



## The lonely life of the reserve

The nature of cricket and sport more generally, is that quite often things don't always go the way you would like. You may be injured at a crucial time just when you're reaching form, you may be searching for runs when you know it may be your last chance or you may be playing well and doing the right things but still you can't find a place in the team. People often say to me that it must be great to do something you love, to be in the sun all day, and 99% of the time this is true, but it can still be one of the most frustrating and stressful businesses out there.

I have been playing second-team games in the middle of nowhere with a mixture of young professionals learning their game and club cricketers looking to catch the eye of the second-team coach (or sometimes merely making up the numbers). In many ways it is even more of a challenge to play well in this arena. The bowling does not have the same quality as first-class cricket, so the intensity is considerably lower and the inevitable goal of achieving promotion or success in the various competitions isn't there. After being in the first team for most of the last three years, it can be hard not to allow my standards to slip, but I think for these reasons you have to rely on yourself even more. I aim to do well and not to allow the nature of the game, the varying intensities of the players and the lack of good facilities to pull me down. Really I'm making it sound like one big excuse culture and at the heart of it that's what it is. You can make the best of any situation and that only comes down to a simple choice.

If you had taken a look at the football pages of the newspapers in the past month you would see that all the euphoria surrounds the Premiership and Champions League races, but more specifically the heroes who have got their respective teams to the top. Ronaldo, Rooney, Lampard and Drogba are just a few of the big stars on show - but what happens when one of them gets injured or they have a bad season? No one writes about the Chelsea or Manchester United players who are not currently involved, the ones who are palmed off on loan for half a season to some First Division team miles away from their so-called home ground. They've got profile otherwise they wouldn't have been signed by a big club and with that comes huge pride and both internal and external expectation; so to spend

your time on loan has to be a very hard and painful route to go. They are not playing for the club whom they have loyalty. Their team mates forget them because they are not involved in the everyday hustle and bustle and what's more the team they are playing for isn't their own, so ultimately it must be a lonely existence.

That is what really interests me about sport. Justin Langer once said to a team-mate when he played for Middlesex, "If you get your runs no-one can touch you." What a true statement - but does this cloud our judgement? When a player is doing well everyone wants to know them. People they deleted from their mobile years ago call them up. Their parents are happy and full of pride. The local press man is suddenly friendly and wants to do a feature. Sponsors suddenly deliver an extra bat in the post when normally the allocation is three per season and team-mates are enjoying their company.

Then there are the times when a player is struggling to reach a hundred or take a bagful of wickets. Scoring runs or taking wickets should have absolutely no bearing on whether someone is a good bloke or not. Sport loves to find reasons why a player has failed. When you find yourself in that situation you have to learn to balance your emotions and not simply be happy when you are doing well and sad when not – though this is easier said than done.

Despite what is going on around me, whether it be team selection, an injury or stories in the press, my priority is to make sure that when that first delivery is bowled I am watching it like a hawk. If I can do that well then it gives me another opportunity to face the next ball and so on. Maybe writing this blog will prove to be more a reinforcement to my own development than of any interest to anyone else. Nevertheless it does make me admire those who have achieved in this game that much more. Not just the likes of Sachin Tendulkar, who has 10 million screaming fans following him around India daily, but the lower profile cricketer too, because everyone has their challenges however big or small.

So what do professional cricketers do on their day off? Most of the time is spent trying to scrub off hard-earned grass stains from the game just gone. It's always a sign that you've got involved and made some sort of contribution. Between doing the washing, hanging it up on the couch, over the door or somewhere in the kitchen because there are no washing lines in London, you try to get some good couch time with the missus or even the ex for that matter. However, it isn't long before you're cruising up the M1 again. It is pretty much head down and full steam ahead once the early season weather dissipates.

The one thing I love about playing cricket in hot weather is that when you come off from a competitive game you are hot and sweaty and you feel like you've really got into the competition. I think when we spoke last I was talking about my first experience of playing in the snow, two weeks on and how things have changed – with a week of scorching weather in the lead-up to the first Test, followed by days of rain and cold wind again.

But whatever the summer brings, a good game of cricket with suntan lotion on is always going to be better than being stuck in a stuffy office - for the time being anyway!