

Jamie Magill



# IT'S RAINING BATS AND PADS

The Story of  
Lancashire County  
Cricket Club 1988-1996



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## G. Fowler

OH FOR the halcyon summer days of Athers, Foxy, Harv, Was, Daffy, Winker, Bully, Digger, Chappie, Simmo, Yosser and Chuckie! Played beneath perpetually leaden Mancunian skies. Stressed-out umpires fiddling around with light meters which looked like superannuated Geiger counters from World War II: Dickie Bird would turn to David Shepherd and swear on his Yorkshire cap that the apocalypse was nigh from behind the bowler's arm at the Stretford End sometime just before his meat pie lunch. Sure, it looked Stygian and chaotic, but it betrayed a secret code to Betty in the pavilion, 'Get the bloody tea urn on love.' If you were really lucky it might be a BBC televised game in the Benson & Hedges Cup or NatWest Trophy: Tony Lewis moving Hamlet's heaven and earth to keep his syrup on during the rain sweep and Richie Benaud – looking super dapper in his cream jacket and grey slip-ons – opining that the inclement weather may make it slightly more tricky for the finger spinners to grip the ball. You just wished it would rain forever in the coziest living room in the world, until Geoff Boycott turned up in his sky-blue jacket – grinning (PS – if you have never heard of Dickie Bird or David Shepherd, and his nervous jig on a

'live' Nelson, then this might not be the book for you: try something cooler like Raskolnikov or Capote).

But we need to get there first, don't we? You can't have the implacable drizzle (which we all secretly love to bits) without the sun-dappled light which strains our eyes just after tea and sends us to the hand-pulled safety of the Bass Bitter bar staffed by good old Nigel. Ah, Nigel – part of the fabric of the club: an avuncular retired detective from Greater Manchester CID with bullshit stories and whisky nose to match. He would always be there with hearty applause when the hard-earned county caps were handed out in front of the pavilion by Cyril Washbrook or Cedric Rhodes or some other such Lancashire grandee, in the days when players passionately cared about county caps and would wear them with fierce red rose pride – even the international lot. Nig would have a mate (probably an ex-bobby on a final salary pension wedge) who would maintain the strict dressing room hierarchy with an iron rod and spare truncheon from his battles with the Mau Mau; he would segregate the capped players from the uncapped and the colts from the seasoned pros (who would change in separate rooms on different levels of the old pavilion) and maintain the gravitas of the captain's private chamber: even knights of the realm and individual members of the Beatles had to knock on the first-team door before entering.

Bring back the Village Green Preservation Society and the county capping ceremonies; bring back the bucket rattling-benefit games for the veterans and custodians of the club you had never heard of; bring back the spirit of Jack Bond and Jack Simmons and dressing room attendants called 'Spriggo' with their pots of lukewarm tea for the captain – it might make us all feel a bit less lost and lonely. A decent pint of hand-pulled Bass wouldn't go amiss either. Don't tell the

second XI a brew or an ale is on the cards though. They don't call themselves 'The Mushrooms' for no reason – they like to be kept in the dark. There was fun to be had at Old Trafford before Freddie and Jimmy you know!

Weren't A-Levels bloody hard in the 1990s? I can remember now the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach before my French oral exam, trying to memorise my responses to likely questions about *Le Silence de la mer*. Almost 30 years later I can recall verbatim a missive the examiner would receive whether he liked it or not – I had broken blood learning it for two years so it was the least he could do to oblige. I would feel better until I got home and realised his question was actually about the weather or the price of fromage in Le Portel or Michel Platini or Philippe Pétain and my life was actually over. Or so they told me; they said the same rot to the builders and craftsmen who were millionaires by 27.

'Pour von Ebennac une union culturelle entre Les Francais et Les Allemands est devenue une obsession a telle point qu'il ne pouvait pas s'en passer.'

And? So there was this German geezer in *Le Silence de la mer* who was forced on a French family during the occupation; he was blind to the true purpose of the Third Reich and actually thought all the toy soldiers in the Ardennes was a bit of foreplay which would inevitably lead to a deep cultural union between France and Germany. This marriage of art and science and literature and enlightenment obsessed him to such a point that he could not live without it.

You see this quote never actually applied to cricket when I was a kid of about ten. Football, definitely, but not cricket. It was not an obsession and I could – and did – happily live without it. It was, well, a bit too P.J.W. Allott? As in slightly impenetrable? You never said Ian James Rush did

you? That would be plain daft. Or Gary Winston Lineker? Besides, most footballers of this era were too poor to have one middle name, let alone two. That would guarantee you a kicking. So why exactly then do I need to know Paul Allott's middle names? It seemed a tactical device to keep the great unwashed away from the pavilion gates but you just feel things at ten and I just felt it was complete bollocks: as relevant as yesterday and Spearman's Rank Correlation Co-efficient. The announcer at Old Trafford was a fan of this 'G.D. Lloyd' bullshit too but by this (later) stage I was deeply in love with the game and I didn't mind it one bit – it became part of its appeal.

And I thought everything about cricket was much the same: complete bollocks. Why did I have to wait around in the field for 100 years before I got a bat and then be adjudged lbw by Jason Braithwaite who had been out at least a dozen times during his patiently made 37 not out? Or listen to that divvy Andrew Blanchard sing 'Strawberry Fields Forever' in the outfield for seven hours straight until I got near a glove or pad? Deferred gratification is for the bookworms who don't care and entrepreneurs who know deep down they are going nowhere save insolvency. I was normal (at that point anyway) and was not prepared to wait. Why the hell should I? I could wheelie off on my BMX Super Burner and smash some penalties in the five-a-side nets instead: those nice orange nets too – like Dundee United's. It would rain soon anyway and I could bathe in the flotsam and jetsam of World Cup success as the ball hit the rain-soaked onion bag. Or I could sack it all off and go to the leisure centre – mess around in the deep end for a bit with the inflatable octopus or deflate the bouncy castle to see the kids cry or stand in the overhead gallery and tell the fat prawn cocktail sweaties playing squash below to 'fuck off' before disappearing out of

sight to snaffle unclaimed change from the drinks machine for highland toffee and iced gems. Pretty easy choice, right? What would you do? Yes, you.

And the brutal totalitarianism of the primary school regime offered very little cricket solace either. Mr Brown, the headmaster, was a cricket fan; ergo we were not. He once slipped a lad (those Dunlop Green Flash really did hurt) for not knowing who had scored a century for Lancashire in the Roses match the previous weekend. I just looked it up before you do, and it was Neil Fairbrother (or should I say N.H. Fairbrother), who notched 128 against the Yorkies at Old Trafford in the damp May of 1985. When we did have a cricket knock-about then Brown – Broomfields Junior's very own Iago – would join in, unannounced and (of course) unwanted. Any lads who tried to sneak away to the safety of the hop-sotch court would be rounded up and ritualistically shot by the pig bins before woodwork.

There was no cut strip and only around ten yards between the makeshift stumps at either end. This would not deter Harold Larwood, who would produce a rock hard cricket ball from goodness knows where (we were only allowed to play with a Slazenger tennis ball, apparently from Wimbledon) and then steam in off a long run: rolled up sleeves flapping away like deep crimson flags of war. There were no pads or gloves; he was determined to incarnadine the strip with the blood and bone of as many ten-year-olds as possible in 35 minutes. He would then ask for his bowling figures – all smiles and handshakes – and congratulate the half-dead participants clutching cauliflower ears. There is nothing more undignified than a colossal grade A ballbag pretending that he is not; I should know, I have worked with lawyers from big law firms and banks. There is nothing about sadism and psychopathy I am unfamiliar with – you know who you are.



In July 1984 I knew the longitude and latitude of each of the 92 Football League grounds (including those who had to apply for re-election to the Fourth Division) but I wasn't even faintly aware of the Benson & Hedges final taking place at Lord's between Lancashire and Warwickshire: I'm not sure I had even heard of Lord's at this point (I was eight). It was probably just as well because had I tuned in, it may have been for the first and only time – Lancashire won at a canter, after Paul Allott and Stephen Jeffries had shot Kallicharran and co. out for 139 on a spicy deck, but quite inexplicably the man of the match award went to the winning captain – John Abrahams – who did not bowl, dropped a few catches and made a fantastic duck.

The man of the match adjudicator was none other than the redoubtable former England captain and stylish top-order batsman of the 1950s, P.B.H. May, who at the time was England's chairman of selectors. A stunned Abrahams was seen to mouth, 'Who, me?' on the balcony but it was his birthday so maybe this was the clincher? Gin fizz confusion for P.B.H. no doubt, but this would have been too much bullshit for my eight-year-old self; even more foaming bullshit to add to all the above which I simply did not need when I was looking for love. What would you do if you turned up for an evening dinner date and Kirsty was eating cheese and onion crisps and talking about the bad table manners of the bloke with the spicy chicken wings? If Jimmy Greaves had given the man of the match award in the FA Cup Final to the fumbling Gary Bailey ahead of the match-winning piston of Bryan Robson in midfield I would never have written to his *Shoot!* postbag again. Consistency and order is required to attract a lover – not just the odd attractive glance or two.

TV was no practical help for cricket either in the 1980s – certainly not the Lancashire or county version. I

got into the Ashes in 1985 but Botham and Gower played for Somerset and Leicestershire and no one gave a toss about that because they were, well, Botham and Gower. Somerset and Leicestershire – and therefore Lancashire – were irrelevant because it was all about things more much important which transcended the mundanities of the shires: the classy blonde left-hander, the bellicose all-rounder with rock star highlights, the urn, the baggy green, Allan Border, the Windies pacemen. No one much cared about the County Championship, or domestic one-day cricket for that matter. There was no county cricket equivalent of United v Liverpool in the playground; no Monday morning jousting or depression following events at Aigburth or Southport or Lytham and no one swapping P.J.W. Allott for N.H. Fairbrother: Panini stickers knew their shit and cricket was a shit demographic they (quite rightly) couldn't be arsed with. I had no idea that P.J.W. Allott played for Lancashire and nor did I care. It might have helped had ITV's Roses coverage awakened some form of Battle of Bosworth Field sensibilities; it could have done but when the last over started with ten required we were shot off for an advert break to learn about Castrol GTX, Head and Shoulders and Lucozade. Before you could say 'Gold Blend' the match was over and Fred Trueman had no idea what had just happened.

Not even a major cup final could salvage the club problem. I had just started secondary school in September 1986 and on the very first day received one of my biggest bollockings ever from the maths teacher – D.D. Ward – who (in full gown and mortarboard) eviscerated me for writing my name on the wrong side of the exercise book. He also called me 'Magill' which shit me up more than any of Mr Brown's beamers or green (or amber) Dunlop Flash. I had barely recovered from the bollocking, and was already

dreading Monday morning, when I casually turned over to the BBC's coverage of the NatWest Trophy Final which was contested by Lancashire and Sussex at Lord's on Saturday, 6 September 1986. I had been told that Clive Lloyd (C.H. Lloyd) knocked a few about the park now and then and might be worth a go. I watched one ball of that final.

C.H. Lloyd lbw b Reeve 0

He was obviously shit: 110 Test matches, 19 Test centuries and 79 first-class centuries shit. Steve O'Shaughnessy bowled tripe a bit later on and I was desperate for it all to end and for *Telly Addicts* with Noel Edmonds and *The Russ Abbot Show* and *Casualty* to begin. I'd take Bella Emberg and Charlie Fairhead over Lancashire County Cricket Club any day of the week – it was that bad. I loved the Ashes in Australia that winter mind you with the coloured clothing, the night games, the white ball, the huge floodlights, the noisily enthusiastic Australian crowds, Channel 9's exciting coverage and Botham and Gower and Border. Not one Lancashire player shone under the spectacular MCG lights. Had Mike Watkinson smashed Merv Hughes into the dog track at the Gabba or Paul Allott bowled the Aussies out on Boxing Day it might have been different – but they were no closer to that than United were to the First Division title. I had no idea that Lancashire had finished third from bottom of the County Championship in 1986 nor that David Hughes was about to be released from the purgatory of second XI cricket to pioneer a bright new dawn at Old Trafford.

The summer of 1987 was without a World Cup or a European Championship and I was contemplating various modes of suicide: boredom is self-limiting and highly effective. Perhaps I wanted to live (at least until the football

restarted in August) or maybe the winter cricket in Australia had lit a slow-burning fire of love and passion. When N.H. Fairbrother of Lancashire was drafted into the England side for the first Test against Pakistan at Old Trafford I made a point of tuning in.

N.H. Fairbrother lbw b Moshin Kamal 0

Arguably England's finest ever one-day batsman was obviously shit as well! Sod Lancashire: I was almost done with England at this point. Was the cricket malaise more structural and chronic? It was fun watching Gattling and the boys in bright sunshine by the Boxing Day fire but maybe the fun was in the hot and cold juxtaposition not in bat and ball? When you took away the chocolate money and the *Shoot!* annual and the roast beef and the Michael Jackson tape and the luminous socks maybe there was nothing to really enjoy? Maybe you were watching paint dry and waiting for *Grange Hill* on the other side? Or maybe cricket was just plain shit?

There was the odd abridged tasting menu and amuse-bouche to tempt me back to the king willow and linseed oil side of the argument during that unfeasibly wet summer of 1987: Clive Lloyd's televised tribute match at Old Trafford saw a crack Lancashire side take on a Rest of the World XI featuring such luminaries as Gavaskar, Haynes, Border, Richards, Kapil, Qadar and Walsh. I hadn't forgotten Lloyd's NatWest duck the year before so frankly I failed to see what all the fuss was about but I gave it a shot, and it rained – only 18 overs were possible. I took an early lunch with Daphne from *Neighbours* and Mr Benn and friends but a complete afternoon washout followed. At least I had time for lunch. Remember those microwaves in 1987? Two minutes for baked

potato? Dangerous things, microwaves; we thought you could get a Mediterranean tan by just being in the same room. What with Chernobyl and acid rain and Westland and Heseltine it's a wonder we ever left the bloody house in the mid-to-late-80s. What was even more dangerous than nuclear/cold war armageddon, however, was trying to nab a bit of Arctic Roll from the freezer after lunch and go undetected. My parents loved a ruler-clutching audit – Arctic Roll was strictly for Christmas only. Woe betide you if you purloined a sugar almond or a toffee apple or if your straw dropped agonisingly into the ginger beer or bitter lemon mixers in the mini-bar! Blame your sister. They can't disprove it.

It was during this summer I was round at my mate's house and we were messing about with his old man writhing in agony on the settee like he had been kicked by Shergar. He had a 'vasectomy' that afternoon and pushed away his sausages in some sort of protest. I had no clue what this was and as we left the room after our 100th bollocking he told us to leave the cricket on as it would help him nap. It was the Roses match and David Hughes was at the crease. Stoney's dad's reaction pretty much summed up where we were at with all things Lancashire and county cricket back in 1987.

So what changed things up? Well, as above, boredom and solitary confinement for one. Back in 1987 kids did not have bone-tired parents as 24/7 playmates in addition to 24/7 push-button entertainment as well as KFC/McDonald's/BK on tap, Mac and app. Did I mention sweets and sugar stalks? Argos outings? Cinema with slushies and surround sound? Carte blanche on Netflix? Swimming with wave machines and whirlpools because swimming now is too boring? Indoor surfing? Wetsuits? Ice skating? Roller blading? Crazy golf? Rope swings? Water parks? Go karting trips? Go kart trophies and certificates (for coming last)? Adventure playgrounds?

Legoland? Borrowmydoggy.com for breakfast and brunch? We didn't get rewarded for eating a steak with a trip to the zoo and the pleasure of bags of nuts and the joy of a full row of shiny pink baboons' arses scratching for gold and silver in ensemble form. Get the picture?

It might have well been 1947: you were 'seen and not heard' (which meant not seen and not heard) and implored to 'entertain yourself' and 'not to come back until five!' (Which meant eight or nine at the earliest, and – preferably – never.) And we are the generation of parents who feel the guilt?! Only the women get tired of course; their careers are more important than ours (except in the black and white of the pay slips of course) and so therefore is their sleep. As they nap for England, Scotland and Wales we have to produce further rabbits from our arse to entertain our progeny and worry about the overdue report and paying for the bigger house – your wife's t-shirt business will not grow overnight and you need to seed fund that too. It's your job – you said you'd look after her. And we wonder why the divorce rate is sky-high? Explain that one to me please.

So in 1987 we had to bloody well make do. I hated freshwater fishing to begin with but I learned to like it because I didn't get to see a bloke at a circus with a crocodile up his arse bringing plastic flowers out of his left nostril every other afternoon. So after a while I loved pulling roach and perch and bream and the odd carp out of the canal and pissing off the bloke with the sideboards at the tackle shop by asking for '17 pence worth of maggots and no sawdust, you dick!' He once chased us out of the shop with a shotgun with the support of all the locals. For the same reason I got to like boring cricket: I didn't care that the run rate was 1.7 an hour because what was the alternative? Pick up the grass clippings and graze your knuckles to buggery and

back? Read a book from the library about rabbits or bees and pollination? Hang around the rope swing in the park in the freezing cold waiting for a can of Shandy Bass that never arrived? Budgie might bring some chips but he rarely did. I never saw the point in that but I didn't like beer until much later either.

Of course, it helped that some of the cricket was not boring; in fact it was breathtakingly brilliant. I recall the bicentenary Test at Lord's in 1987: MCC v Rest of the World; hundreds for Gooch and Gatting and Greenidge and Gavaskar; Harper defying the laws of calisthenics to run out Gooch and Marshall skittling Sunil on the fourth evening before rain deprived us of a great finish. The first sign of true love I guess was when the rain stopped play; I stopped sulking upstairs or smashing snooker balls or darts in protest in the garage and I started playing dice cricket. When you think about them deeply when they are a million miles away and/or utterly unavailable then you know you are well and truly hooked. A rolled five was out – unless you were Botham or Gower and it was almost always called a 'no ball' – top-six batters had to get two fives to be dismissed and the non-batters just one. Six bowlers made things easier on the dice as did six modes of dismissal (bowled, lbw, caught behind, caught by a fielder, stumped, run out). Like a start-up looking for a NASDAQ solution, it took time and a bit of creative software engineering; Gower stumped Dujon b. Marshall 376 would never pass data room due diligence but we had all the time in the world to fine-tune and finesse. When exactly did we start to rush? And why?