



'When I think of
Worcestershire, I think
of Mitch. He's always
been my go-to-guy.'

Moeen Ali

DARYL MITCHELL

with Frank Watson

Once a Pear...

My Cricket Journey

Foreword by Moeen Ali

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CONTENTS

Foreword by Moeen Ali	7
1. Close of Play	11
2. Finding a Way	24
3. Bret Boy	41
4. Cutting It	49
5. Upstairs, Downstairs.	66
6. Yo-Yo Years (1).	77
7. Ready to Lead	100
8. Staying Up	113
9. Yo-Yo Years (2).	126
10. Where the Heart Is	143
11. A Changing of the Guard	153
12. Rewards	162
13. New Challenges	186
14. Pick of the Pears	205
15. Looking Forward	225
16. Reflections	236
Statistics	249
Acknowledgements	254

CLOSE OF PLAY

IT WASN'T how I'd planned it. I'd always had a hopeful vision of my career ending on something of a high. Perhaps my club, Worcestershire – the Pears – would win some silverware that year. Perhaps, after a season of heavy run-scoring, my final innings would be followed by a walk from the middle of Worcestershire's New Road ground to the appreciation of a packed pavilion allowing me to share the moment with county members, many of whom I'd known for the best part of two decades. I might even have finished with a hundred. But if there's one thing I learned in my time in the game, it's that reality very rarely matches imagination. Generally speaking, I believe, you get what you earn and in professional sport that's absolutely true.

My playing days actually drew to a close on a warm September evening at the end of the 2021 season, the

second in consecutive years to be hugely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. New Road was sparsely populated and the pavilion closed to the public. Though we had won that final game, against Leicestershire, in three days, the victory was not particularly significant. It brought to an end a hugely disappointing season for Worcestershire which had seen us promise much but deliver little. Personally, I had underachieved.

That isn't to say that I was unappreciative of the generous send-off that I received from those that were present, be they players, journalists, staff or spectators. The Leicestershire team had given me a 'guard of honour' as I made my way out to bat in the first innings and the club had made me a memorable presentation during the lunch interval on that last day. When I did make my final walk back to the empty pavilion, having scored 9 not out as we made the 12 runs needed for a 10-wicket victory, those elsewhere in the ground stood in lengthy applause and I was pleased that my parents, wife and children were there. It was real and it was deeply meaningful but it wasn't the stuff of boyhood dreams.

It had been a strange few weeks. Having not qualified for the latter rounds of either of the two domestic white ball competitions we had finished in the bottom two of our group in the County Championship's first stage and been placed in Division Three for the second part. This meant that we had

four games at the end of the season which, in all honesty, were of limited consequence. Of course, as professional county cricketers, all players have a responsibility to apply themselves whatever the circumstances but when there is little riding on results it can be difficult to reach maximum levels of motivation. That might depend, of course, on a particular player's circumstances; a youngster in his first two or three seasons might well be highly driven in any first-class game, a veteran opening batsman who's already made the decision to retire perhaps less so!

It was made clear to me that I didn't have to play in all of those remaining games but even entering the last few weeks of my career, the idea of voluntarily not representing Worcestershire went very much against the grain. I had dedicated my entire professional life to the Pears and I wasn't going to quit early. Also, one was against Middlesex at Lord's and the opportunity to play at 'the home of cricket' just once more was welcome. I might even get a hundred! There I go, dreaming again! In reality, on a seamer-friendly surface, I failed to reach double figures in my last two innings at Lord's, and indeed throughout those last four games never really got myself 'in' at any time.

Retirement and the transition out of a playing career had been in my mind for some time. I had finished my second two-year stint as chair of the Professional Cricketers'

Association in February 2021 and taken up a part-time role as the PCA’s director of cricket operations, knowing that when my playing days ended the position would become full-time. If I had written my own script, that change would have occurred at the end of the 2022 season but events during 2021 dictated otherwise.

I didn’t score the runs that I should have in Championship cricket and I was disappointed that I wasn’t given more opportunity in the Twenty20 games, especially once Moeen Ali had become unavailable after a brief spell at the beginning of the competition. I was especially frustrated to be left out of two consecutive matches that we lost on the road at Trent Bridge and Headingley. However, I was satisfied with the outcome of some honest conversations with head coach, Alex Gidman, and accepted that the club wanted me to focus on the red-ball game for the remaining time, perhaps only making the odd contribution in shorter formats. The thinking was that there were young players coming through who could and should be able to fulfil the sort of role that I had previously.

I agreed, accepting that I would, going forward, be almost exclusively a red-ball player. With that proviso the coaches wanted me to play for another year and I was happy to do so, hopefully looking forward to a final season, a 20th with the Pears, played in a non-Covid environment.

That changed when it came to discussing a new contract about six weeks or so before the end of the season. I was disappointed with the terms offered to me and could not reach an agreement with the hierarchy. In short, I would be significantly better off retiring and if that offer reflected my perceived value to the club it was definitely time to move on.

So it was that my transition into a full-time role at the PCA was advanced by a year. Whilst that was not what I might have planned, I can have no animosity towards Worcestershire. I had a brilliant 19 years at the club, 17 of them in the first team, and as those final few weeks unfolded I became increasingly comfortable with my decision. I was also acutely aware of my privileged position in terms of having a future career in place, and therefore being able to look forward without fear or immediate financial concern, a luxury not many retiring sportsmen enjoy. As my PCA work has clearly demonstrated to me, many professional sportsmen reach the end of their playing careers with limited employment prospects.

I have asked myself whether or not knowing that I had my future so securely mapped out might have just taken the edge off my hunger in terms of run-scoring in my last season and the truth is I don't know. I cannot deny that I was no longer playing for my future and whether or not subconsciously that detracted from my performance, I

honestly can't say. What I do know is that I never knowingly gave anything less than my best even though there were a couple of occasions in that last season when I found myself really struggling in the middle.

Another way in which I am fortunate, I think, is that I can say I reflect on my career with no regrets. It has been suggested that I might have played for England but I find that one easy to deal with; it wasn't my call so it is pointless to worry about it. I don't think I could have done much more than I did in terms of maximising my talent. I know that my name was discussed in at least two England selection meetings and I did allow myself to become genuinely hopeful during the 2015 Ashes series. At that time I was top of the Division One County Championship averages and Adam Lyth was struggling opening the batting against the Aussies, but the selectors stuck with him and actually my own season tailed off a little bit.

Generally, though, I'm not a character that deals in regret, believing that you make your choices and you live with them. I adopt the same attitude, I suppose, when I reflect on turning down opportunities to move to a different county. At various points in my career I could have moved, and I could have hugely improved my salary by doing so, but such decisions are particularly difficult for a local family man. One very attractive option with which I was presented

came not long after the birth of our second child and shortly after being removed from the Worcestershire captaincy. After discussing everything with my wife, Danni, and other members of the family, we made a collective decision that I should stay. Cricketers spend enough time in hotels anyway, and if we hadn't uprooted the family I'd have been practically living in one! Had the domestic situation been different, who knows?

That said, the ties that bind me still to Worcestershire are incredibly strong and whilst I don't look back with regret, I do look back with immense pride at having represented the county of my birth with distinction for such a long time. Winning the Twenty20 Blast in 2018, undoubtedly the high point of my career, was an unforgettable experience and in some ways I regard it as a single, shining reward for my loyalty. A trophy with the Pears undoubtedly meant more to me, my friends and my family than any success I might have achieved elsewhere.

That last game against Leicestershire had finished on a Thursday and there followed a busy weekend of end-of-season activities including informal dressing room beers, a surprise retirement bash arranged by the lads, and the annual Players' Awards Evening. Therefore, there hadn't been much time for the significance of the events of the past few days to really sink in before I went to New Road on the last Monday

in September to empty my locker. As I arrived at the ground I bumped into a couple of the young lads, Dillon Pennington and Jack Haynes, both at the opposite end of their careers from me, but when I reached the dressing room I found it deserted.

That’s perhaps when it actually became real to me that I was no longer a Worcestershire player. I sat in my usual place in the corner of the room by the window for a long time and I can’t really remember my exact thoughts. I did reflect on how different those facilities in the Graeme Hick pavilion at New Road were from those we had in the old pavilion in my early years. Back then, the younger players changed in a different room almost up in the roof space and it was only when you had established yourself as a first team regular that you were allowed downstairs. We even had to knock on the door to gain access to the big boys! I recall not even daring to walk through the senior dressing room on the way to the nets but having to go around the back of the pavilion to use the rear staircase.

By the end of my playing career, things had become very different for the younger players coming into the game and rightly so. Nonetheless, back then there was some value in being aware of your appropriate place in the grand scheme and I do wonder if the increasing lack of patience in the modern digital world has impacted negatively on

young people generally. The increased emphasis on how things look, and the instantaneous nature of a life where information is literally at your fingertips via whichever mobile device you use, has made all of us become less able to bide our time, and young sportsmen are no different. They want instant recognition, high profiles, big salaries and, given how the world of social media has shaped them, this is understandable.

Early in my career, it was simply the numbers on the scorecard which mattered and though that will ultimately always remain the case in a game like cricket, the exaggerated perception that the way things look is paramount has made life more complicated for the new generation. It has become harder for coaches to keep players happy and the increasing involvement of agents pushing the interests of their charges has exacerbated the situation.

An empty cricket dressing room is an interesting space, filled with memories but also with potential; which great players have celebrated or agonised here and who will follow? What triumphs and disasters have been experienced and which lie ahead? I can't say that I recalled certain days or moments as I sat there but it was a special and quite emotional experience and I became lost in thought. I did consider that I might never go into that room again. I took down the pictures of my kids that decorated my

locker, packed up those items of kit which I wanted to keep and threw out some old stuff. I left various bits and pieces out for others to make use of and, unable to resist one last practical joke, I removed all the grips from Jack Haynes’s collection of bats and signed them all, with an accompanying message, on the face. He’d attempted to prank me (poorly) a couple of times down at Lord’s and, as the experienced professional, I had to have what would literally be the last laugh.

Such silliness, fun and frivolity are perhaps what I miss most after retirement. That jocular aspect of life as a professional in a team sport is hugely important. Cricketers probably spend more time together than players in any other game. There are the many practice sessions, the travelling, the time spent in hotels as well as the long hours playing the game. It’s vitally important to commit to the team ethic, to understand the dressing room mood, to engage with it and to play your part in making it work. I can’t even begin to quantify the extent to which my adult self has been shaped by my experiences in various dressing rooms around the world. I wouldn’t say I’ve changed fundamentally – I’m still that kid from the Vale of Evesham who entered a very different professional cricket world at the start of the millennium – but almost everything I’ve learned has been because of the people I’ve played alongside.

My relatively sheltered youth meant that I was unacquainted with a variety of cultures and backgrounds when I embarked upon my cricket career. Everything I've come to understand about Hinduism came from Vikram Solanki, and about Islam from Moeen Ali. Asking other people questions and learning to appreciate the way they see the world and not just how they play cricket has helped me to become a more rounded individual than I might otherwise have been. It's obvious that such development might have happened whatever profession I had pursued but for me it's been in a cricket context.

Seeing other players struggle with periods of bad form and come through it, observing those reaching the end of their careers and dealing with it, recognising when people have made mistakes in terms of behaviour and how they've responded have all been contributory elements of my personal growth which are attributable to cricket and the dressing room environment. I've also been able, through cricket, to travel the world and to spend time in many countries I might not otherwise have visited, to mix with and play alongside people from a huge variety of geographical, cultural, educational and economic backgrounds, all again vitally important in shaping the person I have become.

I'm not usually a particularly emotional person and I had coped fairly well with the events of that last week or

two, unlike my mum who had been very moved, especially during the last game. However, as I sat there on that Monday morning the tears weren't far away. Had I taken one of those opportunities to play elsewhere, I never would have felt like that. I wondered how many players beginning at county level would ever spend so many years at one club. In a changing cricket landscape of franchises, loans and routine transfers, the likelihood of spending an entire career wearing one badge was receding. How many future players would, like I did, play in all versions of the game? The global impact of shorter forms of cricket and the potentially life-changing sums which players can earn by focusing on the white ball has seen the likelihood of players of my type – a home-grown, one-club man playing in all formats – decrease significantly. And that's not to make a value judgement of any kind whatsoever, just to recognise the evolution of the game.

I also stood on the pavilion balcony for a long time and just took in my surroundings. Considered, I suppose, to be amongst the most famous in cricket, the view across to Worcester Cathedral simply never loses its appeal and players appreciate that too. I knew I would miss it and though I'd come to the ground as a spectator in future, it wouldn't look quite the same as it did from the dressing room. I strolled out to the middle of the ground to give one of my playing

shirts to the groundsman, Tim Packwood, as a gift to his son and on the walk back I took one last look at the ground from the inside, so to speak. I can't properly describe my feelings at that point; there were probably just too many to process.

I put my stuff in the car and climbed back up the stairs for one last time. When we were replacing some furniture at home a few years earlier I had brought an old sofa in to make the dressing room a bit more comfortable and as I took a final glance through the door I remember thinking, 'That's my sofa.'

I decided to leave it.