

A cricketer in white gear is shown from the waist up, holding a cricket bat high above his head with both hands. He is wearing a white shirt, white trousers, and white leg pads. A red cricket ball is visible in the foreground on the left. In the background, a large Gothic cathedral with two prominent spires is visible under a clear blue sky. The scene is set on a green cricket field with a white stumps in the foreground.

THE SECRET CRICKETER

ENGLISH CRICKET FROM THE INSIDE

THE SECRET CRICKETER

ENGLISH CRICKET
FROM THE INSIDE



Contents

Foreword	7
Acknowledgements	11
1. Starting Out	13
2. Making It.	33
3. Treadmill.	68
4. Feeling Like A Rock Star	118
5. Country File	146
6. Pressure.	162
7. Coaching and Coaches	185
8. Leadership	210
9. Hiring, Firing, Earning, Recruiting and Moving	229
10. How Lucky Am I?	254
11. Around The Grounds	264
12. When the Treadmill Stops	274

Starting Out

I'M NOT sure how long cricket has been my life. I can't even remember the first time I held a bat in my hands or threw a ball at someone or something, it was that long ago.

Every young sportsman or woman has a support system as they make their way: parents, coaches or siblings. But if you are going to make it, that's all they are, support – not someone or something to blame if it doesn't happen for you.

You could be the most talented player in every junior team in your county, and even one of the best at your age in the country. You could be fast-tracked into the county second-team at 17, have the best equipment and access to great facilities and coaching.

THE SECRET CRICKETER

Everything could be there for you to help you make the transition, but only you can make yourself good enough technically, physically and, most importantly, mentally so that when that opportunity comes you grab it.

All those things I've mentioned happened to me in my formative years. I showed an aptitude for ball sports very early on. I was playing two years above at the age of nine, facing loads of future Australian Test stars at 15 and playing county second-team cricket three months after my 17th birthday. I trained like a maniac, I watched my weight and I wanted it, I really wanted it.

In my mid-teens I had to overcome a pretty traumatic episode when probably one of the best-known coaches in the world tried to change my game so fundamentally that a few weeks later I turned up at games dreading the thought of even walking on to the pitch. Quite a few contemporaries who worked with him at the same time were ruined by his methods and their chance of a career in cricket disappeared. But I was mentally strong even then and got through it.

So here are a few things that happened when I was finding my way in cricket, how I approached and

STARTING OUT

how I responded to different setbacks and challenges. I think for young players and parents they are still relevant now.

The right school – does it make a difference?

I coach kids occasionally nowadays, enough to get a sense of whether the development of young players has improved in the past 20–25 years. Some of these boys and girls have been educated in private schools, with the access to better facilities that gives them. Their parents are also happy to pay me £70 an hour to operate the bowling machine and encourage them along. Happy days. I have also worked with a lot of promising young players free of charge to try to help them in areas where they may not have had much help, so it's not just about taking a bit of spare cash off parents I can assure you.

In 2020, statistics showed that 43% of English professional cricketers were privately educated yet only 7% of the total school-age population in the UK go to public schools. That first figure is probably going to keep rising as more and more state schools sell off playing fields and fewer teachers provide

THE SECRET CRICKETER

cricket coaching after normal lessons. Those two things were just starting to happen when I went to school.

Does your school make any difference to your chances of making it? That figure of 43% suggests being privately educated does give you a decent advantage, but it still means more than half who come into professional cricket do so via state schools, universities or the club system.

The most important thing to remember is you are never more than a few miles from a cricket club in this country, whether you live in a city, town or a village. And there are coaches and volunteers working at local clubs who will be able to spot young talent and push it in the right direction, through their own contacts in county or Minor Counties cricket. So, is it access that stops young boys or girls being full-time cricketers? Are there advantages to living in certain counties? Does the cost of kit have a big impact on who can or who can't play cricket? The sport's lack of visibility is a much bigger issue, as has become apparent in recent years.

In my opinion, if you turn out to be good enough the opportunities to become a pro are the same now

STARTING OUT

as they were when I started, whatever way you get there, and there are many different routes to the top. It is simple when you think about it. We still have 18 counties as we did 20 years ago, so we still have around 400 players who can make a full-time living out of the game. And that's not including players who play Minor Counties cricket for two or three days at the weekend and supplement their income by coaching in schools, often in the private system but sometimes for those enlightened state schools who still provide cricket facilities.

Of course, you've still got to have talent. When I speak to parents, some are anxious that the 'pathway' their kids might end up on in a county's junior or academy set-up will not improve their chances, that they will get swallowed up in 'the system' like hundreds of others.

I have one response to that. If they are still in the system by the age of 15, they are – technically at least – almost certainly going to be good enough to progress. The rest is up to them. If you cannot drive yourself to be among the top 400 or so in the country then you should think about doing something else. If you are good enough, you will score the runs or take

THE SECRET CRICKETER

the wickets that get you to professional level. The rest, particularly being mentally strong, is up to you.

This is something that I have heard repeatedly over my career. When I mention that I am a professional cricketer I often hear the same sob story, 'I played for my county at 16, could have made it but the selectors preferred x or y.' That's fine, but if you didn't make it because one coach didn't like you, I can categorically say you wouldn't have survived the continual setbacks that would have come your way between the ages of 16 to 19.

This is common across all sports. I understand and have sympathy for those who have opportunities taken away by injuries or illness. But, if you were good at 16, and it would have taken another two or three more years of really hard work and sacrifice so one day you could play in front of 30,000 at Lord's, don't tell me some idiot in a tracksuit stopped you.

Professional cricket is 40 people fighting for one career. Work as hard as you can, give it everything, and if you don't quite make it be proud that you gave it a right go. Don't sit in a bar and tell me you were/are as good as me and all my peers when we have worked for everything we have achieved. Don't tell me about

STARTING OUT

your 3-60 in the under-15 club final and expect me to say you're unlucky to not be playing for a living week in, week out.

Don't just play cricket

I have a sibling who was also a very good sportsman, which is not unusual. It certainly helped me no end. He probably could have played professional sport as well, but he decided it wasn't for him. He still loves sport and has been my biggest supporter throughout my career.

My dad was also a keen sportsman and helped me so much by just being there, never pushing me and allowing me to make my own mistakes while enjoying the ride. We regularly share a beer and laugh about the times he was so nervous he could barely speak, or would hide in the ground holding a random bit of metal or wood he had found walking around the boundary while watching my last successful innings and decided it was a lucky omen!

So many of my peers had expectant parents and that is the hardest thing I have seen and continue to witness in sport, not just cricket. Plenty of parents are wonderfully supportive and I don't see anything wrong with a parent who will do whatever is needed to help

THE SECRET CRICKETER

their child to achieve their dreams. Mine largely left me alone, apart from taking me everywhere. Others may provide this, but also pay extra for specialist coaching or training.

It is the ones who try to live their lives through their kids that cause the problems. These kids grow up to be adults that end up resenting the game and the miserable existence it gave them. If a player makes it to the top, it is down to their drive and hard work. When you are out there in the heat of battle, it is you who is accountable. No one else.

There aren't too many players who make a career in cricket who have been pushed so hard they end up hating the game. Encouragement from a parent can be so important. A player who makes it and enjoys it hasn't been pushed too hard. That's important.

Playing a wide range of sports was key to my development. I see so many kids being pushed away from other sports so they can focus on doing their gym work and whatever the strength and conditioning coach decides they want them to do at that time. I can safely say that playing a range of sports helped me develop physically for cricket, and also gave me an all-round enjoyment of sport in general.

STARTING OUT

To see young kids doing all these drills makes me wince a little. Go and play tennis or squash, build your hand-eye co-ordination in a fun and free environment. Once you turn pro you are going to be a cricketer 365 days a year. There will be no time to play other sports, so let young players loose and allow them to develop naturally in a variety of sports.

A lot of coaches won't do this as it isn't something they can control. I have worked with enlightened coaches who encouraged tennis in the winter, or some five-a-side football, and others who would barely let you leave the house unless it was to go to the gym or running track.

Fitness levels in English cricket have gone through the roof during my career. There are still plenty of players who don't quite fit the mould of what a professional athlete should look like, but remember cricket is fundamentally a skills game.

The fitness side should always have a relevance to the sport, and this is something games like squash, tennis or badminton can really enhance, as well as providing the competitive element. It also gives players a break from the monotony of going to soulless gyms in the basements of county grounds, trying to motivate themselves.

Have some heroes – even if you can't emulate them

I was encouraged to play by a coach at my local club who saw me throwing a ball about and made sure I joined a team and started my cricket journey there and then. These people are invaluable to the game and I have huge gratitude to the amazing volunteers and organisers who allow kids to play the game in clubs all over the country.

The media love to show pictures of England's newest star when he was a freckle-faced kid picking up his first trophy at the end of season awards. Or they dig out a nice headline in the local paper and find the coach at his first club who put him on the road to stardom. At that age it's nice for the ego, being the best at sport also makes you popular at school.

When I was growing up cricket was still on terrestrial TV so access to your heroes was readily available. Mine were Michael Slater and Merv Hughes. Slater was the Aussie opener who lit up the 1993 Ashes by trying to hit every ball to the boundary. I even had the same Gray-Nicolls bat and pads as him, handed down from my older brother. I liked Slater, he was a bit rogue, and I guess the equivalent

STARTING OUT

Englishman at the time was Robin Smith, someone else I liked. Big Merv was *the* big personality in the Australian team at the time. His moustache and the way he seemed to bully the England batsman. If, like me, you wanted England to win it was horrible, but fun to watch at the same time.

I was a cricket badger. When *The Cricketer* magazine came out every month I'd cut up the articles and rearrange the layout so I was in all the headlines. I used to pore over the reports and scorecards in the paper every day.

I once bunked off school to go and watch a county match which was televised, and the headmaster spotted me in the crowd and sent the deputy head to our front door the next day. They got short shrift from my mum, 'TSC wants to be a cricketer and he'll learn more watching cricketers than sitting in your classroom' – and slammed the door in his face.

These days it might not be considered healthy by parents for kids to be so obsessive about something. Just be as supportive as you can. If I'd wanted to be a bookseller or a flower arranger my parents would have driven me to the library or the garden centre. Most parents are the same.

It helps to remember where you came from

I would say I had a fairly privileged childhood; my parents did everything to make sure I was happy, and I will be eternally grateful to them for this. I went to the local comprehensive, I sat on a park bench getting pissed and I'd go to the youth club where, fuelled by cheap cider, I'd act a bit lairy. My school reports all said the same thing, 'Loads of energy, bright spark, could do better.' I got enough A levels and my parents always provided for me, but most of my gear was handed down by my brother and for years I carried my cricket stuff around in a travel bag.

Many years later, if I was struggling for form I would think back to my formative years when I started falling in love with cricket as a way of reconnecting with the game again. Sometimes, I would drive miles just to walk around the outfield where cricket started for me, remembering games I played as a kid. I've had a lot of setbacks in my career, as every professional sportsman does, but I've never lost my love for the game. That definitely helped me play for as long as I have.

One thing which makes me laugh is when the next big thing returns to his club after playing in his county's second team and struts around like he is Ben

STARTING OUT

Stokes. It is crap, and I get how opponents end up spending the day abusing them and wondering how the fuck they can act like that.

It is a bit embarrassing. I have seen county pros turn up for club games in a lease car which cost them their whole monthly wage wearing their county shirts with their name on. Why? They are massively insecure, but to them it is a way of showing everyone they are good. I try to motivate young players to get really stuck in; what better way to earn respect and support than by giving your all in a game of club cricket and helping your team-mates. I have seen so many county players who get sent back to play club cricket then act like complete pork chops. Give a little back and help the club players, maybe even stick around for a beer afterwards because you never know when you might need their support. Actually, you probably need it now because while you're helping take the covers off on a Saturday you could be playing at Lord's and enjoying sticky toffee pudding for lunch!

Stick at it

You'd probably be reported to the authorities if you did this now, but I remember one summer when I

THE SECRET CRICKETER

was 14 or 15 playing for 30 successive days out of 32. Any game going, I would put my name down for. I would turn up and play for other teams, even though I knew I would be batting at No.11 and not bowling, just fielding.

A couple of times when I realised I wouldn't be batting again there would be tears. 'I just want to play,' I'd bawl at the coach. I still see him now, and we have a laugh about it. It wasn't nice but it taught me some really good lessons:

Be patient

Work hard

When you get your chance take it or don't moan

Don't be a prick

At 17, I broke into the club's first XI and was playing against county pros in the league on a Saturday but only batting at No.10. The coaches realised that was too low and moved me up the order. I never made any threats about leaving. An older player made way and a new guy came through and that was the way it happened, through evolution and good communication.

Speaking to the coaches at my old club now, I realise how much things have changed. A lot of lads

STARTING OUT

aged 14, 15 or 16, especially those who have been privately educated and are told they are the best thing since sliced bread, can't accept a hierarchy that means when they turn out for their local club on Saturday that they might have to play in the second or third team and perform consistently before they get a chance in the firsts.

Instead, they tend to piss off to another club, even if the facilities and standard of cricket are lower just so they can say, 'I'm in the firsts, I score loads of runs' and feel good about themselves. What they don't realise is that the opportunities to be spotted, nurtured and perhaps play age-group cricket for your county become less frequent the further down the leagues you fall. No coach ever looks beyond the top division of his county's league to spot players who may have slipped through the system. And, of course, playing against good players, whatever age you are, improves you.

Train smart

When I was young, if I wasn't playing cricket or another sport I'd go running to improve my fitness. I should have been lean and mean given all the exercise

THE SECRET CRICKETER

I did but I was conscious even in my mid-teens that some of my contemporaries were more ripped than me. Stupidly, instead of training smarter, I thought I needed to lose weight so I could develop a six-pack. Some days, all I ate was lettuce sandwiches. Thankfully, understanding of the importance of a balanced diet is an area of the game which has improved markedly. Back then coaches were so uneducated about it. They could not tell who was naturally fit, or if someone needed to reach his absolute optimum just to pass a basic bleep test.

Nowadays, a lot of cricketers still struggle with body image. For every pro sitting in the weights-room after a session posting a picture of his ripped torso on his Instagram feed another is hiding his belly folds under a towel in the corner of the dressing-room. I'll return to this topic later on because I think it can become an issue.

Setbacks can be good for you

I was lucky. Apart from the odd tearful outburst when I didn't get a bat, I coped well with setbacks from a fairly early age. I'd be pissed off, like everyone is, when they get out for nought or their bowling is taken apart,

STARTING OUT

but it didn't put me off. I think it was my inherent love of cricket, and everything about the game, which gave me that resolve. Nothing was ever given to me. I didn't mind playing in my brother's oversized pads or waiting until my gloves and boots literally fell apart because I'd used them so much before they were replaced.

If there is one thing I have learnt in the past 20-odd years which I believe is fundamentally more important than anything else in terms of a player's development, it's that if you're going to make it to the very top, or even the level just below, you have to have overcome setbacks in your development, whether that is getting dropped, having a shit season (not a few bad games which happens to everyone) or a serious injury. As I alluded to earlier, mine came when a top coach nearly ruined me. I'll talk about this more in the chapter about coaching.

After I became a professional, I saw lots of youngsters follow me into the county's professional squad who had a gilded career at junior level and who were clearly talented. And then, when they came up against players who were as good as or better than them, they struggled to cope.

THE SECRET CRICKETER

Once you leave the schools and junior system it's a different game for a 19-year-old who is used to having his arse wiped and his ego massaged for ten years by his coach, whether it's in the academy or at school. We've all been there to some extent. But as soon as you join a county as a pro, for every young player there are 15 experienced ones desperate to assert himself. You have to learn quickly how to deal with this shit.

I hear about gun players in academies all the time. And all I want to know is how they react to their first big setback. During my career, you can count on one hand the players who have made serene and uninterrupted progress from their first game of organised cricket all the way to the top and a long England career. There are always pitfalls.

In county cricket everyone knows each other. It is a small world and I am always interested when I hear about the next big thing. There is always the player who bursts on to the scene, gets all the press attention and sometimes attracts a few nice sponsorship deals before they have even hit a ball. They come in and make a few pretty fifties in their first season and everything looks rosy. Some get picked for England

STARTING OUT

and flourish, but most disappear very quickly never to be seen on a county ground again.

When a player becomes a pro it is the first step on the way to a long and rewarding career. The biggest challenge comes when they are faced with the gnarled veteran who has been around for 25 years. A dependable old seamer can play with a 19-year-old like a cat with its prey, tossing him and turning him until finally he puts the youngster out of his misery by whacking his front pad. This is when you find out if the player has more about him than just a glittering junior career against his private school peers.

I like to see how a young player bounces back from these early experiences. Do they become the bitter player at his club, moaning to his opposite number in second team matches that they should get more chances? Or do they take their medicine, work hard to overcome the problems and aspire to come back stronger and more prepared for the big bad world of professional cricket? These are the players I watch out for and believe could reach the very top, and if not have long and rewarding careers in county cricket.

My own setbacks did leave mental scars because all of a sudden I doubted if I was technically good

THE SECRET CRICKETER

enough. Fortunately, a couple of key people in the county I ended up at thought I had enough talent, allied to my enthusiasm and dedication, to work with. I was told I *could* be a pro, and that was enough to make me work hard enough to *become* a pro. There are a lot more of us who were like that when they started than not.

I know without any doubt that the setbacks I have encountered during my cricket career will help me for the rest of life; I know I can deal with them, and I am stronger for my experiences.