

Jason Gillespie – Interview by Annie Chave



On leaving the UK, Jason Gillespie wrote a ‘love letter to County Cricket’, and, as he subsequently isolated in his Australian hotel room, I was lucky enough to delve further into this love affair, via Zoom. Dizzy, who greets my enthusiastic thanks with ‘no dramas’, has a greater understanding of and empathy with County Cricket than many of our own countrymen. He’s an insightful, very open-minded man who genuinely loves cricket. I would imagine

he strides, and very large strides they’d be, through life with a positive outlook and an enthusiasm for the game that has gone a huge way to make him so popular in England.

How does the County Championship differ from the Sheffield Shield?

The biggest difference is the amount of cricket. In Sheffield Shield there’s six States that play each other home and away, so you have ten first-class games. You might have a match against a touring side, but that only happens once every few years for a State team. Essentially you just play your ten games, and then there’s a second-eleven structure, with six to eight games. This is why Club Cricket is such a big part of the Australian landscape, because that’s where a lot of the cricket is. After second-eleven cricket, the next best level is Grade Cricket, very hard-fought in each of the States. To play for your State you must be aligned to a Grade Club. In Adelaide, for example, there are thirteen Grade Clubs. If you want to play for the State you must be involved in the Grade Cricket competition. When there’s no first-class or second-eleven cricket, you’re expected to play for your Club. That applies Australia-wide.

In England there is a huge jump from Club Cricket to County Cricket. Is it a lesser jump in Australia then?

Yes, that’s one big difference that I found in England. I couldn’t understand the concept that you weren’t aligned to a Club that was knowingly preparing players for the next level. In Yorkshire, for example, where I played and coached, there were so many leagues, and people could play in any league they wanted – even in one outside Yorkshire. That’s unheard of in Australia. If you want to play for your State you must be aligned to a Club. You can’t be considered for Sheffield Shield cricket if you don’t have a Grade Club. Obviously, if you’re a regular State player or a regular Test player you don’t get to play much Club Cricket, but there are still times, when there’s no State or International cricket, that almost every Australian cricketer will be playing for his Grade Club.

So in Australia players come through Grade Cricket more than through private schools?

Well, players do come through private schools, there’s no doubt about that, but a lot of Australian cricketers learn the game in regional centres and small country towns, then go to the big cities to try their luck as professional cricketers. The sports clubs of country towns are often the hub of the town.

As you leave us, what kind of state do you think County Cricket is in (COVID aside)?

I think it's quite healthy. I know a lot of people think quite negatively about County Cricket, but you only have to look at the England side at the moment. There are so many wonderful players, and they have to come from somewhere; they come from County Cricket.

While there are improvements to be made at County level, essentially it's good quality cricket, better than a lot of people allow. The challenging conditions make for hard work, especially in maintaining pitches, but it prepares players for that next level. There are lots of positives in County Cricket, and I know many overseas players love the chance to be part of it. I also love the support it has; much more than people give it credit for. I've spoken to journalists and sat with them in press boxes and commentary boxes, and the volume of interest in County Cricket has blown my mind; the amount of people listening in to the BBC and the live streams from all over the world, it's quite extraordinary.

You mentioned pitches, and challenges. I'm a Somerset fan and we were penalised for our pitch. Do you think there's too much emphasis on setting pitches for fast bowling?

Yeah, I know what you're alluding to, and that Somerset has been criticised for preparing wickets that suit their side. I actually don't have an issue with that. What we want is players who are adaptable to different situations, conditions and surfaces, because when you play in India or Sri Lanka you're going to play on wickets that favour the slow bowlers, so if you're not preparing for that in your domestic structure, then you're not helping your players. If it's blatant doctoring, then we all have a problem with that, like playing on a wicket that's twenty days old, but I don't have a problem with teams preparing a wicket that gives them a slight home advantage. I think that they've earned the right to do that. In Australia, some of our best domestic cricket happened when I was playing. You'd go to Perth and play on a fast bouncy wicket, coming up against four or five fast bowlers on a really fast bouncy deck; then you'd go to Sydney knowing it was going to turn on day three and going to turn square; you'd go to Melbourne where it would be a little bit up and down, to Tasmania, where it won't break up at all. So you have to adjust your team accordingly. You go up to the Gabba in Brisbane and it's going to seam around for all four days. You come to Adelaide and it's a pretty flat wicket, then there will be reverse swing and a bit up and down, and the spinners will come in. These variations prepare players to adapt their game to different conditions against different bowlers. They make well-rounded players. What we don't want, and this is happening a bit in Australia with drop-in pitches, is the same pitches replicated in each State. How the surfaces will play is another thing I love about County Cricket – how is Sussex going to play against Somerset? How are they going to adapt to the spinning surface there, with Somerset playing two front-line spinners, after they've just played against Durham on a green seaming wicket, with Rushworth

and Onions moving the ball around all day. It's great preparation if they get to play at the next level.

If you had one memory of County Cricket that you hold most dear, what would it be?

It's hard to go past seeing the lads celebrate winning a County Championship. I was fortunate enough to be coach when Yorkshire won a couple of titles. It was special, and the reason it was so special is because you see the time and effort that players and fellow-coaches put in to help the lads improve over the winter to the point where they're in a position to win a trophy. I suppose that's the overriding memory of my time in County Cricket.

Yorkshire, Glamorgan, Sussex – are they all very different?

Yeah, they are. I was two years at Yorkshire as a player, then one at Glamorgan, and I enjoyed all three seasons. I actually said, when I was at Glamorgan, that I felt that the Yorkshire dressing-room and the Glamorgan dressing-room were quite similar, and everyone looked at me like I was a stupid Aussie. But to me the Glamorgan team were the Welsh County, it was them against England, and I felt that



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a little bit at Yorkshire – Yorkshire against the rest of the world. There was a similar sense of passion and pride in their County. Coming to Sussex purely as a coach, and further down the track, was a different experience. The biggest difference was the size of Sussex compared with Yorkshire, where the players came from as far apart as Harrogate, Scarborough, Huddersfield, which was very de-centralised from a playing-group point of view. Whereas I got to Hove and what struck me was all the players live within a mile of each other, so you'd walk down the street and see four of them in a café having a coffee. Both were great experiences, just very different.

Did you get to see much of Jofra?

When I arrived in 2018 Jofra played a lot of the summer. He got into the England squad at the end of that season and debuted in 2019. I've often been asked did I do anything with Jofra? I have to hold my hand up and be honest, I could big myself up and say I helped Jofra do this or that, but I'd be lying. I just let him play, and I'd always ask him is there anything you need from me and he'd say no coach I'm good, then he'd go and do his thing. He's got a couple of really good mentors in Chris Jordan and Jon Lewis. They're real supports and have spent a lot of time working on his game. I believe that, if players have got their own coaches/mentors, it's about me understanding how they tick and get the best out of themselves. I asked him a lot of questions, then just listened to him and observed how he went about his work, helping him where I could. He's a naturally talented player and it blew me away just how much of a cricket tragic he is. He plays like he's twelve years old and out in the street with his mates having a laugh; he's got that childlike enthusiasm. I'd encourage him never to lose that love and enjoyment of the game, because

it can be hard to replicate. When you're an adult with a lot of expectation on you, to still have that childhood enthusiasm is pretty special.

Is there a way we could open more channels for black and Asian players to play County Cricket?

It's the job of The ECB and the Counties to make everyone feel welcome, so it's just a matter of educating them to do this. That might sound simplistic, but from the feedback we've heard I think it's as plain as that. We know some players feel like they're not welcome, which might be a bit of communication breakdown, but it's up to the powers that be to change that. Something needs to change because that tends to be the overriding narrative from the British Asian Community. I'm aware that the ECB are looking to make changes, and that Counties are very open about that, so I think there is genuine desire to make changes. I'm quietly optimistic about that. I know Azeem Rafiq, whom I knew quite well from my time at Yorkshire, has made some allegations. He's a nice lad who had some difficult times. I just hope the parties can get together and have honest and open discussions to sort things out because, let's be honest, it hasn't reflected well on our sport. We need to be better. Yorkshire is a very proud County with a high Asian population, and there are signs that they're taking steps in the right direction, like the great work they've been doing at Bradford Park Avenue, which is an amazing accessible facility that Yorkshire CCC, together with Bradford Council, have renovated to the tune of millions of pounds providing an all-inclusive public ground. I like to think positively. We all love the sport and want what's best for everyone. We want to see everyone enjoying it, players, spectators and all those invested in the game.

Are we going to see you again over here?

I don't know when, but I'd love to come back sometime in the future, even if I just sneak over for a couple of weeks. I love my fix of County Cricket. You've got to understand I've spent more than half my life in England. I hold the place very close to my heart. We've loved our time there and made lifelong friends. It's a wonderful country. I sometimes wish that the English could see how nice a place England is, because I think sometimes that gets lost.

Jason Gillespie coached Yorkshire to successive County Championships in 2014 and 2015