



Banter makes the game go round

After arriving back into the changing room following another gruelling session in the field, I sat back in my all-too-familiar spot and peered down at the floor groping for the drink I had left there. To my horror, all I managed to grasp was a handful of Nashy's fourth-day whites, an inside-out pair of sweaty underwear (just for good measure) and what looked like a half eaten banana! Not quite what I was looking for, but then in that brief moment, in my tired and defeatist state, I burst out laughing. I suppose I was laughing because I felt surprisingly privileged to have this man's dirty kit entwined with mine. Where else on earth would I meet a guy like Nashy and where else in the world would something so banal make me smile?

Oh we do love the day-to-day proximity with one another, don't we? Maybe it was this brief moment, this philosophical outlook that made me realise what a wonderful, yet strange place this cricket changing room is. Despite Nashy's grass-stained kit and putrefying underwear invading what little privacy I had, I still wouldn't swap the cricket changing room for anything. So why is it when players retire from cricket it is not their bat or ball they miss so much, but rather the changing room: the banter, camaraderie and the sense of belonging that is associated with it that makes the transition so tough?

When that inevitable day arrives, as happens to every player, when that dreaded envelope is discovered in your pigeon hole or maybe when you have decided it's time to hang up the boots, the transformation into the so-called 'real world' can be a tough ordeal.

The consistent player-to-player interaction is something that is easy to take for granted. The freedom of speech, the secrets told, the laughs had, the sarcasm, wit and repartee and of course this 'banter' I allude to can make the changing room a special place. Like the film 'The Shawshank Redemption', where Tim Robbins becomes institutionalised by the penitentiary. At first he hates the confines of those jail walls yet, over time, they grow on him until he couldn't be without them. Perhaps not the best analogy but it is the intimacy that you have with the ten other players that makes it such a comfortable place. Making that step towards so called 'normality' or the 'real world' is like being released from jail after serving your time.

So what then is this term 'banter' we hear so frequently? Because it is the banter which makes the changing room the place it is. Is it just having a good laugh with some mates, talking and discussing the trivialities of day-to-day life, or is there something else to it? I thought the best way to find out was to open it up to the Middlesex boys during a morning warm up.

"Boys what would you define as banter?" I asked, hoping to get an enlightened view from one of the more educated and insightful members of our team. Instead, I was interrupted by our very own 'Hartlepool Hammer' Danny Evans, who piped up "its somefing you ain't got mate". Needless to say, this was followed by an eruption of laughter. I suppose the truth hurts sometimes!

So what role does this banter play during our cricketing lives? I believe it is crucial to our development as people and as players from the early days of age-group cricket right through to heady heights of international stardom.

I was fresh out of school – green, naive and an ignorant little boy who went from the small pond of schools cricket to the big sea of professional sport. It certainly opened my eyes. I wanted to take on the world and suddenly I was thrust into this cocooned environment with characters like Tuffers and Gus Fraser, learning the ins and outs of the cockney English language plus a few other things here and there. Growing up fast was the only option.

In modern society people have become stereotyped into saying, thinking and breathing a certain way of life. We are held back from saying what we think because of the social restriction, the rules, etiquette and the built-up inhibitions. But in the changing room things are said and done that you wouldn't see or hear anywhere else. It is this social freedom, the ability to 'bare all', in every sense of the word, which is very hard to replicate. You realise that you reveal or tell things to people that you never wanted to but end up doing it anyway. Call it plain stupidity but very few things go unheard in the changing room.

People are often judged on their banter - it is your skill and performance that ultimately mark you, but I often hear players asking "what's his banter like?"

It's important to have decent banter as it can make you more accepted. The best laughs I've had in my short life have without doubt been in the microclimate of the changing room.

It is hard to define what makes good banter. Perhaps it is quick-wittedness, tinged with a competitive edge? But it's never cruel, it doesn't really cross the line of being unfriendly, and is often affectionate. Some days the banter is there, other days it doesn't come so easily, much like scoring runs. Fundamentally, it is the banter that unites us, bringing us all on to the same level. You can never escape it when it is your turn to be the butt of the jokes, so it is better to laugh it off, never let it annoy you or at least pretend! 'Biting' is the worst thing you can do and trust me we've all done it.

The inner workings of a cricket team, the politics, and the form all players go through, both personally and as a team, make it a challenging environment. There are few sports where one spends so much time contemplating, questioning, even meditating as much as in a season of cricket. Players arrive early at the ground, hoping to get a good spot in the changing room, usually in the corner somewhere. Then they get changed in front of people they know little about and for some this can be uncomfortable. After that they are back in and out of the changing room for the whole day, spending more or less time in it depending on how successful their performance has been.

You hear a lot of stories about players who throw their kit about after getting out. Sometimes it goes beyond kit, even the occasional broken windows or tray of home baked scones found sliding messily down the walls. There are also some strange screaming noises bellowing from locked toilets and physiotherapy rooms. At the heart of it everyone has their own way of venting their frustration.

So yes, changing rooms do differ from team to team. Some clubs have certain traditions that have been instilled for years. There are different rules for dress code or times of arrival. Some places are relaxed and allow players to arrive in tracksuits, whereas at The Home of Cricket it is blazer, shirt and tie to enter the Pavilion. Others regulate that mobiles are off during the hours of play or that players are not sitting in the physio room checking their Facebook status (not that I have ever done that of course!) Much depends on the infrastructure at the time, the captain, the coach and quite often the success of the team. Often poor performance can result in a tightening of these rules, but rarely is it arriving ten minutes earlier or wearing smarter attire that accounts for the losses. These things should be unconditional and can lead to something of an excuse culture.

The advent of Cricstat has made for an interesting discussion point in the dressing room. A computer logs every ball we face on a hard drive and then this is available for players to see. Quite often when there is a loud appeal we all rush to the computer to take a closer look. "Was that out?" "Gee that was close", are the calls. Some players like to watch it before they go in to bat. The wise individual, the one who knows his game and is in touch with his instincts, never spends too much time on the computer. We all suffer some bad form and maybe a little technical glitch visible on the screen could be the solution. Over-analysing though can mean you end up seeking unattainable perfection. I would not advocate taking this path.

For every player who likes to sit quietly alone, well away from the cricket, there will be an extrovert who prefers to be in the midst of team banter to take their mind off the game before heading out in the middle. I remember once passing a player on my way back to the changing room and telling him that the ball was swinging in and the wicket was slow. He reprimanded me for doing so, saying he didn't want to know that in future.

On the flip side, the changing room can be an unwarranted comfort zone, a place that becomes so familiar it can be daunting to leave. In this haven you have your comforts – the hot cup of tea and biscuits, the newspapers and of course this friendly banter. Suddenly you have to leave this 'second home' and before you know it you are out in the middle, confronting those very real fears and anxieties, about to face that first ball. This is it. You are exposed. There is no hiding place. Sometimes it can be a cold, miserable and daunting prospect. The new ball may be nipping around and that bad form or run of bad luck has just bitten you again. There is nothing for it but to muster your courage, take a deep breath and face the music.

Every changing room holds such an eclectic mix of people; different races, classes, nationalities, ages and of course experience. What brings them together is their ambition to win. When you have built a strong team it makes this extraordinary mix of people and personalities a powerful machine, and it is the dressing room banter that is the oil to make it run smoothly.

But don't get too comfortable. The changing room is the not the place you want to be. Then again, I have spent the last few hours in self-induced solitary confinement writing my blog. No calls, no banter, just lonely silence – perhaps Danny Evans had a point after all!