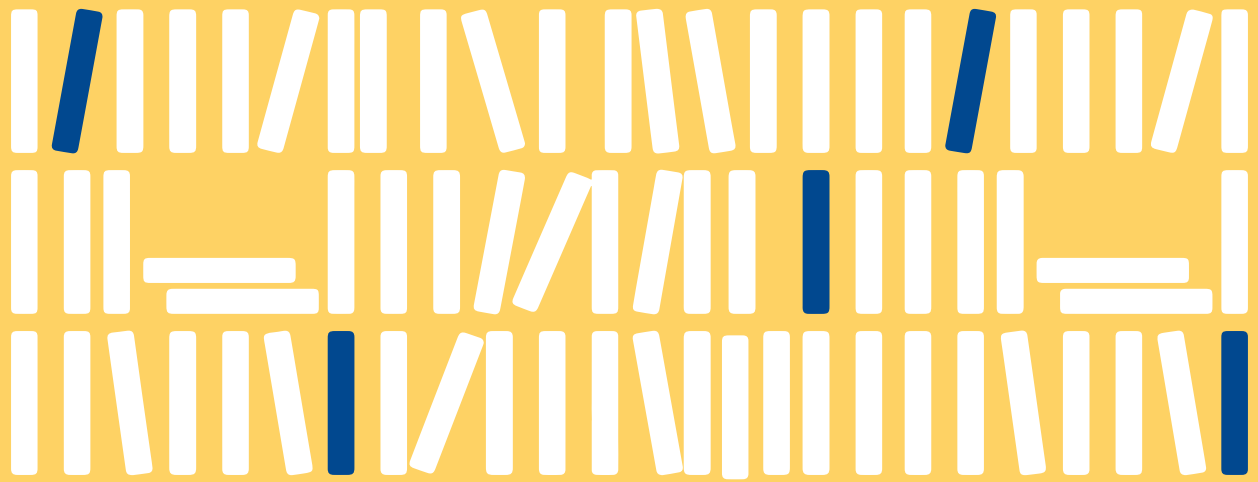
Tim Hart: I was very disappointed England didn't accept NZ's challenge in the first test, one that could have resulted in a win and therefore avoid a series



Anderson and Broad - is it time for one or both to go?



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Is what happened.

It was doable and for England to chicken out shows you the lack of confidence they have and their fear of losing.

Mindset is important. Players that win matches, tend to have little fear...Ben Stokes our latest. They also have the inclination to practice more when not playing.

It is a shame that the England players tend to play very little championship cricket. Never used to be like that. Too much rest time, now. Players played nearly all the time and why not Practice makes perfect and England are far from perfect.

I'm sure the planners can organise all competitions so that England players have the opportunity to play at least half of their counties matches. Administrators need to step up.

England players need to step up.

It is a game to be enjoyed, not feared.

COME ON ENGLAND!

Mike Hall: The one day game has slowly been destroying test cricket for decades. I believe that the 100 (possibly the most ill-conceived one day

competition ever devised) will be the final nail in the coffin of Test Cricket.

The central contracts make players lazy and very few of them have much fight in them.

There are other reasons too:

Joe Root is not a natural captain, he is far too nice. I would like to see him ticking his players off when they mess up.

Too many England batsmen have a poor technique; it makes you wonder what on earth they are teaching them in the Academy's. But of course one day cricket is again to blame for this as playing tip and run does not give you the skills to play a long innings. A good technique and 100% concentration is what builds a long innings.

Getting rid of the England Selectors does not appear to have worked as going into the last two Test Matches without a recognised spinner has been an act of self-destruction. Just crazy!

I believe that the England cricket team is awful.

There are lots of reasons, but may I just focus on one.

England were widely condemned for not chasing for a win on the last day of the first Test against New Zealand and this condemnation, for me, sums up something that has crept into all sport in this country — it is the American demand that an event/ a match/a contest must have a winner.

The conversations during and following the drawn Test were focussed on the 'need' to entertain, the 'failure of England to chase' etc-drawn games are allowed in cricket. Can we please get back to understanding that when two evenly matched teams play it is absolutely fine for the game NOT to have a winner.

The whole circus around the TV coverage promotes action, it is loud and to be honest, sickening, repetitive and dull. I do not want to watch people in the crowd signalling (usually badly) a four or a six with one hand and a plastic pint of beer in the other. I want to know where the fielders are being moved to, any conversations between the fielders or bowler and captain...I want to watch what is happening on the field not the crowd. Nor do I wish to see a person in the crowd have another one-sided conversation with David Lloyd just because the person is listening to the TV commentary. It was funny the first time.

Keep the screens and crowd shots for the white ball game.

Back to my point - It was New Zealand's job to take 10 England wickets in that drawn Test, by guile, by cunning, by bowling well, fielding well and putting pressure on England - just because a team declares doesn't mean the other side have to go for the win!

Mark Hunter (aged 18)

What to do: I would bring back the County Championship as it used to be: one division (and if some counties have to merge then so be it)

I would also bring back the Minor Counties into a knock out competition like they used to in the Gillette Cup.

I was lucky enough to become a Life Member of the MCC last year but I am beginning to think I have been duped because if I cannot go to Test Matches at Lords then I probably won't go there again, how sad.

Brian Irvine: There's no reason to be a county member these days if you don't like the one day rubbish.

Hilary Richardson: We continue to pick 'promising' players who are little more than T20 sloggers. We have treated Chris Woakes, a whole-hearted trier and excellent team man unbelievably shabbily, and Jack Leach also, who appears to have gone back to permanent tea tray duty. Is it a good idea to have Chris Silverwood totally responsible for selection? I think not.

The whole approach to these two matches has been totally contemptuous of fans of the game, but ultimately who is accountable? No one.

One positive however: James

Bracey (Pictured, Below) can now join Dick Spooner and Richard Blakey as the post war England wicket keepers you can never

name on a quiz night!!

Graham Colbourne: You are absolutely right, Bill. The ECB seems to be a shambolic organisation which just follows what appears to be the latest money making fad. For years the County Championship was the bedrock of the national team, but the ECB first set out to denigrate it and then decimate it. I said at the time that central contracts would be a disaster for the first class game and I think I was right.



The county supporters now get very few opportunities to see the best players in action. The championship has been consigned to the start and rump of the season to make way for more and more ersatz cricket and its no wonder the national team is suffering. I saw my first match at first class level in 1955: it was Hampshire, my team, v the South Africans. Some of the leading players in the world were playing and there was a sell out attendance. Later that season I watched Hampshire play Stuart Surridge's excellent Surrey team with Lock, Laker, May and the Bedders. These days we are lucky to watch any players of that quality in County Championship action nor do we see the overseas tourists performing against the counties any more. I think that there is a place for over limit cricket but from being an adjunct to the season it now dominates the schedules. I quite enjoyed the old Gillette format when it included the Minor Counties. It was good to see players who one had faced in local competition taking on the pros. I realise that things have changed a lot since the fifties with the TV interests dictating a great deal of the ECB policy, but as far as I can see there is no substitute for regular participation in first class cricket if the Test Match players are to improve their performance.

Nick Gillgrass: This is one of those questions where the more you think about it the more you come up with ideas, so I have decided to be succinct.

Devaluation of the County Championship: while I accept that players had the chance to play county cricket before the Test series against New Zealand, it was sporadic at best, and there appear to be only two further opportunities for four-day cricket before the Test series against India.

Team Selection: Dom Bess (Pictured, Below) was called into the England squad for the second Test, but neither of the spinners was picked. I am a traditionalist at heart, so I believe that the five batsmen/wicket-keeper/, five bowlers should always be the way to go if at all possible. With the greatest respect to James Bracey, I have to wonder whether he was really the best wicket-keeping option?

Lack of All-Rounders: I accept that team selection was dictated by availability, but I find it difficult to believe that there was no all-rounder available to play.

Preference of one Day over five day: I understand that Eoin Morgan will have all his players available for the upcoming one day

series, but some of these players were not available for the Test series?

Lack of a Quality no 3 Batsman: I find it amazing that England have not found a no 3 batsman since Jonathan Trott. I accept that it is a specialised role as the player needs to be a quasi-opener or a quasi-middle order batsman, but England's solution appears to be to move down an opener or move up a middle-order batsman.

Technique/Coaching: I do not feel qualified to comment on these issues, but there does seem to be a need to look at the coaching that goes on in the county game and ask whether there is enough emphasis on the way to play 4 day cricket rather than the way to play 1 day cricket?

I am sure that there are a lot of other issues that can be raised, but sometimes less is more!

Richard Endacott: Here are a few thoughts as to why England generally played so poorly in the two Tests against New Zealand:

1. Play the best team available at all times having consulted players individually as to whether they consider themselves physically & mentally fit to play a five day Test match — forget rotation.
2. Always select your best wicketkeeper.
3. Face up to the fact that NZ were a well drilled, disciplined & extremely competent group of players. What should our players & coaches have learnt from them? Practise catching & fielding & don't throw wickets away are two points that come immediately to mind.
4. Selection is always difficult when many potential top order batsmen have faulty techniques & have not adjusted temperamentally to Test cricket — there is a huge gap between County & Test cricket in every respect.
5. Looking forward, Robinson, Stone & Wood look excellent prospects for Australia but will Silverwood be brave enough to leave Anderson and/or Broad behind for that trip?

Eric Broome: I worked as a postman for Royal Mail for 37 years. Over my entire career I averaged 28 days holiday a year, not including bank holidays. On average I walked 7.25 miles every working day, I had less than 10 days off-sick in my entire working life. I was not rotated at any point, nor was I met after every hour of my daily round with a hot or cold drink — in the first ten years of my time I was 'told' the area to do and it wasn't until I had been with RM for 19 years that I was given use of a vehicle. I could not pop over to a different county and do an easier area for the same wage, nor could I rely on fitness coaches, physios,

dieticians or nutritionalists to get me right for each days work.



Now that I have retired I have looked at working in the media as a 'Specialist Postal Advisor' so that when there is a little rain-shower or the wind gets up to one mile an hour I could be called to assess the impact on the 93,000+ posties in the UK, maybe discuss the



A Post Box - maybe one that Eric came across during his career

technique they use, the line and length of their delivery, their defensive approach when faced with dogs or irate customers, how they would handle a run-chase if they approached someone about to drive off - and yet, surprisingly, my services are not required.

There are many words I could use to describe England, the ECB, the game...but Bill said to be polite.

Richard Holdridge: For as long as I can remember, I have wanted England to beat Australia, and of late

India. The main reasons being that they generally provide the strongest opposition, and both have much going for them. I love to see the underdog win! When it comes to other Test matches, my main concern has always been that the cricket is good, competitive, entertaining and played in the right spirit. It seems of late New Zealand, with Brendon McCullum leading the way, have achieved this, England have not. I have never worried if England lose to a side playing better cricket. I was 12 when I saw the South African beat England with a fine side during my 'political innocent' phase.

How can they stop being an embarrassment?

1: - They need to spend time with the organisations that trained them and the people that supported them. True, the last 15 months have been terrible for achieving this, but playing more county cricket is what I have in mind.

2: - Reduce the amount of international cricket played

3: - They should be less timid on the field, and try and win matches.

4: - They should field a balanced attack that includes slow bowlers

5: - Admission charges for International should be set at a level to encourage teenagers to attend

6: - Ensuring that 'meaningful' cricket is on 'free to air' Television.

If we had more young people taking up the game we would, in time, improve the standard. I am not holding my breath and I do not expect this to happen in my lifetime.

There are of course many things bubbling under the surface which do not help the situation but are not

strictly relevant to your question. There is the 'Hundred' which can only dilute county cricket and might be so costly as well. (As one member of our club said recently, we are ruined if it works and we are ruined if it fails....He didn't say 'ruined' by the way) I wish that cricket could gain wider popularity by being part of the 'Olympic' movement, for that has to be the aim, more people enjoying the game. I worry that county boards are controlled by a nominations committee controlled by the ECB, whose board is rather like Lord Aberdeen's Government in the nineteenth century (Who? Who? Said the Duke of Wellington) who had not heard of any of them. Last Wednesday I watched a 20 over a side evening match. We have been playing these matches locally for over a 100 years. I visited the ground because I thought it was a new club setting up, in itself a rare event. In fact it wasn't, it was an old club that had changed its name to match where their new ground was. It was an exciting match, ending in a tie (108) in the gloaming at 9.10. Of course the standard was modest, but the match was tense, there was much laughter and encouragement from the spectators, some of whom were having a drink served from the bar in the village social club that served as the pavilion. They should have had a fielding circle but didn't, and when one player strayed he came back into line with 'We haven't got a circle but you are on the boundary so get a big closer'. Chuckles all round. So maybe not all is lost.

Crusoe wrote (as I am sure you know) in the 1940 Wisden 'Maybe we turn to cricket as an old friend, who gives you a seat, a glass of beer and something sane to talk about. Perhaps some of them wondered when, if ever again, they would watch on the Mound at Lord's and borrow from a small boy in a school cap a scorecard to see what it was all about, and find strange entries and pencilled mysteries; when, once more, they would sit on someone else's sandwiches in the tram that sways to Kennington, or trip over the marquee ropes at the Saffrons, or smell the sea at Hove, or argue at Old Trafford.

Tony Saurin: Agree with you the lack of respect for county championship cricket is to blame the games are played the wrong time of the year almost as nuisance to be got rid of so we can get down to serious business of 20/20.

I watched the West Indies vs South Africa match recently and the WI batters technique couldn't cope with the SA bowling and I then realised the England batsmen were just as bad

And what do our cricket administrators believe to be the most pressing matter, the Hundred and after that perhaps we can have the Fifty or the Twenty-Five. But its not all doom and gloom for when Ben Stokes returns all we will need will be four batsmen, four fast bowlers (Anderson and Broad cannot go on much

longer) and two decent spinners and were laughing, oh and a captain who can face reality.

David Marshall: It gives me no pleasure to say that I agree with you on every count. At the moment the England team is an embarrassment.

A long time ago one of my heroes (Brian Clough) said that — "You must always pick your best team and try your hardest — you have no choice — that is what the game's about." Isn't it the same for cricket? If so where were Chris Woakes, Sam Curran and Jos Butler? Resting and having a break after the IPL! RESTING with their salaries! The New Zealanders didn't rest Kyle Jamieson, Kane Williamson or Trent Boult did they? Why did our players need to rest then?

The England players seem to have lost sight of the fact that they are representing their country i.e. you and me. They are the chosen few who have managed to achieve what many of us dreamed of doing i.e. playing cricket for England! When they walk down the steps of the pavilion I would expect them to look as though they were intent on winning and showing how good they are at their jobs. The soul destroying trudge to a draw at Lords was awful, and truly indicative of their mind set. That is not how I, or I imagine most people, want to be represented.

When I look through my many Wisdens I wonder how many of the current England players would get into the teams in 1956, or the 1970s or 2005? Very few — and the reason is probably one-day, crash-bang-wallop, cricket. I think they need to get back to basics. They have 5 days to win a match and that is what they need to think and do. And if they are not good enough (and sadly I think most of the top-order batsmen are not) then they should not be picked.

Gavin Rook: I really don't think the England team is too bad. Just stop making so many changes and pick your best team no matter what. New Zealand has a great depth of players at the moment, all fighting for a start in the Test team. They would have won the first Test if it wasn't for the rain, then made six changes for the second Test and won easily. NZ love the English pitches as they are like home too them. In short, pick your best team and I hope they do win the Ashes.

Keith Russell: To begin, let's get things into perspective. We have some good wins in recent years. And we have some promising youngsters such as Crawley (Pictured, above, Centre), Curran and Archer. So it is not relentless doom and gloom.

There are two reasons often cited for our underperformance.

First is our format with its emphasis on limited -over cricket. I am sure this plays its part. But we still play more longer cricket than other countries.

Second, Michael Vaughan and others blame the most recent poor showing on the rotation selection policy. And yet New Zealand changed 6 of their team between the First and the Second Test. Moreover, our policy of rotation has applied more to the bowlers than the batters, and it was the batsmen who particularly under performed in the Second Test.

There is a lot of promise with the batting, but also a lot of inexperience, not helped by the reduced opportunities in 2020 and 2021. To take one example, I (being a Kent supporter) obviously have high hopes of Crawley, but think he needs advice, time and practice to resolve some technical flaws that are being exposed at top level, such as not moving his feet enough so that he is vulnerable to the ball leaving him.

I worry about the absence of good spin options.



Playing Root as the main spinner is a joke and produces an unbalanced set of bowling options for him as captain.

Terry Hopkinson: I'm of a certain age and grew up following my home county Nottinghamshire. We moved to Shropshire many years ago

so geography and lots of encouragement from one of my cronies has resulted in me becoming a member down at New Road following the adventures and misadventures of Worcestershire. I love it so you will not be surprised at the route my answer to your question is going to take.

In a sentence nobody in their right mind would buy a second hand car off our chums at the ECB and you certainly want them in charge of organising the proverbial social occasion in the brewery. They are making sure that the dumbing down and levelling down process which is now part of our daily lives is alive and well and kicking in Cricket. Far more important to introduce a cheap and nasty version of the game to try to make a few extra quid for all involved than to make sure that we have best possible team representing England on every occasion. Then just when it looked like it couldn't sink any lower all their efforts get focused on the public destruction of a player who is performing well in his first Test Match. I could stop there but I won't. I reckon that at the point central contracts took over the plot was inevitably lost because once any kind of exclusive set up is created self-interest is going to take over. The money gets followed and sub-standard performance will get justified by those who run the show together with all sorts of Root like excuses from those who participate. Language is important too — you're always going to be hearing the inauthentic "we weren't quite at our best today" rather than its more authentic distant cousin "we were actually bloody awful".

I think though that the disconnect with the County Game together with the condescending attitude and lack of respect towards those who participate in it and those who follow it will eventually complete the destruction of something that was once of value to many of us.

It feels like a whole way of life is disappearing and sadly our game and our currently bloody awful team are on their way too.

To end on a lighter note I'm wrong about most things

Karl Langston: A response to your question about the England Test team from a New Zealander. Firstly, NZ are a very good opposition so people shouldn't be shocked at losing to them. England under rated them, but they are now a solid well performing unit. And English conditions are similar to their home conditions. NZ's first class game is becoming much more competitive, with greater depth and players pushing for international places.

Secondly, England gauge success by the ashes series. To build up to that they are prepared to play weaker sides against the number 1 and 2 ranked countries in the world.

Thirdly, the first class county game is marginalised. It doesn't prepare players for Test cricket. Shorter formats take priority for both scheduling and player focus.

Winning the 2019 World Cup was the primary goal.

Steve Coleman: Once again, England failed. Why? The ECB seem to regard Test matches way down the pecking order against 20/20 or the dreaded 100 We have been warned by the failed European Super League, what is to stop an individual or Country setting up one Global 20/20 or 100 competition selling off the rights? They could play all year round.

Pundits say — "Let Pope and Crawley go back to 20/20 and express themselves (Whatever that means) Is 20/20 a viable competition to learn how to defend and build up an innings, No, it certainly is not.

There are only a couple of rounds of Championship games left before we face India. Let alone the Ashes looming.

A Test team should be all about the best players. New Zealand picked players straight from the IPL, we chose

to "rest" players from the same league. The damage done to Bracey will be that he joins the Two Cap only group like Mark Lathwell.

At the heart of England's problems could be pointed at the Central Contracts system?

Where do players nowadays learn to defend, build an innings, wear down bowlers?

They are wrapped in cotton wool and brought out totally unprepared to take on the opposition.

Too many white ball competitions but it feeds the coffers. All these up and coming one days with Sri Lanka and Pakistan? Time would be better spent with the fixtures allowing players to go back to their counties. I think we also have to remember the age we are living in. Maybe at times I (We) look through our rose tinted glasses and remember Test matches growing up. Not that I am asking for a recall for Chris Tavare!

Leonard Courts: They are too busy counting the money from all the

Interesting subject and one as a Scot I come to from a semi detached point of view. Not since the days of childhood hero Bob Willis have I felt any ownership of the England cricket team. I think I smirk slightly at their travails and applaud quietly at their triumphs.

For years I felt the bubble around England conveys "greatness" on players who have achieved adequacy at Test level. If you want to look at the last 50 years you would struggle to find an Australia team that doesn't have at least one batsman with a 50+ Test average - the barometer to greatness. In the same period you would labour fruitlessly to find an England batsman with one even in the upper 40s. Gooch, Gower, Gatting, KP, Cook, Trott, Atherton, etc. Not one in the pantheon of greatness yet they are feted as such.

In Scotland we have a habit of doing likewise to our sporting heroes. Hogg, Russell, Robertson, Tierney are all great players....by Scottish standards of rugby and football....but where I feel we differ is we have this very Scottish trait of never putting anyone on a pedestal and feting them. You are great in terms of what went before but our adulation is qualified.

Ian Botham once said he was more comfortable with the Scottish psyche than the English one. You never got too built up and you never got knocked down to the same degree.

Perhaps its just the mindset. I don't believe English cricket is in any sense poorer or weaker than its contemporaries. But perhaps its ease by which it tells young men and women of their greatness is the thing that causes the comfort zone or complacency that engulfs the team in they way you allude to.

Richard Bowman

T20 tournaments around the world instead of watching the ball. I'm sure James Bracey is a nice man and a reasonable keeper but Bairstow, Buttler and Foakes are ahead of him as keepers and batsmen. If they don't select the best players England wont win matches.

Whereas Stokes and Archer may have been injured, the balance was all wrong. Here was Woakes on his favourite ground? Why no spinner?

The best way to improve is to play and yet all the IPL players were missing from the New Zealand Tests.

James Cameron: The England Test team is very good. For once, New Zealand is just better. I think the suggestion that the almighty England is an embarrassment just because little New Zealand beat them is frankly more of an embarrassment.

Colin Morris: My answer to your question is England

are not awful. At present we hold the rubbers against Pakistan, West Indies, South Africa and Sri Lanka. Australia haven't beaten us here in 5 series, since 2001. We have recently lost to the two best teams in the world rankings.

What we are is a collection of moderate talent with one or two stars - Root, Stokes, some over their peak - Anderson, Broad, and the rest.

Much more to the point is why I don't give a jot. And here, I'm with you. A day spent at a county cricket match, with the occasional chats with fellow spectators is a more satisfying experience than attending a test match with raucous spectators who think dressing up in fancy dress is appropriate behaviour. And, Hampshire winning the Championship (OK, it's not going to happen) would mean far more than any number of Ashes triumphs.

Royston Brockman: My view on the England cricket team being so bad is as follows:

First, the lack of leadership. Root is a poor captain and should be replaced. If he has not learnt by now, he never will.

Second, selecting batsmen with averages in the mid thirties is wrong. There are better ones in the County Championship and the current lot should go back there and learn. Abolish the two divisions and give all counties the chance to be champions and all players to compete against the best.

Third, no problem with the England bowlers. Some of the world's best. But poor fielding and field placements has constantly let them down. Poor leadership again.

Mark Elliott: It's a very interesting question you pose and I certainly wouldn't presume, as an Australian, to have intimate knowledge of English cricket. I do believe, however, that English and Australian cricket share a number of similar challenges:

- * Overpaying average players on central contracts.
- * The complete disregard for the Sheffield Shield in Australia mirrors the issues you face in England. The Shield is the nursery for the Test Team but it has been pushed to

the margins of the summer to make room for T20 Franchise Cricket. Test players generally don't participate, performances from fringe players are ignored and future Test players are often selected based on form in shorter formats.

- * And then comes the biggest issue of all — the proliferation of T20 Franchise cricket all over the world. Where is the incentive for young players to strive to be Test players?

Two other points to note in relation to your current team:

- * Ben Stokes in particular and Jofra Archer (Pictured, Below) will make a significant difference.

- * Don't under estimate New Zealand, in every sport they play they punch well above their division.

Bring on the Ashes, we can't wait.

Tony Bennett: Thank you for the opportunity to have a good moan. Just to start, I completely agree that the decline set in after 2005. In that year the ECB sold the TV rights to Sky, and since then there has never been an England home test match on free-to-air tv. How were children and young people supposed to be enthused to play the sport when they couldn't watch their national team? Around the same time in their wisdom the ECB started the inexorable hike in ticket prices.

So the game started to lose a large chunk of its audience and this has surely had an adverse impact on the flow of new players. We still get them from the public schools where most of the current crop went, but not from state schools. We are selecting from a diminished group at both county and international level.

And speaking of county cricket, the rot really set in when the ECB started marginalising the County Championship, sticking it away at the beginning and end of the season to clear the route for the slap & tickle stuff. How can we expect to produce test quality batsmen if the first half of the domestic season is played in cold, damp, seam-friendly conditions where bowlers only have to pitch it on a length. And does this produce test bowlers? The spinners of course don't get a look-in until the end of the season, so we can't produce them either.

Of course even batsmen of talent — there are some —

are betrayed when playing 5 day tests by their being accustomed to trying to whack the hide off the ball in white ball cricket. Coaches must find this difficult. There are some very dodgy techniques out there, in fact currently the England top six now contains probably more



weird techniques than it ever has.

Obvious solutions that follow from my comments — (1) restore free-to-air cricket on tv, (2) put the County Championship back centre stage in the season, (3) get some decent leadership into the ECB.

I doubt that any of these things will happen.

Incidentally I don't think Joe Root is much good as a test captain. Cook wasn't either. But then Test captains have to learn on the job nowadays.

Over the years I have received surveys and questionnaires on cricket, the latest was from a certain publication which amongst its rather mundane questions dedicated a fifth on the magazine and what I thought of it. Without blowing smoke up the Wisdeners' creators' backside may I thank Bill for just asking a simple direct question, one that my friends and I ask ourselves.

England is awful.

England is embarrassing and irrespective of the performance of other nations and how we might be better than Sri Lanka, the West Indies and Pakistan...the question needs to be asked, why is there a complete lack of talent coming through into the county/state/island long game across the whole cricketing world and in my opinion it is simply because the limited-over format now rules.

Whether we like it or not our cricketing culture is closer to the American sporting culture, where every game must have a winner — in Baseball teams travel the nation playing 60+ games in around 150 days, there are so many Twenty20 tournaments around the world that it is completely feasible for players to play in every one and never have to put up with batting for more than a couple of hours.

I have the upmost contempt for the ECB and the power-brokers in the game — they have taken what I love and turned it into a farce.

I challenge anyone to list 20 players who they feel should be in the England Test side. In order for any professional sporting side to flourish it needs competition for places, it needs pressure from outside to keep those in the team on their toes, it also needs players who can actually play the game...the game of Test cricket is a simple one, but it is obvious that the current crop of England players are just not good enough.

It is ridiculous, absurd and an insult to the game that we are looking at taking Anderson to Australia....He has been an exceptional bowler for England, but he won't play all Test matches and he has constantly under-achieved in Oz, but we do not have 4 or 5 players banging on the door saying 'pick me, pick me.'

The same for the batters. I would place a large bet that before the summer is out Bairstowe is back in the England set-up, oh and maybe Moeen too!

Anyone with doubts, look at Wisden in the period between 1970 and 1990, look at the county championship score cards and see a gorgeous array of talent from all over the world representing the counties, and now have a little look at the pre-Covid season and see the overseas players populating the long game.

The county game is awash with mediocrity on every level.

Adrian Ormesby

David Bown: I have always been a lover of the County Championship and still am. Test cricketers should always play for their counties when not on international duty in my opinion. There is scant evidence to show that the England Test Team, in particular, has been more successful since Central Contracts were brought in.

Notwithstanding the constraints caused by Covid, it is the same for both sides and it's therefore reasonable to form a view on a current England Test performance on the basis that the best XI from those available was sent out to represent our country. The fact that players are / were 'allowed' to play in the IPL at this time and therefore rendered themselves ineligible for selection is a separate matter for debate. If I was in charge of a county, I would expect my playing staff to be available to play for me from April to September.

I think that there are three main areas for debate with the current England team.

1: - Team selection

2: - Captaincy and 3) Priorities

Let's firstly assume that the teams fielded by England in the two Tests v New Zealand were chosen as being the best available formation to beat

a crack New Zealand side, worthy of the utmost respect. Oh dear, we already have a problem with that assumption. The England team management is apparently more interested in next winter's Test Series in Australia, also known as 'The Ashes'. New Zealand are a better team than Australia though so why wouldn't you want to apply maximum effort to confronting the current challenge? It's a competitive match, a Test Match. All Test Matches should be treated with equal importance. Win and it becomes a habit, the 'Ashes' will look after themselves.

As for the team selected, only Rory Burns (Pictured, Below) and Ollie Robinson had been in good form so far this season. Not surprisingly therefore, these two were our best players in the First Test v NZ. James Bracey's been doing reasonably well for Gloucestershire at number three this year so why did

he bat at seven, leaving the misfiring Crawley at three? Apart from his double century against Pakistan, Crawley has done better opening. Once Bracey had been chosen, Crawley should have been moved to open, with Sibley dropped for a spinner. None of England's front-line batsmen, apart



from Burns, have been in form this season. Having said that, then it's difficult to see too many alternatives to the team that took the field against NZ and hereby lies the crux of the problem as far as the batting is concerned. Joe Root aside, the jury's still out on the rest of them. They are inconsistent at best, not good enough at worst. You wouldn't consider any of them, apart from Root, for a World X1. They also have this collective ability to all fail at once, causing the all so regular collapses. The all out for 122 at Edgbaston was inexcusable, even allowing for the brilliance of New Zealand, They deserve a Five Test Series. It's difficult to see any alternatives, the likes of Westley, Stoneman, Robson and Lyth have been tried and discarded. I'd give Dawid Malan another chance and persevere with Dan Lawrence and Ollie Pope but that gives us four fours with Root! Number three's a real problem. Where's England's Labuschagne, Williamson or Pujara? Can Gary Ballance be helped, persuaded back? He did well for a while.

Now for the captaincy issue. I think that the burden of so often carrying England's batting is placing an intolerable burden on Joe Root's ability to effectively captain the side. There is though no obvious alternative. Burns? Stokes?. Maybe but I have reservations about both. Maybe we're over reacting? It wasn't that long ago that we had a great Series win in South Africa. Best India and everything in the garden will be rosy again. Cheer up Bill. Test cricket remains one of man's finest inventions.

Richard Reardon: We know that for the general good of the game there is the need to balance one day cricket with the first class programme in England, be that Test or County cricket.

However at present County cricket is largely neglected in height of summer. Hence the lack of opportunity for spinners to develop their game properly in the conditions experienced on drier pitches at the height of the season. Also out of form batsmen have little chance to get their game in order in between Tests. It does not take the wisdom of Solomon to see there needs to be a better balance between both forms of the game throughout the summer. What is wrong with alternate weeks of one day and County cricket? After the abject failures of the top of the England batting order in the New Zealand series there is limited opportunity for players to recover form in first class matches before the forthcoming India series begins. Players need to be adaptable and perhaps the regular switching between the two forms of cricket on a weekly basis may encourage batsmen to think more carefully about issues such as shot selection and overall approach to the game.

Those involved in team selection need to man up and take responsibility. This is now Chris Silverwood alone — but perhaps with some input from captain Joe Root. After Edgbaston, Silverwood cited inexperience in the

England batting order versus new Zealand. Really? The top five of Rory Burns (25 Tests), Dom Sibley (20), Zak Crawley (14), Root himself (105), and Ollie Pope (19) can hardly be described as inexperienced, especially when compared to New Zealanders Devon Conway (making his Test debut in the series) and Will Young, playing in his 3rd Test. They managed more than useful contributions. (Chris) Silverwood (Pictured, Below) also cited the absence of Ben Stokes and Jos Buttler in the batting line up as an excuse. Well, they would have been batting at 6 and 7 anyway. Selection policy has been strange to put it mildly — four seamers in India and no specialist spinner at Edgbaston. The refusal to take on the run chase in the fourth innings at Lords was a disgrace. Root's battle cry before the start of the series proved empty and hollow. I'd rather

see England go down fighting than wimp out in such a gutless manner. The rotational system of selection is an out and out disaster. As for a supposed long term policy with the winter

tour of Australia permanently in mind, this is just pure nonsense. We should pick the best Test team available for selection every time, every Test. If some players want to follow the money in one day cricket then good luck to them. That is their choice. But team selection should not have to be made around the personal preferences of individuals and when they are available and when not, or if they might be feeling a bit tired and worn out after their one day excursions. The treatment of Chris Woakes in the supposed rotational policy was just one indication of the continual muddled thinking of those making the key decisions in running English Test cricket.

Duncan McGrath: I wish, like Bill, that it didn't matter (It's only a game, haha), but it does. When the country and the world has been through what it's been through, surely sportsmen/entertainers owe it to us to put on a bit of a show?

After a successful tour of South Africa one winter then a successful start to the Sri Lanka/India tour something started to go wrong. I am not convinced that any one of the eleven from the latest Test has yet booked their place for Australia.

1. The batting is wholly inadequate. Players seem to not prize their wickets-surely the army of coaches now employed can see what we can see? One could claim it's a result of one day cricket yet some of the wickets have been nothing more than meek surrender and had no place in any form of the game.



2. The side is unbalanced. If you need six batsmen plus a wicketkeeper/batsmen, leaving only 4 bowlers then you are acknowledging that the batsmen you are picking are not good enough. Stokes is so vital to this side when he is out it is such a glaring hole, yet he is overworked when he is fit.

3. The bowling attack consisting of four fast/medium right arm over bowlers with back up of part time spinners is woefully inadequate (and boring and predictable) but is a consequence of playing effectively seven batsmen

4. I am not convinced that Joe Root is the right man to captain. I see very little tactical nous. The bowling changes are very formulaic, and I think it's affected his batting. As the stand out batsmen we need his ability, yet he looks haunted by the responsibility. (I also hate his cliched press conferences. Show a bit of passion man, get angry.)

5. I would bring Bairstow (Pictured, Right) back, he always shows passion. We must invest in a spinner and stick with him. Wood is also a whole-hearted cricketer who should be a key part of the team if he can stay fit. We need to face up to the fact that Broad & Anderson are reaching the end of their careers sadly. I want Archer to succeed but wish he would show Wood's attitude. I think I would give Malan another go. So my team for the next Test : Burns, Sibley, Bairstow, Root, Malan, Stokes, Butler, Wood, Archer, Leach, Anderson.

6. A couple of other points:-when are we going to afford NZ the courtesy of a full tour-they deserve it? When are the players going to be forced to give spectators what they have paid for — the over rates are pathetic and the authorities and umpires do nothing, and finally, and I being very old fashioned here, but whilst I love the support that the likes of the Barmy Army give, the amount of drinking and boorish behaviour that follows with seemingly a significant faction more interested in drinking and creating snakes than watching the cricket is a little tedious.

Mike Reeve: Thanks for inviting the question as to why are test team is so bad and I agree with your comments and understand your despair, I feel the same.

As a 53 year old who has watched and followed the county game since 1976 I'm staggered the ECB has let the first class game decline so badly, here are my views:

1) County cricket is not taken seriously - Playing in April, May and September only produces green top wickets and means England will produce plenty of front footed batsman and medium pacers — exactly the wrong combination of players to win test matches. Play majority of games in mid season on good wickets that replicate test match pitches. We need to produce more batsman who can play off the back foot (hook and pull shots), more fast bowlers (not medium pace or medium fast) and quality spinners (they need to be

bowling long spells regularly to properly develop, Bess is a perfect example of a young modern spinner not being helped by the system).

2) Play three formats, not the currently scheduled five, forget the 100 competition (wishful thinking)!

County matches from Mid May to end of August.

T20 and One day Cup to start beginning of late April and schedule to finish by end of September (T20 final at the bank holiday at the end of August).

3) Schedule county matches so they are played close to test match dates, players are then coming into the team in form and not a few weeks since last playing first class cricket. It also gives the captain/coach/selectors the opportunity to drop players knowing replacements are not coming in "cold".

4) Improve the quality of the County Championship.

The ECB needs to put more money behind this,

encourage test players to play a bit more county cricket and incentivise the counties by increasing the prize for winning the competition. Perhaps 2 overseas players per county allowed to try and improve the standards.

5) Replace the current England coach. Chris Silverwood's policy of rotation is clearly not working and doesn't seem likely to change soon. No obvious replacement but we need better thinking and a more proactive approach, may have to look overseas again. Unfortunately I don't think the ECB is likely to change any time soon as clearly T20 and one day cricket is the focus.

My gripe with the England Test team is the very poor batting standards, we have been unable to find two quality Test match opening batsman since Cook and Strauss last played together in 2012 and if Root fails we are in big trouble, consider this when we have 18 counties to select from!

Helena Wilson: Sadly, the England Test side is awful, but before we all start criticising team rotation and the resting of players after they have played one match in two months let us just be very realistic — the Test cash cow for English (and Australian) cricket is the Ashes. Sky TV generates eight times more advertising revenue for any E v A match than for any other fixture, so it is obvious that the ECB and the team hierarchy must be fully aware of the consequences of a weak or under-prepared side travelling to Oz - although whichever England side goes, it will be weak anyway.



The Tea Interval

The Hypnotist at the Senior Centre.

It was entertainment night at the senior citizens' centre and after the community sing-along led by Alice at the piano, it was time for the star of the show - Claude the Hypnotist!

Claude explained that he was going to put the whole audience into a trance.

"Yes, each and every one of you and all at the same time." said Claude, "You will then do exactly as I say." There were light murmurings of 'ooohhh' and 'ahhhh.' The excited chatter dropped to silence as Claude carefully withdrew from his waistcoat pocket a beautiful antique gold pocket watch and chain.

"I want you to keep your eyes on this watch" said Claude, holding the watch high for all to see.

"It is a very special and valuable watch that has been in my family for six generations" said Claude.

He began to swing the watch gently back and forth while quietly chanting:

"Watch the watch - Watch the watch - Watch the watch"

The audience became mesmerised as the watch swayed back and forth.

The lights were twinkling, reflecting from its gleaming surface. A hundred and fifty pairs of eyes followed the movements of the gently swaying watch. They were hypnotised!!

And then, suddenly, the chain broke!!!

The beautiful watch fell to the stage and burst apart on impact"

"Shit " cried Claude.

It took them three days to clean the Senior Citizens' Centre and Claude was never invited there again.

Karl Marx is an historically famous philosopher, but no one ever mentions his sister; Onya, the inventor of the starting pistol.

"We appeal to anyone who may or may not have seen anything suspicious to come forward."

Police Inspector on BBC Radio Four - June 2021.

"Carl Lewis - what a good runner...All his arms and elbows and knees running in the same direction. Radio Commentator."

"At the English Schools Athletics Championships, you can see the youngsters of the future."

David Coleman.

"Boxing - it's all about getting the job done as quickly as possible - whether that takes 10 or 15 or 20 rounds."

Frank Bruno.

"I thought he was going to dive and decapitate himself...badly."

Mike Hendrick guesting on Test Match Special.

Radio Commentator Alan Parry asked Arsenal manager George Graham:-

"So, at the end of the day, why do you think Arsenal won?"

Graham: - "Because we scored two goals and Sheffield Wednesday scored one."

"Nick Faldo has shown himself to be a worthy world No 1 by finishing second here today."

Peter Alliss.

Lord Birkett was once a guest of honour at a cricket dinner where the chairman - not one of life's greatest after-dinner speakers, tried hard to impress the gathering, but he rambled on and on, and as the audience grew more and more restless, he proposed the toast of the guests.

As he sat down, he leaned across to his guest of honour and enquired:

'How would you have proposed that toast, Lord Birkett?'

'Under an assumed name' replied his lordship.

When I see lovers' names carved in a tree, I don't think it's sweet. I just think it's surprising how many people bring a knife on a date.

'Darling - I just wanted to call and say that you are the love of my life and I cannot think of ever not being

without you."

'Sir - This is The Red Lion on the High Street.'

'Oh, I know.'

Mum talking to her young son.

'No Jamie, you don't have to worry, there is definitely no monster sleeping under your bed...it sleeps in the same bed as me every night.'

But mum, I don't want to go to America.

"Quiet child and keep swimming."

Two cannibals are chewing a clown. One says to the other: "Hey, does it taste kinda funny to you?"

At a funeral:

"Do you know the WiFi password?"

"Have some respect for the dead!"

"Thanks. No spaces?"

and finally, from a Greater London Radio interview...

GLR Reporter: 'What should a parent do if your children want to talk about solvent abuse?'

Health Minister Brian Mawhinney: "Take a deep

How to kill a male walrus?
-
Point to his chest and say, "You've got something there!"



The VERY USER-FRIENDLY Cricket Quiz

Thank you to everyone who has taken part in the the VERY USER-FRIENDLY Quiz. I have made a unilateral decision and ended the competition, mainly so I can re-start it again from scratch once the County Championship starts up again later in the season.

I hope no one minds, but effectively it gives everyone a chance to win more prizes.

I am also hoping to do a similar competition for the England v India Test matches.

The overall winners of the Very Friendly Quiz were:

First prize

Sandra Bowden 215 points

Second Prize

Mark Hilton 210 points

Third Prize

Neil Fraser 205 points

102 of you entered all four so a massive thank you to one and all.

The Wisden Collectors' Club Website has been re-launched and I hope you like it.

If you would like to join the WCC, you have three options:

A Full Membership until December 31st 2021 £10, please click [HERE](#)

A Full Membership until December 31st 2022 £18, please click [HERE](#)

A Full Membership until December 31st 2023 £30, please click [HERE](#)

If you need any help or guidance please contact me - details below

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