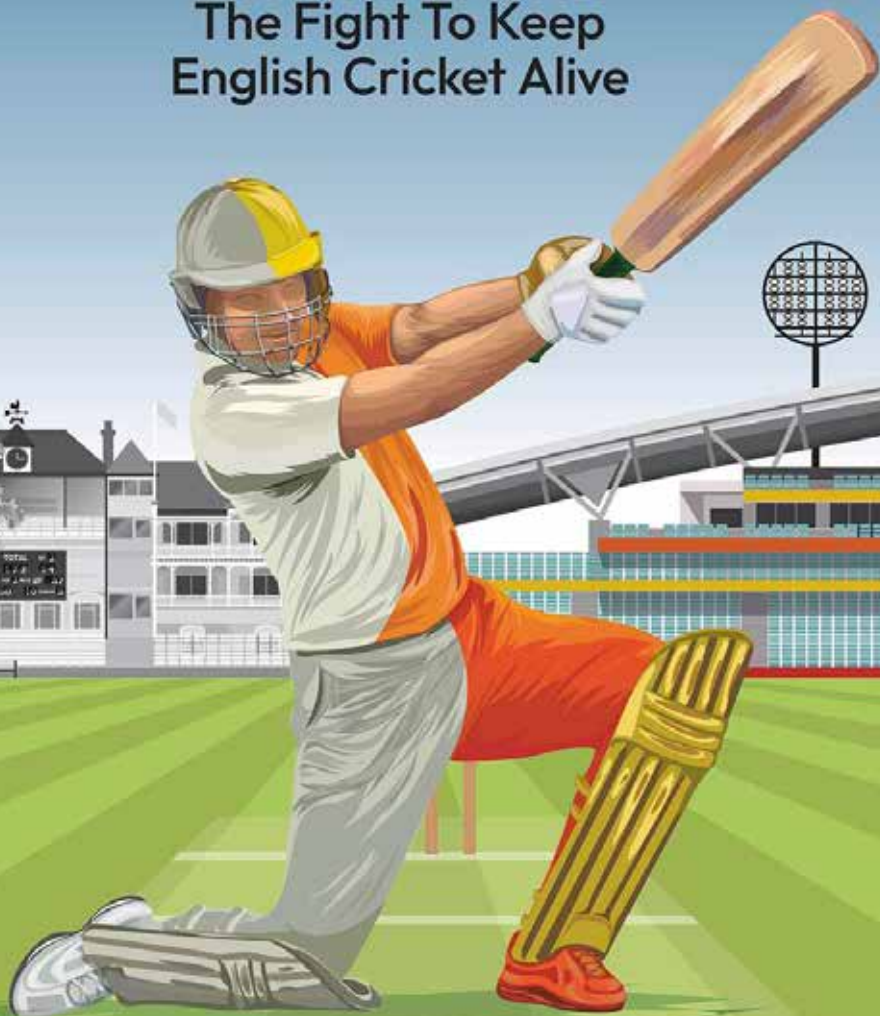


BATTING FOR TIME

The Fight To Keep
English Cricket Alive



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1.

Fightback of the fleas

HOVE, SUSSEX. Early April 2023. Very early. Wet weather has left English domestic cricket's pre-season programme riddled with the words 'match' and 'abandoned' but here, belatedly, is a first (and last) chance to blow away the winter cobwebs on the south coast before competitive action begins in a few days' time.

Sussex, the oldest first-class county – perhaps the oldest professional sports club in the world, but that is an argument for another day – have afforded the University of Exeter students the honour of the match. A smattering of spectators have travelled to support the visiting side, mostly family members of players eager to test themselves against some of the country's best cricketers, plus a few hardy fellow Exeter undergraduates who have made the long journey from Devon for the occasion. In the Sharks Stand, a group of students resplendent in cricket whites break the otherwise polite silence with cheers and hollers in the direction of their peers on the pitch. The bar located nearby will see plenty of custom throughout the day.

From her usual vantage point – two rows back, end of the aisle – in front of the Spen Cama Pavilion, Brenda Lower surveys a familiar scene. A healthy, four-strong Sussex slip cordon readies itself for each delivery with bobble hats atop each head and hands in pockets until the last conceivable moment. It is the kind of chilly day that lures only the most diehard cricket supporter from their hibernation.

Lower, a county member for longer than she can remember – ‘Oh, at least 60 years’ – is only too happy to fit the brief. Among the Hove faithful, Lower is affectionately known as the ‘keeper of the balls’, for whenever an umpire deems a Dukes (or, increasingly, Kookaburra) to be in need of replacing, it is to Lower they come for a delve into the boxes of 5.5-ounce beauties she has been handed each morning for safekeeping.

Throughout the day, players old and new greet her like a nephew checking in on an older relative. Earlier in the year, the club hosted her 80th birthday celebration with club icon John Barclay among those in attendance. On the south coast, Lower is part of the fabric. ‘There are so many people that I’ve met through cricket all over the country,’ she says, a wistful glaze over her eyes. ‘This club is amazing – much better than a big Test ground. It’s a family affair.’

Lower cannot envisage a time when her beloved club no longer exists and her smile does not abate at mention of an uncertain future. Others are less certain.

Much of the talk around the ground is about the winter of discontent that has recently passed. That the ECB, and lead author Andrew Strauss, only dropped their High-Performance Review (HPR) the previous September on the eve of the final round of 2022 County Championship fixtures meant members had little chance to discuss and debate its proposals in the informal surroundings of the cricket-watching stands, a home from home to gather with flasks and home-made sandwiches.

As Lower luxuriates in the start of six blissful months indulging in her greatest passion, the sentiment inside the club’s nearby boardroom is rather more sober. The fallout from the ECB’s review is still fresh. ‘If you wanted to find the worst piece of consultation, the Strauss review is an almost perfect model in how to bungle change,’ proclaims Sussex chairman Jon Filby.

While University of Exeter opener Tom Geffen works his way towards a fine hundred that will guide the students to the heady heights of a draw against their illustrious opponents, Filby rages against Strauss's 'lack of decency' in failing to engage directly with him about the proposals, instead ploughing on without undertaking what he believes was sufficient dialogue with the people its recommendations would most affect.

In just a couple of days, new ECB chief executive Richard Gould (in his latest guise since the days of fielding complaints about sanitary products from a teenage Becca Garrard when at the Surrey helm) will publicly confirm that the two most contentious elements of the HPR – those that relate to the structure, standard and intensity of the three county competitions – are 'dead in the water'. The 2023 domestic structure will remain in place for 2024, barring a few scheduling adjustments for international tournaments. But the fallout from such a highly emotive episode has only just begun.

* * *

There is an acknowledgment among many at the ECB that there were grave errors inherent in the HPR process. When Strauss was asked to lead the project in the wake of England's shambolic 4-0 Ashes defeat in Australia in 2021/22, the national team's former captain insisted on the narrow parameters of solely looking at the game through an elite performance lens rather than taking a holistic delve into the wider domestic structure. Strauss's remit was unashamedly limited to developing a system that would see the England men's side become the world's best across all formats within five years. Everything else was to work towards that sole common goal. 'I think that's probably where we got it slightly wrong,' admits Neil Snowball, previously the governing body's managing director of county cricket, and now in charge of all competitions and major events.

Gould, who only took up his new role in February 2023, is stronger in his criticism, stating bluntly that ‘the ECB lost the dressing room’. During five years as chief executive of Somerset and then a decade in the same position at Surrey, Gould was previously something of a thorn in the governing body’s side, frequently critical of decisions taken from on-high without thought for those at the coalface. The entire period of the HPR took place while he had briefly left the sport for a job at Bristol City Football Club, but he is now back in cricket and tasked with fronting up for a process he – in large part – did not believe in.

‘What we saw was clubs finding their voice,’ he says. ‘Perhaps the ECB also started to re-understand its role as a convenor and a cooperative headquarters rather than a corporate do-and-tell headquarters. Sports ultimately belong to the supporters.’

Of the 17 recommendations Strauss delivered, 15 were within the ECB’s power to implement. They were also largely uncontroversial – non-radical ideas like refocusing the England Lions programme, and developing skills and diversity in leadership roles. However, it was the two related to the domestic structure that proved most contentious.

In these, Strauss recommended shifting the One-Day Cup to April and having the T20 Blast in a block between May and July, while reducing the number of financially lucrative group-stage games in that competition from 14 to 10. The County Championship would see the biggest overhaul, creating a six-team top division with a 12-team second division split into two separate conferences beneath it. All teams would have their guaranteed red-ball fixtures drop from 14 to 10, although the report recommended playing first-class cricket festivals (like a London Cup, between Middlesex and Surrey, or a Battle of the Roses, contested by old foes Lancashire and Yorkshire) while The Hundred was taking place in August.

Crucial, for many of its detractors, was The Hundred's hallowed position as the only competition unaffected, retaining pride of place in the cricketing calendar. The newest tournament's almost entire absence from Strauss's report was explained by a brief footnote, stating that 'the competition has proved its ability to bring new, young audiences to cricket, and its scheduling in the summer holidays is a vital part of this ... we believe its structure and prime-time schedule should be protected.'

A large number of county cricket supporters vehemently disagreed, Gould being one of them. 'People thought it was very hard to look at the summer and the season in the round unless The Hundred is included, because it's an island in which everything else fits,' he admits. 'People were of the opinion that if there's going to be a restructure of the season, everything needs to be considered so that we can keep everything in mind.'

Although the words 'Premier League' were absent from the final document, Snowball confirms the desire to create a cricketing equivalent of football's top tier. 'That was a fairly fundamental recommendation,' he says. 'We want to make sure the best teams and best players are playing against each other. We wanted a more competitive league at the top level.'

For those with realistic aspirations of occupying a place in English cricket's Premier League, the benefits were multiple and obvious. But, with a majority of at least 12 of the 18 first-class counties required to vote through any changes to the domestic game, a schism among the clubs quickly emerged.

A number of traditional county heavyweights – those with Test grounds that also host The Hundred franchises – were believed to support proposals that would likely benefit the game's 'haves' rather than the 'have nots'. Giles White, Hampshire director of cricket, confirms he felt 'three divisions [in the County Championship] would be a positive step forward'. His equivalent at Nottinghamshire, Mick Newell,

says county chairs ‘scared of losing their roles’ meant they ‘missed an opportunity’ in not implementing the review’s proposals.

Conversely, a number of senior figures at smaller counties spoke passionately about the absence of commercial recognition to their particular predicaments in Strauss’s recommendations. Ryan Duckett, Derbyshire chief executive, says voting through what might have been a £200,000 loss for his club would have amounted to ‘self-harm’. Leicestershire chief executive Sean Jarvis maintains the income reduction from T20 Blast fixtures would have ‘been a potential nail in the coffin’. Worcestershire chief executive Ashley Giles says the creation of a Premier League would be the ‘first step to [his club] going out of business’.

There was unanimity among the money-men in charge of counties operating on a modest budget; those for whom seemingly small sums of money are the difference between survival and extinction. At some, there was a sense that perhaps a covert cull was what the ECB were privately angling for. In existence since the Victorian age, a sprawling county structure that grew to encompass 18 first-class clubs is almost certainly not what any governing body would choose if starting anew in the present day.

Despite countless ECB figures insisting they do not want any clubs to fold, that belief persists among many. ‘If the ECB takes the view that there are too many teams then have that conversation honestly and don’t do it by stealth,’ says Gloucestershire chief executive Will Brown. ‘That’s probably the thing that put people’s backs up – the feeling that we are all treated like idiots and we can’t see what is really happening.’

Alan Higham is not an obvious campaigner, nor what he describes as a ‘natural awkward person’. A lifelong cricket lover, he has been a Lancashire member for more than 30

years, adding Surrey and Hampshire membership cards to his collection since moving down south after the turn of the century, and spending much of his hard-earned cash travelling overseas to watch England play on tour. He never expected to play such an important role in the debate over English cricket's future; his passion meant it just happened that way.

Always full of ideas, and eager to champion the rights and thoughts of the cricket fan, Higham sat for some time on the board of the Cricket Supporters' Association – the organisation established in 2017 to be an independent voice of the sport in England and Wales. When the ECB promised to consult with fans during research for the HPR, it did so through the Cricket Supporters' Association. But at some point, Higham's patience with the process snapped.

Fundamentally opposed to Strauss's assertion that less cricket would be of benefit to the English game as a whole, Higham hastily established the County Cricket Members Group with the aim of conducting a grassroots campaign to protect the domestic game. Crucially, he was eager to ensure senior figures across the 18 first-class counties were willing to engage with cricket fans and county members before deciding whether to support or reject the HPR.

'It was a bit of a wake-up for a lot of county fans,' explains Higham, taking in a day's play at Chelmsford with James Anderson making a rare Lancashire outing to dismiss his good friend Alastair Cook. 'People realised it wasn't enough to turn up on your own with your lunchbox. If you really care about it you have to make a bit more of an effort.'

An intense character, fiercely diligent and considered, he was the ideal front man for the cause. With 15 of the 18 counties owned by their members (Durham, Hampshire and Northamptonshire are the exceptions), Higham found himself coordinating a national effort to ensure the voices of the 69,000 adult county members, who formed the total

membership base nationwide in 2022, were heard. Letters were written to county chief executives and chairs, motions tabled at members' forums and extraordinary general meetings called. The demands were simple: listen to us and don't do anything we don't approve without our say so. What they desired was not difficult to ascertain: the protection of cricket (particularly red ball) at home grounds, ideally during prime months.

The death knell for Strauss's final two recommendations had been rung. Before any sort of binding vote could be held, the ECB waved its white flag and accepted the groundswell of opinion was too strong. Whether the required majority of counties would have supported the proposals became a moot point. Any formal count was shelved and the members emerged victorious.

* * *

Stooping slightly as he slowly hauls his giant frame around the Lord's Cricket Ground that has been his second home for the best part of four decades, there is a slight sense of the prehistoric about Angus Fraser. A man who has held most positions at Middlesex during his long career in cricket, Fraser has seen all manner of changes to the county game first hand over time. There was, he suggests, an 'innocence' about domestic cricket back in his playing days of the 1980s and 90s, when he would shuffle to the crease and work over opposition batters with his accuracy, guile and no shortage of toil.

He recalls a time when players would finish matches at dusk, drive 200 miles or more across the country to their next destination and begin again the following morning. Days off would be occupied by playing in benefit matches and evenings filled with other cricket-related events. 'You were pulled here, there and everywhere,' he says. So when it comes to the suggestion that players are over-worked during

the course of an English summer, his natural reaction is to shake his head in disbelief.

‘You’ll hear someone say a player can’t do something because he’s playing in a game in two days and you think: “For crying out loud,” he says. ‘Of course, if players are on a treadmill it’s not going to lead to exceptional performances. But you can go the other way where players are treated like Fabergé eggs and people are afraid to use them.’

When the ECB unveiled its HPR, it did so with a host of accompanying statistics to justify its findings. Paramount was the assertion that players undertake too much cricket. In England, suggested the report, each domestic cricket team plays an average of 79 days of cricket per season, while individual players face an average of 47 days. By comparison, those respective figures in India are 71/37, South Africa 70/43 and Australia 63/41. Each club’s 14 matches in England’s County Championship also exceed the number played in equivalent red-ball competitions in India (12), Australia (11) and South Africa (7).

James Harris, Glamorgan bowler and chairman of the Professional Cricketers’ Association, the players’ union, insists the schedule is ‘too congested for high performance’. On the day before the 2023 season begins – one in which he will claim his highest County Championship wicket haul for five years – he sits down inside one of the hospitality suites at Sophia Gardens after training. Born and raised in Wales, he is now back where he began his journey after a long period at Middlesex. It feels like home.

Harris acknowledges previous generations had it tougher in terms of the basic numbers of playing commitments, but he believes increased scrutiny around the game means there is now far greater pressure on those who are expected to deliver on the field day-in and day-out, pointing to the toxicity of social media as an example. In part, Fraser agrees with Harris. ‘It’s a more unpleasant world than it was,’ says Fraser. ‘It’s harsher.’

But where Fraser believes the summer should remain an ‘endurance test’ that rewards those who commit the most and work hardest, Harris suggests the game should learn from past mistakes. He points to cricket’s well-documented issues with mental health, and suggests long-term player wellbeing – both mental and physical – needs to be given greater consideration.

Upon release of the 2024 domestic fixture list, which confirmed the same volume of cricket would be played as the previous year, Essex bowler and PCA representative Sam Cook criticised the ‘welfare of players and support staff being disregarded’, in particular highlighting the stresses of playing back-to-back T20 Blast games in different parts of the country on consecutive days.

At this point, disgruntled county members around the country might legitimately bellow about the elephant in the room; an ever-growing herd, in fact. If players believe they are being asked to do too much, why involve themselves in the additional commitment of The Hundred and then fly around the world taking part in short-form franchise leagues outside of the English summer?

For Harris, the fact those opportunities exist – and offer far greater riches than county cricket can hope to provide – mean they must be acknowledged and responded to accordingly, regardless of whether someone supports them or not. The short-form leagues cannot just be ignored. So, to the man tasked with representing the entire country’s professional cricketing population, the equation is simple: if English cricket does not adapt, the best white-ball players will leave. And that is something he does not want.

‘Players could earn more money, spend more time with their family, lead a less stressful life and prepare better, which allows them to perform better,’ says Harris. ‘We don’t want to get to the stage where we’re making that decision easy.’

His answer is to make the English domestic summer less taxing, more accommodating and therefore a more appetising

prospect. But, just as all those invested in cricket cannot reach anything that resembles unanimity over the future of the sport, neither can the players. Harris concedes that a red-ball batter will think differently to a white-ball bowler or a multi-format all-rounder.

Asked about his current workload, Derbyshire batter Wayne Madsen points to the fact that he used to play more when he first started and sees no problem with the existing routine. Essex and South Africa spinner Simon Harmer also says he wants the current schedule to remain and ‘can’t see how playing 14 first-class games per season is detrimental to player development’. Former Sussex and Nottinghamshire batter Chris Nash says players should not be allowed to have their cake and eat it. ‘They can’t be paid more and play less,’ he says. ‘You can’t moan about the schedule and also take the money from The Hundred.’

There might also be unforeseen repercussions of cutting the number of matches played in English domestic cricket, warns Sussex head coach Paul Farbrace: fewer games might mean not as many players are required, sparking a reduction in staff members as an obvious way to save much-needed money. ‘The PCA have to be really careful that in saying there is too much cricket, they don’t inadvertently reduce the number of staff at each county,’ he says.

* * *

As a former chief executive of Warwickshire before moving into his county-focused role at the ECB, Neil Snowball is fully accustomed to the financial demands of keeping a county cricket club afloat. He knows what it takes to run a growing business and has witnessed the struggles among some of his former peers in attempting to turn around ones that are contracting. So he fully understands the divisions that Strauss’s review created.

A club with a ground that hosts Test matches, white-ball internationals and The Hundred matches, in addition

to county cricket, has such a healthy supply – arguably, a surfeit – of cricket that the removal of a few domestic games would likely provide some relief. ‘So, for me, if I was still at Warwickshire, [the HPR recommendations] would give me a business model,’ says Snowball. ‘But if I was the chief executive at Sussex, their bread and butter is domestic cricket. I totally get it. Our job is to facilitate those conversations, thinking about how I would have felt at Warwickshire, but also how Rob [Andrew, former chief executive] is feeling down at Sussex.’

Watching events unfold from a ramshackle New Road ground that has neither floodlights nor an indoor school, Giles is acutely aware of Worcestershire’s lowly place in the pecking order and admits he is worried about the ‘widening gap between the boys at the big table and the rest of us’. For the former left-arm spinner, there is a danger that in beefing up the financial heavyweights, the featherweights of the county cricket world might fade into obscurity. For others, the quest to secure more cash for the game – whoever’s pockets it initially lines – is of paramount importance.

‘Money makes the world go round,’ says aspirational Durham chief executive Tim Bostock. ‘We haven’t got cash without international cricket and something that TV is really interested in. They are interested in The Hundred so what we’ve got to work out is where the county game fits into that.’ Bostock insists he would be quite content for Durham not to initially be included in any cricket Premier League so long as the door to promotion remained open. He believes an improved quality of matches should trump many members’ desire for a greater quantity.

On Snowball’s part, he is wholly unapologetic in the ECB appearing to pander to pound signs. ‘Without money the game is screwed,’ he says bluntly, pointing to the fact that the £1.3m the governing body distributes annually to each first-class county for allowing The Hundred to go ahead

continued to be paid even when the tournament did not take place during Covid.

Of course, financial concerns are no modern phenomenon for a domestic cricket structure that has lurched from one crisis to another throughout much of its existence. For almost its entire history, the county game has appeared largely unviable. On the eve of the First World War, Worcestershire and Gloucestershire were forced to call members' meetings to discuss withdrawing from the County Championship (the only domestic competition in existence at that time) due to a lack of funds. Worcestershire did indeed skip the 1919 season and were often close to bankruptcy around the time.

A financial gulf between the strongest and weakest counties that is arguably wider than ever was evident as long as a century ago, when it manifested itself in the large discrepancies in the number of professionals each county was able to employ. The Great Depression brought more tough times in the 1930s, before dwindling spectator numbers caused widespread concern in the 1960s and prompted the development of short-form competitions in a bid to make the sport more attractive.

Rarely has there been a time of calm, yet for more than a century the only alteration to the first-class county make-up has been the addition of Durham in 1992. Some have sought private investment, while others have sold grounds. But not a single county has been lost along the way.

* * *

The initial battle over the HPR provided a resounding victory for county cricket's traditionalists, but there is no expectation of a sustained ceasefire. Few within the domestic game disagree that change is required – on what, precisely, is where battle lines remain drawn, ready for the next proposals, discussions and consultations. Never before has there been such a concerted effort to split the counties,

growing the most powerful to the likely detriment of the remainder.

Now consisting of a network that includes a group of volunteers at each first-class club, the County Cricket Members Group is prepared for another fight to counter the inevitable next coming of the ECB's attempt to future-proof the game, most likely in the form of external investment into predominantly member-owned institutions and the creeping expansion of The Hundred.

'Nobody has an appetite to simply be a protest group or a blocker to things we don't like without acknowledging the fact that the game does face significant challenges,' says Higham. 'We can't just stick our head in the ground, ignore them and say we want everything to remain the same.'

Higham is heartened that one positive of the controversy created by Strauss's review was to awaken a county cricket membership base accustomed to its slumber. His hope is that English cricket emerges stronger from the sorry episode. But no one expects the process to be easy.

His ambitious vision is for a future where all forms of the domestic game continue to thrive. 'Red-ball cricket is like a theatre production in several movements with lots of plot twists, while a T20 is a half-hour sitcom in comparison,' he says. 'You can have both, and both can produce excellent art and entertainment.'

There was a time more than two decades ago, when T20 was in its infancy, that the Hampshire hierarchy were throwing around ideas to boost gate receipts for the novel format. Someone suggested recruiting recently retired Southampton and England footballer Matt Le Tissier as a wicketkeeper-batter for one of the Blast matches. 'We suspected it would bring about 5,000 extra people through the door,' says former Hampshire chairman Rod Bransgrove.

That particular south coast football-cricket crossover never materialised, but it was indicative of the prevailing

attitude towards T20 cricket at the time – one in which counties were sceptical about the new fast-paced competition and required persuading to get on board with what many deemed to be nothing more than a gimmick. But ultimately, they did.

So, too, when the idea for The Hundred came along some 14 years later. Bransgrove describes the persuading factor of the £1.3m annual payment for each club through the ECB as ‘simply a bribe’. The promise of what was, for some clubs, a lifeline sum, ensured the tournament was voted through with a 16-3 majority among the first-class counties, plus Marylebone Cricket Club.

For a sport often perceived to be stuck in its ways, cricket has continually evolved throughout its existence. In the 1960s alone, it abolished the distinction between professionals and amateurs – ahead of many other sports – launched two limited-overs competitions in the form of the 65-over Gillette Cup and 40-over John Player League, permitted matches to take place on Sundays, and allowed counties to sign an overseas player. The sport has never stood still.

When the next set of proposals are put in front of county executives, Snowball is adamant the ECB does not want to ‘squeak in with the required two-thirds majority – you want to get the whole game to support it’. The governing body knows the scale of that task, and the sport remains finely balanced on a knife edge in the meantime. Opinions are rife. Emotions heightened.

Upon their ascension to their positions, there was widespread belief that the county experience of Gould and his former Surrey colleague Richard Thompson, now ECB chairman, would ensure they serve the entire top-to-bottom sport better than their predecessors, notable among them Tom Harrison and Colin Graves, who were frequent targets of ire from the grassroots. That kind of rhetoric, says Gould, is ‘heartening to hear’, but he insists he must

be 'more pragmatic than that', aware that evolution is vital in some form.

'In the past, change may have been encouraged with a fistful of dollars in one hand and a pistol in the other,' says Gould. 'We don't have any more money so we can't encourage people with dollars, and our learnings from last year are that people want to be involved in finding the solutions rather than having them thrust upon them.'

They are optimistic words of cooperation that almost all within the sport will welcome. But, the scale of the task is vast. Watching his Worcestershire side overcome Glamorgan in a One-Day Cup match just six weeks after taking on his new role at the club, Giles was under no illusion as to the size of the challenge: 'I don't think there has ever been a more fragile time for the whole game.'