

# WINTERS of DISCONTENT

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## COMPTON

*“You have to question the approach”*

Nick Compton – who was part of three England overseas tours, winning in India and South Africa, and drawing in New Zealand – gives his view on why standards have slipped so badly

**T**o put things in perspective, there aren't many teams at the moment who are winning Test matches away from home. Some people may not appreciate this comment, but I think some of the skill level in Test cricket has gone down since T20 has become a more staple diet for the emerging professional.

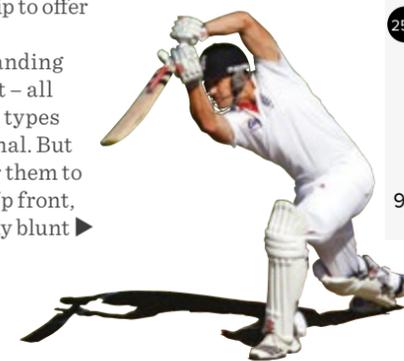
Attributes that 'old-school' players used to have – like patience, discipline, good judgment of which balls to play and which to leave, and application of skills according to the context of the pitch and the scoreboard – are seen less often today. And because we don't see many teams perform well outside of their own country it has become almost acceptable to have a win/lose record that makes overseas victories seem like a miracle and poor performances abroad the norm. It's nonsense! The reality is that as a cricketer you want to test yourself all over the world and prove your adaptability and level of capability in a variety of conditions against different types of bowling.

My sense is that too many batsmen have a belief that, 'If it's my day, then it's my day to make hay in the sun'. Are there enough batsmen being developed with the qualities to make sure when you don't have a good day, it's not a disaster? Can you play well enough to contribute towards your team's overall position even if you feel out of nick, or are dominated by an opponent who has home conditions to suit them?

England's recent away record – 11 defeats in their last 14 Tests, with no victories in that time – is particularly poor. With a record like that, one has to question the team's approach to identification of talent, management of people, coaching support, and team, as well as individual, tactics.

England are seemingly trying to play aggressively, which is fine, but if you want to win Test matches you need to be hard-nosed and have more than one way of succeeding. If a team is to perform consistently over time, it must have a diversity of skills. Too much rigidity and planning can create dull cricket. The key is for the leadership to offer clear direction as well as some freedom.

The current England team has some outstanding individuals. We've got Stokes, Bairstow, Root – all dominant, aggressive 'get-on-the-front-foot' types of people and cricketers. They are inspirational. But they need a foil if the platform is to be laid for them to show their brilliance on a consistent basis. Up front, the team needs batsmen who can consistently blunt ▶



ENGLAND TEST RECORD (SINCE 27.03.15)

	Win%	Loss%
Home	62%	33%
Away	17%	61%



ENGLAND'S 2017/18 TEST WINTER

	Wickets	Bowl. Ave
Anderson	20	28.00
England's other bowlers	43	64.83

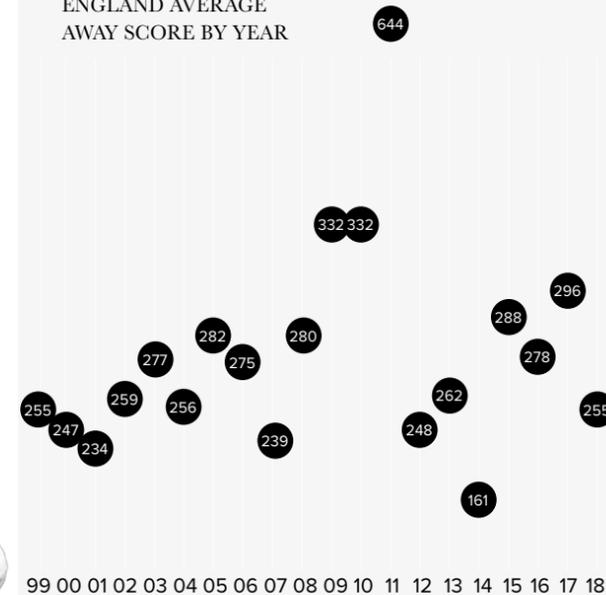
MOEEN ALI'S TEST RECORD SINCE (27.03.2016)

	Wickets	Bowl. Ave
Home	43	30.95
Away	26	59.03

ENGLAND TEST RECORD (SINCE 27.03.15)

	Bowl. Ave
Home	27.67
Away	39.02

ENGLAND AVERAGE AWAY SCORE BY YEAR



the new ball so that the middle order is rarely exposed to the best bowlers with a hard newish ball on pitches which still retain their freshness.

This team doesn't need any more glamour players. It needs solid, hard-nosed batsmen in and around the stars in the middle order. It needs a Jonathan Trott or two.

In the teams I was part of we had KP, Ian Bell, Matt Prior. We didn't need any more glamour. Everyone knew their roles, and I was happy to play mine too. I

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**THIS TEAM DOESN'T NEED ANY MORE GLAMOUR PLAYERS. IT NEEDS SOLID, HARD-NOSED BATSMEN IN AND AROUND THE STARS IN THE MIDDLE ORDER. IT NEEDS A JONATHAN TROTT OR TWO**



was selected to be the glue, as I was for a successful Somerset team. But it seemed some people in the media didn't want that. They wanted England to 'go to the next level'. They did, but it was a level or two down, and not up.

I don't care how long it takes to get to 100 or to 150; if you've got guys in the top three who more often than not can get themselves in and wear down the new ball, you'll win Test matches.

Trott was very underrated and is more appreciated now than when he was 'boring' opposition and the media to death with his routines and defensive excellence. The attributes he showed aren't cultivated over a few years; they're developed over a lifetime. He was a serious, serious player, and with KP to come in at No.4, the middle order had proper protection and could do some damage against the older ball and tiring bowlers.

'Blockers' tend to be more appreciated inside the changing room than in the stands – bowlers value batsmen in their team who can allow them well-earned rest. And the confidence that runs through a dressing room when a team isn't prone to collapses is a significant aspect of developing a winning mentality.

It takes all sorts to make a successful cricket team and finding the right blend is vital. That is where brilliant coaches and man-managers play their part. Mike Brearley was a genius in this field and my sense is that today there are too many people getting in the way of the captain refining the team's formula.

England need to look at preparation, too. You've got someone like Moeen Ali, who didn't have a good Ashes series by his own admission, who probably could have done with some time away to sort out a few things. Maybe he needed to speak to the England management about his role going forward and come back to Test cricket reinvigorated. Instead he had a diet of white-ball cricket and was then thrown straight into another Test series when his game was nowhere near the level it should be at.

If a few bad habits creep into your game, when do you rectify that? The modern schedule is crazy, so the selectors and team management must exercise good judgment and pull players out of tours and series at vital times, both for their own good and that of the team.

On the flipside, those guys who aren't part of the limited-overs sides hadn't batted properly for a couple of months and they started the New Zealand series without even playing a first-class fixture. Should we be surprised the batsmen aren't moving their feet?

I don't think this is the way to set up the England Test cricket team. If all it's doing is fostering mediocrity and allowing the next generation of players to get away with sub-standard Test match skills, then the approach to player development, the identification of talent, and the scheduling of the County Championship fixtures needs to change. ■

## LIEW

*“The job's too big for Bayliss”*

With the clock ticking on Trevor Bayliss' time at the helm, Jonathan Liew says the ECB must consider employing separate head coaches for the red- and white-ball formats



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As any public figure knows full well, entire legacies and reputations can often turn upon a single ill-timed phrase. “Strong and stable”. “Make them grovel”. Perhaps, one day, we may come to see the words of Trevor Bayliss at the conclusion of England's recent humiliation in Auckland as his own modest contribution to the field.

“We're not scoring enough runs or taking enough wickets,” he said, and as an analysis of an innings and 49-run defeat, it was certainly hard to fault on a factual basis. On the other hand, you wonder whether it rather reinforced the emerging impression of Bayliss as England's ghost at the wake, its meat in the room, its £500,000-a-year nonentity, the living embodiment of the axiom that you can't do anything wrong if you don't really do anything at all.

Which would be a harsh, if catchy, assessment of the Bayliss era, one that seems to be winding towards a reckoning of sorts, even if he does manage to hang on until his intended 2019 exit date. Bayliss may be taciturn to a fault, but it would be wrong to equate form with function, and assume his input is of minimal relevance.

Indeed, it is easy to overlook the hand Bayliss was dealt when he took over almost three years ago. A game riven by discord. A one-day team that was the laughing stock of the world. The Ben Stokes business was hardly his fault, nor the failure of the County Championship to produce world-class Test batsmen or spinners.

Meanwhile, England's resurgence in 50-over cricket has been a stunning success, even if last summer's Champions Trophy was ultimately a bitter disappointment. His famously tough fielding drills are one of the reasons England are rarely beaten in that area. And for a dressing room tasting defeat so frequently, there seems to be remarkably little rancour

in the ranks. In short, then: England are a likeable team, an entertaining team, a well-prepared team, a united team. The problem is, they aren't a very good Test team.

And as the defeats begin to pile up, so do the questions. Is a coach with such a limited shelf life really the man to engineer its new dawn? As England face the imminent loss of three all-time greats, wouldn't you want the person choosing their replacements to have watched even a little county cricket? When Joe Root looks this anxious, this haunted, this overstretched, shouldn't a coach shoulder the burden instead of skulking in the shadows? And ultimately – this is the clincher – does Bayliss have any solutions beyond “scoring more runs” or “taking more wickets”?

It's true that the very same qualities that were being lauded during Bayliss's first 12 months, when England beat Australia at home, South Africa away and came within one over of World Twenty20 triumph, now look like vices. Laid-back has become disengaged. Empowering has become listless. And in his call for Twenty20 internationals to be abolished – an abominable stance for a man in his position to take, and one that put him in direct opposition with Eoin Morgan – there was perhaps even an indication that Bayliss himself is beginning to look beyond, to the many gilded franchises that might be furnishing him with his next paycheque.

The ECB, too, need to be planning a succession. The usual names will be thrown around – Paul Collingwood, Jason Gillespie, perhaps even a cheeky raid for Ottis Gibson – but almost as important as the identity of any new coach should be defining the role. Detached figurehead? Ego-masseur? Details man? Perhaps even two separate roles: given the increasing gulf between the red- and white-ball formats, and the relentlessness of the modern international schedule, there is certainly an argument to be made that the job of coaching the England cricket team has grown too big for one man.

One thing's for certain: it's certainly grown too big for Bayliss. ■

## BOOTH

*“As a means of preparing England’s Test teams for flatter pitches abroad, county cricket isn’t up to the job”*

Lawrence Booth, editor of the *Wisden Almanack*, writes that county cricket’s problems are fundamental and deeply ingrained when it comes to producing a Test team capable of competing consistently overseas

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olks, it’s happening again. The moment anyone calls out county cricket for what it is – a lovable anachronism that promotes quantity over quality – its advocates leap to its defence, ensuring England will lose on their next trip to Australia, and the one after that.

English cricket has a way of turning people who are quite liberal in their everyday lives into dyed-in-the-wool conservatives. Don’t touch our 18-team system, they cry: it’s all we’ve ever known! And what has that tradition landed us with? One glorious exception to 30 years of hammerings Down Under.

Don’t blame county cricket, comes the argument – as if it’s ludicrous to expect a sport’s domestic set-up to prepare its players for the international stage. Yet when Steven Finn, whose transformation from one of the world’s most promising quicks to a fast-medium seamer plagued by injury and self-doubt, says county cricket “sucks pace” out of its practitioners, it is negligent not to listen.

For what it’s worth, I love county cricket. It is charming, entertaining, and for six months of the year ever-present in one form or another. It provides a comforting backdrop to the summer, and there’s nothing wrong with that. But as a means of preparing England’s Test teams for flatter pitches abroad, it isn’t up to the job. You’d have to be pretty stubborn to argue otherwise.

England have now lost their last eight Tests in Australia, a sequence not endured since the 1920s, and their last seven Tests overseas. These are numbers that would earn mockery if they belonged to Bangladesh or West Indies. Yet because England have a decent record at home, they get swept under the carpet.



There is no simple fix, because their fundamental problems – a lack of pace, a lack of quality spin, a lack of batsmen prepared to knuckle down because they’re used to playing on pitches forever firing bullets with their names on it – are deeply ingrained.

If England fans are happy to beat Australia and others at home, while registering only the occasional overseas triumph – usually in South Africa – then let’s carry on as we are, taking our four-yearly humiliations in Australia on the chin. But I suspect England fans are not happy with this. Why on the earth would they be?

So what can be done? The counties have already pushed back at the ECB’s plans to crunch the championship: the board wanted 12 games per team per season rather than 16, but the counties weren’t prepared to go below 14 – still more than any other first-class structure in the world, and still too many for the likes of Finn to thrive.

One solution would be regarded as too radical, but what the hell: three divisions of six, with each team playing the other five in their division home and away; one up, one down. That’s 10 games per team, in which every game counts. Fast bowlers get a breather between matches, and can practise charging in at 90mph, not 82. The members get to see a higher quality of cricket. Everyone is a winner.

Then there are the pitches, which are generally either too green or too slow. Climate is a problem here, and English groundsmen deserve our sympathy. But once upon a time our county pitches encouraged diversity:

pace and bounce at The Oval and Old Trafford, swing at Trent Bridge, seam at Headingley, spin at outgrounds.

Now we have a national performance centre at Loughborough that isn’t producing fast bowlers or spinners. The plight of Moeen Ali in Australia at the moment is painful to behold.

It would help, surely, if pitch preparation were centrally contracted, allowing the ECB to aim for a good spread of conditions at our 18 county HQs. At least then we might be spared the bleating when Somerset dare to produce a turning track.

From 2020, things could get worse. The arrival of the new Twenty20 tournament will push four-day cricket even further to the margins of the home summer – and more games in April, May and September means more help for the medium-pacers. And so the cycle will continue.

Perhaps the last word should go to Finn, for whom this debate goes beyond theory. “If I could change anything,” he told ESPNcricinfo, “I’d have tried to stay true to that person I was when I was younger rather than become, in the era that I played in, someone who could go at less than three an over.”

“I know personally I can bowl 90mph. I’ve done it in international cricket, especially when I was younger, but when you play 12 months a year, if you’re not selective and careful about the way you go about things, it can suck the pace out of you.”

That must be music to Australian ears. ■

## NORCROSS

*'It's becoming more and more challenging to unearth talent'*

ANDREW STRAUSS

Daniel Norcross was in Barbados for the North v South series to watch England's brightest young talent auditioning for senior roles in front of the ECB's top brass

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hy should we pick you for England and what skills do you have that will help us win a World Cup?" This was the challenge set by Andrew Strauss for the players competing in the North v South series in Barbados last month.

The two squads, coached by Paul Collingwood (North) and Mark Ramprakash (South), comprised the top-ranked players in last year's One-Day Cup with a generous sprinkling of wild-card picks; generally young talent from England's recent under 19 squads together with the occasional flier from the fast-bowling academy.

Also present were national selectors Angus Fraser and Mick Newell, assistant coaches Andy Flower and Paul Franks and last, but most definitely not least, Strauss, the director of England cricket.

Describing the purpose of the matches, Strauss said that after the hugely disappointing World Cups of 2011 and 2015: "We had to focus more on white-ball cricket and in particular 50-over cricket... The series was designed to make sure that players were focused on our domestic 50-over competition at a time where 20-over tournaments are more and more prevalent. We also wanted the opportunity to look at the next generation of cricketers and notice them in a highly competitive environment, and to look at players with high ceilings but who are a bit more raw."

Before the series began the ECB announced that, following the departure of national selector James Whitaker, there would be a subtle change to the selection and talent identification process. As for the scouting network, Strauss said: "It's becoming more and more challenging to unearth talent. We need to consider what are England's needs? How are we looking to play our cricket? Where are gaps currently

and potential future gaps?" He talked of the need for "many eyes, many times to see a number of different players in different conditions against different attacks" and the value of exploring "temperament and character".

Character is of huge importance to the England hierarchy. Collingwood, Ramprakash and Strauss all stressed that strength of character is vital to succeed in the intense environment of international cricket and the players were keenly watched as they went about their business in the team hotel. Every player was subjected to a Dragon's Den-style interrogation during which they had to answer that question set them by Strauss: "Why should we pick you for England and what skills do you have that will help us win a World Cup."

Over the course of the winter around 70 players have been involved in senior England tours, Lions tours, fast-bowling camps and the North v South matches. No longer is it enough to pile on runs or bag a bunch of wickets in county cricket and hope for selection to the Test squad. The emphasis now is on developing a pathway for players. As Ramprakash put it, the key is learning. "Learning is very important. It's crucial for preparation so when they get their chance, they're in a good place."

Although the series consisted of three 50-over matches, England's abysmal Test form abroad meant that players were looking to impress selectors more generally. The cursed slot at the top of the order partnering Alastair Cook has been a headache ever since Strauss retired. The lack of a penetrating spinner and a genuinely quick bowler to help provide potency on flatter tracks has contributed to the impression that the Test team has a toothless attack when confronted by Indian or Australian pitches and a ball that won't swing.

The selectors will have been delighted with Nick Gubbins' contributions; the Middlesex opener scoring



centuries in both his innings before succumbing to a hamstring tear. Dominic Bess, the highly rated Somerset 20-year-old off-spinner, who registered his maiden first-class hundred for MCC in the four-day game against Essex that followed, impressed in all three matches with his control and aggressive lengths.

The real surprise though was Tom Barber. Formerly of Hampshire, for whom he played a couple of List A games in 2014, and now of Middlesex, Barber was plucked from the fast-bowling camp at Potchefstroom. A left-arm bowler of genuine pace, he extracted serious bounce from some fairly lifeless surfaces. The 22-year-old was inconsistent and occasionally struggled for rhythm, but if he can avoid the dreaded stress fractures that bedevil quick bowlers these days, he will be one to watch.

The matches themselves brought a glut of runs as players "tested their ceilings". "No longer will you get told off for being caught at deep mid-on," said Collingwood. "They're going out there as if they're playing a game of backyard cricket. The [senior] England team is one of the most powerful in the world. A team full of match-winners. When we played we had maybe two or three. Now we have eight or nine. So here we're looking more to the future. Looking for players that will take you by surprise."

With serious prize money at stake – £10,000 to the winners of each match and £20,000 to the series winners (more than enough, said Collingwood, "to buy a new kitchen") – and the top brass in attendance, the players were determined to make their mark. The North side even concocted a team song, written by Steven Mullaney and Alex Davies, the most notable stanza of which contained the refrain: "We all grew up in a council house. Now we want a cheque from Andrew Strauss."

Their 2-1 series win netted them £40,000 from England's director of cricket. Whether they spend their windfall on a kitchen remains to be seen. ■

## FIVE TO WATCH

**JOE CLARKE, WORCESTERSHIRE, 21**

Ramprakash's pick as the North's best player, Clarke's batting was a cut above anything else on show. A gorgeous timer of the ball, he top-scored in the series with 229 runs including a masterful 112 in the decider. A measure of how highly he is rated was the frustration shown by Andy Flower when he got out when well set in the second match.

**SAQIB MAHMOOD, LANCASHIRE, 21**

The series' leading wicket-taker with nine, seven of them clean bowled. When Mahmood pitches it up he is a real handful and bowls at a more-than-lively pace.

**OLLIE POPE, SURREY, 20**

Identified by Paul Collingwood as the South's outstanding talent, Pope took over the gloves from John Simpson for the last two matches, pulling off a spectacular catch and scoring 42 and 68 in his two innings.

**TOM BARBER, MIDDLESEX, 21**

Barber excited the coaching staff at a fast-bowling camp in Potchefstroom with his raw pace. A left-armer who, when he gets it right, is as quick as anybody in England, he might just be the 'you heard it here first' man of the series.

**DOMINIC BESS, SOMERSET, 20**

Blessed with playing in the spin-friendly surroundings of Taunton, Bess is an attacking off-spinner in the mould of Graeme Swann. And a very capable batsman, too.

