



Bruises, banter and the joys of pre-season

I can't believe it's come round again so quickly. Another cricket season is upon us and with that it is back to reality and back to business. No more swooning on foreign beaches and topping up the tan or earning millions in the City - this is it! Time to perform and be counted. It only seems like yesterday when my team-mates and I were swapping a bit of changing room banter over the latest scandal in the "News of the World", while Owais Shah was crashing another boundary through the offside.

"Alright dog? Good winter?" is the first greeting I hear upon my return to Lord's. 'Dog' is a friendly term of endearment that our beloved wicketkeeper, David Nash, uses to greet anyone from his missus to, given the chance, the Prime Minister! Over the long winter you miss the characters that make up a cricket team. Nothing quite compares to the wit and repartee that is exchanged among the boys and without it the season could be a tiring and unenvied task.

Pre-season can be a tough old slog, given the early-season weather and the encapsulating feeling of being surrounded by netting in the all-too-familiar MCC Indoor School. It is either that or dressing up like the Michelin man as Middlesex make their first attempt at getting some outdoor practice. Trust me, it is never fun when you are fielding at backward point with freezing winds screaming across the out-ground in North London and Andrew Strauss drilling a succession of thunderous cut shots. However I don't think there are many in the world of professional cricket who can boast a fielding practice in the snow at Lord's, as happened on the weekend before last. This was certainly a first for me and, I'm sure, the twelve other I shared the experience with!

It is great to be back doing something I love. Strapping on the pads and hitting that first sweet shot is the reason we players get up every morning as we strive to further hone the technique that will hopefully bring us success this season.

The great thing about playing a seasonal sport is that you do get time to yourself in the winter months, although it isn't one long holiday. Players might spend these quieter months working on their fitness or making some technical changes to their action. Some of us do go abroad, combining a holiday to chill out with some valuable practice – and the lucky ones will be on tour with England. Others stay at home to try their hand at something else - perhaps a job in the city or writing a book like our Middlesex captain Ed Smith.

Whatever way we spend the winter, it can be a very important time for a sportsman if used correctly. The season is long and the amount of cricket being played means that come the autumn it is good to take some time off and turn your attention elsewhere. If you look at footballers, they play almost the whole year round and although their wage bracket is considerably higher, there isn't much respite for them.

I suppose this leads me on to one of the many issues facing not only English cricket but cricket globally at the moment. With the advent of the highly lucrative IPL and ICL, players are of course inclined to take up the huge financial offers made to them - and why shouldn't they? Like football, perhaps this is an opportunity for cricket's best players to cash in and make some serious money in a way that has never been possible in the past.

For England players like Pietersen it will be interesting to see what developments take place. The system of 12-month ECB central contracts means that at the moment England players cannot play in the IPL or ICL. The knock-on effect is that the first-class counties may switch to 12-month contracts to ensure they keep full control of their assets. The IPL also poses a big threat to the overseas player system. With so many of the big names playing in India, the lure of the pound in county cricket for top overseas professionals is not what it used to be. Why would a top international come to England for a whole season, only to earn far less than the sum he could be paid to take part in the IPL for just a few weeks?

The cricket administrators have many pressing issues to think about and it will be interesting to see how the IPL affects cricket at all levels. With the profile of cricket being higher than ever, it does however make this a fantastic time to be playing the game professionally.

Our first run outdoors in freezing wet conditions was something of a foreign affair. It always takes a while to get back to grips with the pace of early-season conditions. Feeling the sweat on the gloves, the spikes getting caught up in the sticky soft wickets as the first attempt at an attacking shot goes by, the bruise on the index finger as you mistime that first catch in warm-ups, knowing that it will be about the only thing that will remain with you for the next six months. This is what the first month of pre-season games is all about.

Key batsmen need time in the middle to see a few overs go by and bowlers want to make sure that the extra strength and speed they've gained over the winter hasn't altered their run-ups. So for us playing two warm-up games against Essex and Surrey proved invaluable as everyone is pushing to show coaches and captains alike how they can be a sure selection.

It is great to be back with the Middlesex team, having a bit of banter and sharing in the excitement of the new season. So far Toby Radford and Richard Scott have been incredibly organised and therefore practices have been that much more productive. This allows us as players to get on with our own individual development approaching our first championship game against Leicestershire on Wednesday. I'm looking forward to sharing my experiences of the season this year as our batsmen pile on the runs. Oh and if you're lucky enough you might get called 'dog' by a small bald wicketkeeper called Nashy!