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Why is it that County Cricket takes the blame every time England lose a Test Match? Such knee jerk reactions are totally unjustified. Why is it rarely, if ever, acknowledged that the best team over the five days (or less) always wins?

In England's case those who most failed to perform at Lord's and Headingley were the cosseted players under central contracts whose appearances in county cricket are infrequent. Batsmen played unworthy shots and bowlers seemed incapable of knowing where to bowl in helpful conditions and could not respond when the long handle was taken to them. The catching was also fallible. It demonstrated that all the elite nets, video analysis and so on will only go so far. It is what is between the ears, moral fibre and taking responsibility that most counts.

Who were ultimately England's most successful bowlers? Two recruits from county cricket in James Kirtley, a marginal figure in the Test squad, and Martin Bicknell. Both possess the priceless ability to move the ball in the air and off the wicket, and developed their proven skills and mental capacity in the county game.

England succeeded gloriously at The Oval because, as a team, they stood up to be counted. Every player took responsibility. And guess what? Among the pages of eulogies for what was an outstanding performance there was not a single mention of the standard of county cricket.

Those decrying the Championship are doing the game a great and destructive disservice. The standard in Division 1 is very high and improving each year. Division 2 is much more uneven, and the gap between the two leagues continues to grow. It has always been a fact that the Championship has consisted of players who were genuine Test cricketers, those who might be and those who never will be. It is no different now. But unless the best in county cricket can hone their skills against Test players then England's strength will suffer in the long term. Why is it that those who propose never ending change, which will eventually bring about the demise of the most crucial link in the chain, cannot see it? They really ought to sit back and be more analytical and objective.

The demise of Counties because of their finances has been predicted for well over a century. And yet, because of their unique position in the infrastructure of their local community, allied to largely prudent management, they manage to survive. Cricket has changed more than any other sport in the last forty years. It is now totally unrecognisable from the evocative game portrayed by Stephen Chalke in his excellent books. But there is a limit to the extent to which more changes can be absorbed without fundamentally affecting to its ultimate detriment, the fabric of the game.

MEETINGS

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The Society is very proud to welcome to this evening's meeting one of the most popular men ever to have played for Hampshire. Robin Smith, in his testimonial year, was always assured of a warm welcome and that greeting will undoubtedly be reinforced following the announcement of his retirement on the eve of his fortieth birthday.

Robin Smith leaves the County with a formidable legacy. No Hampshire player remotely approaches his 62 Test Matches and 71 Limited Overs International appearances for England. Only Phil Mead and Roy Marshall scored more than his 49 centuries in first-class cricket for the County and only the former exceeds his overall run aggregate and tally of hundreds (72). His career average for Hampshire has been bettered by only four men, one of whom is his older brother, Chris. Only eight men have made more first-class runs.

However, he will be remembered for far more than statistics. His walk to the wicket bristled with intent. He blinked his eyes to become accustomed to the light as he emerged from the pavilion, then whilst approaching the wicket in a business-like manner, wielded his bat in a wide circle alongside his head, first with one hand and then the other. He then exercised each wrist with bat in hand.

On reaching the wicket he kicked away the loose earth in his crease. On a dry pitch the wicket-keeper and surrounding close fielders almost required a face mask as they became enveloped in a dust cloud. After taking guard he then blinked his eyes again and flexed his knees as he bent down and sprang from his haunches. It is one of the wonders of physiology that he never suffered an injury during this series of callisthenics.

He waited for quick bowlers in the bat up position, taking minute stuttered steps across the wicket to bring him into line of the stumps. When in form against slow bowlers, these sideways movements became far less pronounced.

He picked his bat up straight and played further forward and back than any batsman of his generation. It was the sheer excitement of his strokeplay, allied to his outstanding courage in the face of the West Indies fast bowlers that earned him the plaudits. His trademark was the most brutal of square cuts. Perhaps only Gordon Greenidge has equalled the ferocity of this stroke. His driving through extra cover was the litmus test of his form. He always played off his legs, through mid-on and mid-wicket, with certainty.

His bravery was a byword. His Test career coincided with a period when England struggled against both Australia and the West Indies and he was invariably targeted by the opposition bowlers. His duels with the burly moustachioed Merv Hughes have passed into cricket folklore. He stood virtually alone against the 1989 Australians. First he kept in company with his beleaguered captain, David Gower, in a long stand at Lord's and was dismissed four runs short of a maiden Test century. However, he reached the milestone with 143 out of 237 at Old Trafford and then made a rumbustious 101 in the next Test at Trent Bridge. No other Englishman made more

than 39 in either innings. He signed off with 77 not out at The Oval. In terms of run aggregate – 553 (avge. 61.44) - it proved to be his best series.

The West Indian pace men posed a more collectively potent threat to his well-being but he always emerged with considerable credit, before Ian Bishop inflicted horrific facial injuries at Old Trafford in 1995. On that occasion, and others, he should have received far more protection from the umpires. Nevertheless, he made three Test hundreds against them. One was his highest score in Test cricket – 175 not out – towards the end of his career in Antigua. The other was what he regarded as his best innings when he made 148 not out at Lord's in 1991. Again it was a case of Robin Smith carrying England on his broad shoulders as he gave such succour to the lower order that the last five wickets added a scarcely credible 270. It was one of the truly great innings at cricket's headquarters.

He had also played a number of memorable innings in his previous encounters in the West Indies in 1989/90. His fourth wicket stand of 172 with Allan Lamb at Sabina Park secured England a first innings lead of 200. Devon Malcolm and Gladstone Small then bowled the visitors to a nine-wicket victory. As the West Indians, with their pride hurt and driven on remorselessly by Viv Richards, regained the ascendancy, Robin Smith did more than anybody to try and thwart their victorious march in the crucial fourth Test at Bridgetown. He resisted for almost 10 hours on a pitch of very uneven bounce in making 62 and 40 not out. England were within sight of an honourable draw and a deserved share of the series before Ambrose, needing no assistance from the fielders, dismissed the last six batsmen for only 25 with the second new ball.

He scored 4236 runs (avge. 43.67) in Test matches before he fell foul of England's unsympathetic man management regime which was then in place. In his last Test series, in South Africa, he made 43, 52, 44, 34, 2, 66 and 13. Hardly a failure. England jettisoned him far too early. It must have been one of the great regrets of his career that he was never able to play against the country of his birth in England.

It was often said, of course, he could not play spin bowling. He did not play with the softest of hands but scored Test centuries against India and Sri Lanka with Anil Kumble and Muttiah Muralitharan respectively in their ranks. He also lifted Tim May effortlessly out of the ground during his epic 191 against the 1993 Australians at Northlands Road. In the context of the occasion when he was by then battling to save his England place it was possibly the best innings ever played at Hampshire's old Headquarters. He batted with complete command and authority as he despatched the Australian bowling to all parts.

He always enjoyed his duels against Australia and his swansong could not have been more fitting as he captained the County to victory against Steve Waugh's side in the inaugural season at The Rose Bowl in 2000. He literally batted himself to a standstill as he made 113 in taking his side to a decisive first innings lead.

ROBIN ARNOLD SMITH was born in Durban on 13 September 1963. He joined his older brother Chris on the Hampshire staff in 1981. He had made his first-class debut, for Natal B, in the previous winter.

He made his Hampshire debut against the touring Pakistanis at Bournemouth in 1982, making 8 and 1. His first Championship match the following season was a far more auspicious occasion as he made 100 not out on debut against Lancashire at Dean Park. He accomplished the landmark with a boundary off the last ball of the day, having hit a six earlier in the over which started with him needing 12 runs to reach his hundred. He had therefore given emphatic notice of his hunger and unique talent. Though he scored three centuries in seven matches that year he was required to return to the Second XI, because of the registration rules then in force, to make way for Gordon Greenidge returning from World Cup duty.

It was not until 1985 that he became fully qualified and a regular in the side. Within three years, after his eye catching cameo in the Benson and Hedges Cup Final at Lord's, he was playing for England.

Though his record in first-class cricket for the County was outstanding, he will always be most associated with his exploits in the limited-overs game. He played a number of quite startling innings which brought three Lord's Final wins and a Sunday League triumph in their wake. No cause was ever lost whilst he was at the wicket and, long before the term "finisher" was applied to Australia's Michael Bevan, the "Judge" was performing that role for Hampshire – and England.

He still holds England's record score in limited-overs internationals with his vivid 167 not out against Australia at Edgbaston in 1993. It was an innings of monumental proportions as he made his runs off 163 balls; he scored almost 70 off the last 7 overs racing from 100 to 150 off only 20 balls in the process. Astonishingly, England lost the match as Mark Waugh and Allan Border guided their side home, with time to spare.

Robin Smith remains the only Hampshire player to represent England in the World Cup, appearing in both the 1991/92 and 1995/96 competitions respectively.

In his younger days, before his shoulder injury, he was an athletic fielder in the deep with a strong and accurate throw. Even when he was forced to field closer to the wicket he could still surprise and run out batsmen who thought they could take liberties with him. He was always a reliable catcher.

Robin Smith retires as one of the most respected, and nicest, men in the game. He has adorned the sport which he loves so much, and to which he has been such a credit. He showed last season that he was still capable of contributing much with the bat.

In the last fifty years, Hampshire have possessed four great world-class stroke playing batsmen who could mould a game to their own design, thrill spectators and, perhaps most difficult of all, gain the unreserved respect and admiration of their opponents in doing so. Robin Smith is the last in an unbroken line which started with Roy Marshall in 1953 and which has continued on its way to him via Barry Richards and Gordon Greenidge. Who will now keep the flame burning?