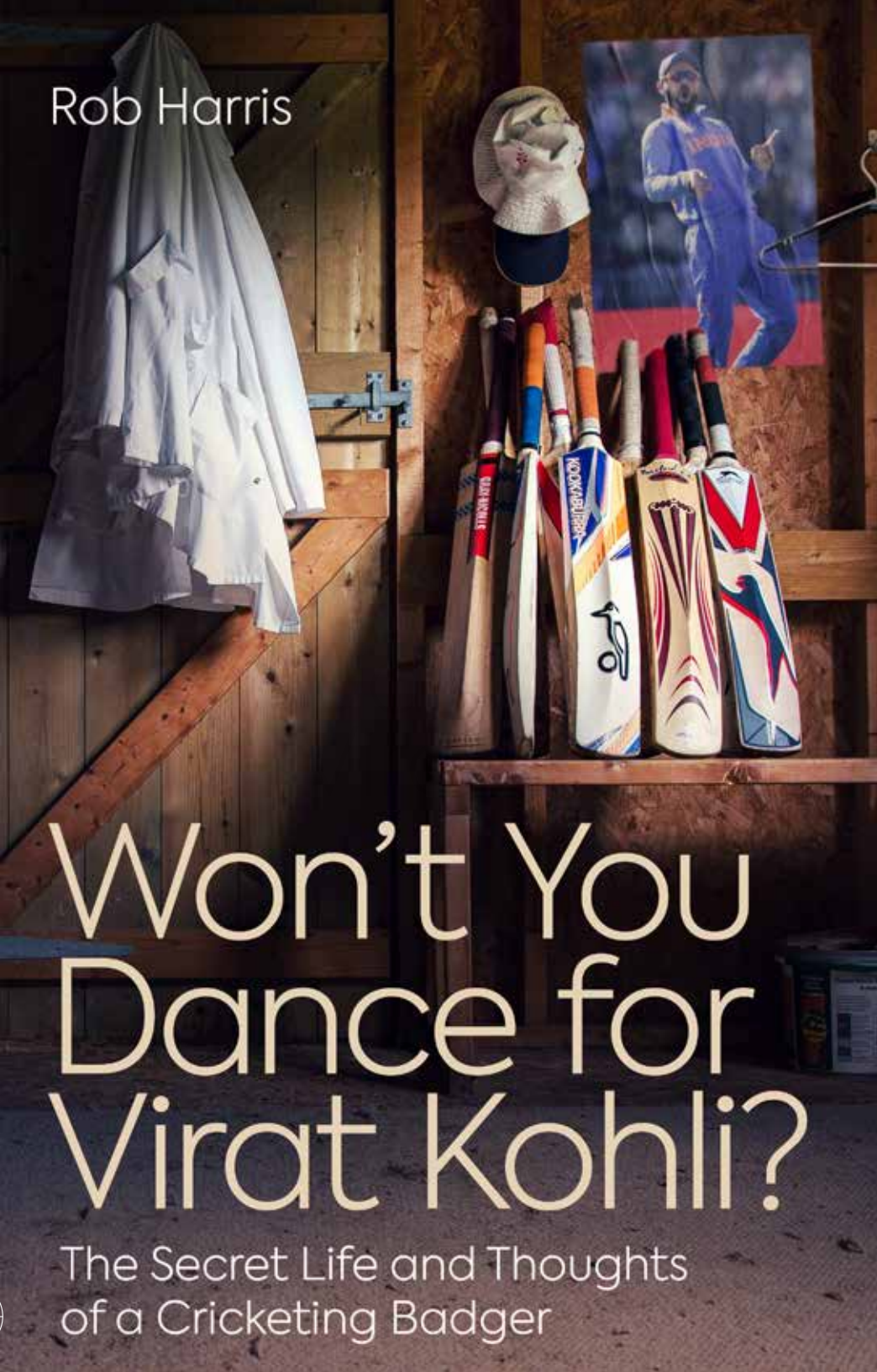

Rob Harris

Won't You Dance for Virat Kohli?

The Secret Life and Thoughts of a Cricketing Badger

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DON'T ALL BOYS WANT TO BE VIV RICHARDS?

'It's not fair, why do I always have to be England? Just cos you can hit it into the cabbages, it don't make you West Indian.'

WHAT QUALIFIES me to write a book about cricket? On the face of it, absolutely zilch. Zero. Zip.

Am I a decent player? No, distinctly average – though I have been known to talk a good game. What about captaincy skills? Sorry, I'm far too selfish to think about anyone else's on-field problems besides my own. Can I coach? Does teaching my daughter the lyrics to 'Living on a Prayer' count? A statistician then? Or maybe a historian? This is starting to get a bit embarrassing.

But wait a minute, cricket is essentially a game of disappointments and failings played by failures. Am I a failure? Proudly, I can hold my bat high in the air and take my rightful applause. 'Yes sir, I am that man.'

My claim to understanding cricket is that I know what it is like to be bowled by a nine-year-old girl in a club match and face the long walk of shame back to the pavilion, past smirking opponents and bystanders. And I know what it's like to be dropped from a team that has only ten available players. I understand too, that feeling of guilt after spilling the simplest of dolly catches, attempting to spare my blushes with the most outlandish of excuses – I wasn't ready, the sun was in my eyes, a low-flying peregrine falcon distracted me – only to better that achievement by grounding an easier chance the very next ball. I even know what it feels like to collide with my batting partner whilst attempting a run, losing my trousers, dignity and wicket in one fell swoop.

'But unless you've played at the top level, you can't really know the game.'

The above is an oft-used phrase, usually repeated by retired Test match greats, who have walked straight from the middle into the commentary box (with little journalistic experience) in order to criticise umpires, administrators and occasionally know-it-all supporters like me. I've always felt some sympathy for those in their firing line because I'm not convinced the greats in any walk of life are always finely in tune with reality. I'm guessing, for instance, that neither Steve Smith nor AB de Villiers has ever eaten so many doughnuts at tea that they cannot physically bend down to pick up a ball in the field afterwards. Nor drunk three pints of gin and tonic whilst waiting to bat next. I am not proud of that particular innings on tour (more of which comes

later) – I was old and foolish. And yes, I failed to score a run although, in my defence, the ball seemed like it was jagging around all over the place that afternoon, unlike my eyes.

Since the age of 12, cricket has consumed me and my life and I don't really understand why. From that age, I've consistently played this silly game of bat and ball pretty much every summer, from April through to September. For at least half of those years, probably more, I barely missed a Saturday or Sunday game. Consequently, I rarely attended family parties or weddings and generally shunned holidays and steady girlfriends. I missed out on so much real life. Over those four decades, I must have forfeited at least 1,600 spring and summer days to sneak off with this domineering cricketing mistress I both love and despise. That's more than four years if you add it all up, 38,400 hours, 2,304,000 minutes, 138,240,000 seconds and counting.

It's not just the playing time, either. Oh, the hours, days and weekends I've given to pretending to work on the club's ground whilst idly standing about doing nothing, or messing around at net practice, or driving to away matches, or sitting in the dressing room after games, reflecting quietly on the afternoon's play with pint and jockstrap or something else in hand, or reliving matches all over again with team-mates, for better or for worse, in bars and pubs, into the small wee hours of the morning. The stuff of dreams; celebrating successes and drowning sorrows. But it's much worse than even that. For every hour I've spent playing or preparing for cricket,

I've wasted at least two or three in 'cricket contemplation'. That's a further eight to 12 years of my life lost to 'mental dribbling', usually whilst lying on my bed listening to Madness, Bruce Springsteen or The Boomtown Rats.

Imagine what I might have accomplished if I'd better used those lost hours? I could have read every modern classic or developed useful everyday DIY skills that would have saved me a fortune whenever I had to turn to a plumber, an electrician or a mechanic. I once poured ten litres of oil into my car because someone told me it needed topping up. I had to drive to the garage with the windscreen wipers on because there was so much smoke. I explained all to the mechanic and asked him where I could locate the dipstick? I couldn't have served him up a juicier half-volley, as he fixed his gaze firmly on me and said 'I'm looking at it.'

The Laws of Cricket were drafted in 1744. They've been revised a few times and are owned and maintained by the MCC, basically a private London club. We're talking 42 Laws with a capital L; a code by which the game itself survives, outlining how it should be played and, to some degree, how men like me must behave. When I'm late home from the pub because I've been celebrating a victory in which I scored a few runs, I'm also celebrating the fact that temporarily, I feel good about myself and my standing as a human being – as if making fifty runs in a meaningless Sunday friendly proves I deserve my place on this strange rotating rock, the third one from the sun, which interacts incredibly closely with the sun and the moon and various other

space objects. No woman I've met has ever understood this kind of thinking, which readily encompasses the beginning of creation and the efforts of Charles Lennox, the Second Duke of Richmond, and Alan Brodrick, Second Viscount Middleton, who drew up cricket's articles of agreement all those years ago to shape the game that we know and play today. 42 Laws, with a capital L. A code for the generations. The building blocks of so much befuddled DNA.

I started playing cricket for Speech House CC, my dad's club, in the heart of the Forest of Dean and surrounded by woodland on every side, during my first summer at secondary school. I played there until I was in my late 20s, around the time my mother died of a heart attack. There were no houses in picturesque Speech House. No catchment area. Players got old and died and so did the club. I joined another village team, Ruardean Hill CC, playing at the highest point of the Forest, overlooking the towns and villages that used to be mining strongholds. Both of my grandfathers worked in these pits and had I been born in a different era I would have done so too. I know I would have hated every minute of an underground existence just as they probably did.

Cricket continued to come before family until my wife died suddenly, aged 40, following an op that was supposed to be routine. Suddenly, making runs for the Hill didn't seem so important. Today, I live in Oxfordshire and turn out for the Astons, a Sunday side who play in the right spirit. It's nice to win but it doesn't

matter. It's generally 35 overs per side then off to the pub. Or sometimes, these days, straight home.

Now in my early 50s, I'm at the stage of life where I look back as much as I look forward. And when I reflect in the rear-view mirror I see cricket running through huge deserts of so many thoughts, deeds, words and actions. It's hard to comprehend how much this game has shaped me. Defined me. Lifted me. Ruined me. I know my best days are behind me in most aspects of life but still I want to achieve more and get better. In 40 years of playing cricket I've made one solitary century but I kid myself there's still plenty of time to score three or four more.

Picking imaginary teams was a favourite pastime of mine when I was a schoolboy. I regularly chose my own England teams, world XIs, all-time world XIs, school teams, club teams, county sides, all-time county XIs, fat boy XIs, worst XIs, funny name XIs; you name it and I had a side for it. I would often imagine myself as chief selector, holding sway in delicate meetings over Peter May or Ted Dexter. The imaginations of a teenage boy eh, lying on my bed with twisted thoughts of lording it over Lord Ted. I could while away whole winter weekends playing my own roll-the-dice Owzthat matches, or sometimes Test Match – arguably the best cricket game ever invented.

My make-believe England teams would go off overseas, usually to Australia, where I'd play entire tours in my bedroom, meticulously logging every detail of every match. A good performance in a state match could

get a player into my Test team. Devon Malcolm, to my great frustration, once scored 235 batting at number 11 versus Queensland, making it impossible for me to omit him from the third Test match of the series – especially as England were 2-0 down at the time and had just been bowled out for 38. I hated it when tail-enders made absurd scores but what could I do? When Phil Tufnell got 150 in the fourth Test and Devon followed up with 77, I decided I had to take swift action so, from then on, I halved the scores of every player batting 8, 9, 10 and 11. Devon was so prolific I had to quarter his runs. I had imaginary conversations with him in my head and he was far from happy with my decision-making and lack of trust in him. We had a blazing row and I sent him home from the tour when he demanded to bat in the top five, above John Crawley – who couldn't buy a run for toffee on that trip.

Endless hours were spent alone in my room calculating averages for my fantasy Tests and tours. I would also bring home the Speech House club scorebooks and work out the real averages for my own teams. I carried my own personal batting average, which fluctuated between five and nine at the time, around with me in my head. If it nudged into double figures for a week I felt like I was strolling around in my big sister's platforms. Looking back, I don't know how I managed to fit all these time-wasting bedroom pursuits in. Thank goodness there was no social media back then to muddy the waters further. I'm not sure how I would have coped or found the necessary time to do so little.

I was an avid cricket-watcher, too. Fortunately, my youth coincided with cricket being on the BBC, where I could watch Test matches, Benson and Hedges Cup ties, Nat West matches and John Player Sunday League games in their entirety. In school summer holidays I would sit in a rocking chair in our front room in front of a little portable black and white TV from morning to night to watch these games, barely moving in case I missed a ball. The likes of Peter Walker, Tony Lewis, Jack Bannister and Peter West became unlikely pals. Sometimes, during *Grandstand*, the cricket would break away for the horse racing, which was no real hardship. Dad, a big racing fan, encouraged me to gamble and would give me my pocket money in bets. The thrill of backing a winner in the top Saturday race could often be doubled by the strains of Frank Bough, David Coleman or Tony Gubba saying, 'And now back to Old Trafford, where there's been a wicket.'

I wasn't that fussed on conventional kids' games or TV programmes. I'd take a Kent v Gloucestershire cup tie on BBC2 – with Mike Procter bowling to Asif Iqbal – over *Magpie*, *Blue Peter* and *John Craven's Newsround* any day of the week. I feel blessed that I can remember the commentaries of men like John Arlott and Jim Laker. They were grandfather figures to me. I remember seeing Jim Laker in the flesh once, in a bar at the Cheltenham cricket ground following a day's play between Gloucestershire and Essex. He was sat there minding his own business, watching the world go by over a pint. Dad, who had taken me to the game, pointed him

out as the man who had once taken 19 wickets in a single Test match versus Australia – and Jim was close enough to see and hear everything. He smiled benevolently straight at me, almost embarrassed by Dad's high praise. I liked him immediately. Unlike Graham Gooch, who refused to give me an autograph – I still don't know why. I'd been polite and he wasn't busy; he was with other Essex team-mates in the same bar and most of them agreed to sign my book. I was about nine years old and walked away feeling very small. For many years after, my inner self did a little fist pump every time I saw G.A. Gooch had been dismissed for a duck.

Of course, it might not have been Graham Gooch at all. The year before, Dad had taken me to watch Gloucestershire versus Sussex at the same venue. We were walking out of the ground when Dad exclaimed, 'Look, there's Javed Miandad in the car park. Go and get his autograph.' I sidled over and stopped the man.

'Excuse me Mr Miandad, can I have your autograph?' The man looked confused and hopped on a moped.

'Sorry, I am not a cricketer,' he said, before not exactly speeding off. Dad just shrugged his shoulders and turned his back on me.

Cricket books filled the two shelves in my bedroom and a favourite was the *Debrett's Cricketers' Who's Who of 1980*, which profiled every player who made at least one appearance in the 1979 English county season. Flicking through the pages of this book today, I'm amazed at the level of personal details, which even included the home addresses and telephone numbers of many top players.

Who knew the Pakistan and Surrey bowler Intikhab Alam lived at 34 The Green, Morden and you could call him up on 01 540 3063!

Over the years, I've read this A-Z book so often that I feel I know everything about the class of 79, from Warwickshire's Robert Abberley through to the wonderful Zaheer Abbas of Gloucestershire. I was fascinated by the characters behind the whites. The book still sits on my living room shelf and every now and again I'll browse through the pages and see the preserved faces of these mostly young men, their smiles, years and ambitions frozen in time. I wonder, who has survived? Whose dreams were fulfilled and whose dreams got crushed? It's like looking at a school yearbook. Some who were destined for the top doubtless got cancer or committed suicide. Others, who you hardly noticed in your midst, achieved far more than anyone ever envisaged.

What I do know, is the vast majority of these faces have slipped easily from the minds of even the most hardened cricket fans. The autographs of men like Essex's Stuart Turner, Keith Pont and Mike McEvoy no longer hold much currency. The cricketing feats of people like Cedric Boyns (Worcestershire), Nick Finan (Gloucestershire), David Francis (Glamorgan), John Lyon (Sussex), Leslie McFarlane (Northants) or Willie Watson (Nottinghamshire) are not the stuff of legends. Or even memories.

Does that make them failures? Or does getting lost down cricket's obscure cul-de-sacs provide them with more interesting stories to tell?

Men such as these – and hundreds of others like them – have lived lives touched by cricket on every page. But cricket has not been the dominating factor of their story. So it is with me.

* * *

1976. I was eight years old. It was already the best year of my sporting life so far because Southampton FC, my footballing love, had just won the FA Cup by beating Manchester United, as I always knew they would. I had told a know-it-all kid at school called Jonah that they would win the final 1-0 throughout the week leading up to the match. He was a Liverpool fan who hoped I would be right, but still thought I was crazy. Not just for thinking Southampton would win, but more so, for supporting them in the first place. The reason I did was because of Mick Channon, the man I wanted to be, with the windmill arms when he scored a goal and the fashionable sideburns I desperately longed for but, even to this day, have never been able to grow.

1976 was a lot more than a famous Saints triumph though. It was the first time I actually sat down to watch Test cricket on the telly. The West Indies were in town and my young mind, struggling to make sense of the world around me, almost exploded at what I was seeing in the rainbow-coloured living room that I called home. I had never seen a black face before. Not in the Forest of Dean in the 1970s. Not ones that weren't covered in coal dust. Although I was already enough of a patriot to want England to win, I couldn't take my eyes off the West

Indians because they were different in so many ways besides skin colour. The England team looked like the men who played in my dad's team; they were insurance salesmen and bank clerks, grey or balding, with pot bellies. Brian Close, John Edrich and David Steele looked almost too old to play in Dad's team without needing a sit down and a cigarette (like Dad sometimes did) when they brought the squash on. Bob Woolmer, I swear, turned out for Dad's team some Sundays, but never got any runs for them either. These men didn't run; they hobbled, sticking a foot out to stop the ball in the field, else not bothering to move at all. They looked like the men I saw going into the betting shop on a Saturday morning or the members' only Soldiers & Sailors Club, where they could drink beer until they fell over, safe in the knowledge that their wives were not allowed to set foot over the threshold to drag them home, kicking and screaming.

The West Indian cricketers were playing a different game. They could bend without groaning or holding their backs, picking up the ball and whipping it in to flatten the stumps in a single movement. They dived to stop and catch the ball. They smiled a lot more and played with a swagger. Their white flannels fitted better. Their jewellery sparkled. Their shirts were unbuttoned. And boy, could they bat and bowl.

I swear, the moment I first saw Michael Holding run in to bowl I almost fell off the arm of the chair I was sitting on. I didn't know what the term graceful meant but thanks to Michael Holding I knew what it looked

like. His movements purred more than next door's Ford Capri. Surely he should be winning gold at the Olympics in the 100m final? He was regularly hitting batsmen as well as stumps – and didn't seem at all bothered if they were hurt or not. Nor did anyone else. I realised then that cricket was a combat sport. Andy Roberts spent more energy with arms and legs pumping but he was equally threatening. They were a far cry from England's honest trundlers, Hendrick, Selvey et al.

The aggressive threat the West Indies possessed transcended into their batting too. I didn't need Jim Laker or Peter West to tell me that Viv Richards was special. I could see it with my sharp young eyes. He chewed gum and stared down bowlers. He walked like a sheriff in a cowboy film who had just pooped his pants and wanted everyone to know it. He patted down the pitch as if it belonged to him and no one else. He took over my living room as if that belonged to him too. And it seemed like his bat, a Stuart Surridge Jumbo, was some kind of magic lightsaber from the *Star Wars* movie. He hit the ball hard. Close fielders flinched. And he didn't bother running when he'd hit it. The England players seemed to be batting with second-hand bits of old doors and floorboards from my grandfather's shed. They nudged and scampered. Ducked and dived. Hid and got hit. The West Indian fielders circled them like lions around wounded wildebeest. Everyone knew how the story would end long before the action unfolded.

Richards, Roy Fredericks, Gordon Greenidge, Lawrence Rowe, Clive Lloyd – these were men to rival

the Incredible Hulk and Steve Austin the Six Million Dollar Man in my fledgling world. I wrote to *Jim'll Fix It* to see if Jim could arrange for me and Dad to play for England against the West Indies in the final Test match of the series but thankfully Jim never got in touch and the selectors went for Chris Balderstone and Peter Willey instead. Phew, two bouncers dodged.

In the front garden, I would force my kid brother Stanley to re-enact those Test matches of 1976 and, because he was only six, he got to be England. I would charge in from the shed to the side of the house before propelling a tennis ball at him as fast as I could from about eight yards. Most of the time, the ball would bounce into the road behind the wicket – and I'd make him run and get it, whether he was Barry Wood, Frank Hayes, Dennis Amiss or Alan Knott. Sometimes, he wouldn't see a car coming and would have to dive out of a collision much worse than a Holding bouncer. On occasions, I would hit him directly in the chest or head with a tennis ball or worse, a Woolworths Winfield Special, an imitation cricket ball that looked and felt like a rock. If he shaped like he was going to cry I'd tell him to remember he was Brian Close or David Steele and 'man up'. He was six. He had no idea what I was talking about.

When I tired of bowling, I'd make Stanley lob gentle underarms at me in the manner of Pat Pocock or Geoff Miller. I would master-blast them through the bushes fielding at extra cover into Mrs Burris's garden for six. Mrs Burris was a formidable opponent in her own right

because she wouldn't always give us our ball back. I can see now she wasn't being mean, she just didn't want her vegetable patch trampled all over by two sneaky, giant, ginger slugs. However, I would lower my brother over her wall and tell him to 'act like Closey'. Off he would go, tip-toeing through the cabbages to find the ball like a paratrooper behind enemy lines, whilst I waited out of sight to lift him back over the wall again.

Mrs Burris would appear out of nowhere, like Viv Richards in the covers, to spy my brother crouching in her greenery. The panic in his eyes as he raced to the wall matched the beating of my heart as it became a true test of wills and courage. Stanley had no chance. He was England and dead meat. To us, back then, Mrs B possessed all the menace of Sylvester Clarke and we naively reasoned she could smell our fear from 100 yards away (truth was, she had a back window).

My brother looked for me to save him, reaching out his arms so I could lift him back to safety, but I'd already scarpered to the pavilion (our front room) where I could watch Mrs B scold him and march him up the road to be scolded again by my mother. I felt a fair bit of guilt for my own cowardice but he would live to bat another day. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right?

Watching the West Indians torment England throughout the 1980s was painful. England had some decent players but the infamous 1984 'Blackwash' series was something I largely followed with a cushion over my head. It was more frightening than *The Omen*. I was at school, watching cricket on the portable TV in the

science room with a bunch of classmates when I saw Malcolm Marshall fell Andy Lloyd with a sickening bouncer to the side of the head. The room went quiet. We all thought Marshall had killed him. Even Mr Button, our teacher, didn't know what to say. Then a groggy Andy Lloyd clawed to his feet and slowly staggered off the pitch with the help of Neil Foster. There could be no manning up on this occasion. He would never bat for England again. Indeed, his life would probably never be the same again.

Some of the other lads said they didn't want to play cricket anymore but I wasn't one of them. I didn't want to go to my next lesson, double history, because Allan Lamb was walking to the wicket and I was desperate to see what would happen to him. This was compelling viewing. A real life lesson; the stuff that school ought to be all about. England were getting absolutely thrashed, but every batsman taking guard to face up to Marshall, Garner and Holding was a hero in my eyes, deserving of the George Cross. They were braver than Shackleton and Neil Armstrong. Going to the moon was a cinch by comparison.

In that moment, I suddenly felt a pang of admiration for my little brother too. What a hero he'd been in our front garden games – bravely facing up to me pinging Winfields at him from a few feet away and taking on Mrs B from next door without thinking about the consequences. In our Tests he took a right pasting every game, but after a good cry, a few sherbet lemons and a bag of Ringos or Rancheros he'd always come back

outside for more. We've all got our fears and phobias though and Stan's was Les Dawson. Just the mention of his name was enough to send him scuttling for Mum's apron strings and a Dawson-like gurn from me could propel him into a complete meltdown.

Maybe the England selectors missed a trick by not calling up Leslie Dawson Junior to beef up their middle order in that long, hot, arduous summer of 76? He certainly had the looks and physique to fit right into that team.