

Cricket

Bell's confident demeanour fails to mask depressing run

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After play on the first day at the SSC, Stuart Broad, footsore and weary after a day's leather-hunting, offered the thought that if England's batsmen did not score 400 themselves they should be shot. If this seemed a slightly harsh prospect at the time, then England did their best to head towards avoiding any Broadian opprobrium by giving the Sri Lanka Development side bowlers the run around much as their batsmen had done to England on the first day. Andrew Strauss's declaration late on, at 272 for four, 159 runs behind (so an agreement presumably not to enforce the follow-on), left the opposition what proved to be eight overs to bat. This they did with considerable panache reaching 44 for one, a lead of 203.

The curate would have had his say about the egg though. Parts of it were good: centuries apiece for Andrew Strauss and Jonathan Trott, the openers adding 197 before first the captain tucked his

bat under his arm and retired himself, and then, on reaching three figures Trott did the same, although with rather more reluctance. That this was only right and proper was indisputable for in what is a three-day match only, and the last one before the first Test, with a maximum 100 overs to bat in the first innings by agreement, there were others - most notably Ian Bell, but also including Ravi Bopara and Samit Patel - who needed to spend quality time at the crease on a pitch that was showing a little bit of turn to go with some reverse swing but little else of real threat.

And here the day was less satisfactory. Kevin Pietersen, looking incongruous



Ian Bell, once as good as any batsman in the world, was out for 14 and has had a dreadful six months

in a white sun hat rather than the blue helmet of habit, fairly bristled, finding the boundary with a flourish and rattling along at a run a ball until he moved from his crease to counter the tall languid left-arm spinner Sajeewa Weerakoon - for those who might recall him, think Ravi Shastri - passed the ball on the way and was stumped for 26. One should rarely be worried by Pietersen's scores in practice matches, for he looked in good order and has the capacity to raise his game when it matters. Later Bopara and Patel became embroiled in their own little game, making a dozen each but looking to take the game nowhere beyond their own concerns and possibly precipitating Strauss's declaration.

Bell, though, is more of a concern, with a stark plummet from someone who was as good a batsman as any in the world for a year but who for the past six months has scarcely been able to bat his eyelids. A run of failures in first-class cricket, stretching back to the start of the year makes depressing reading: 3, 39, 0, 12 not out, 0, 4, 29,

Scoreboard

Sri Lanka Development XI First innings (overnight 376-5)	
†MDKJ Perera lbw b Broad	35
KS Lokuarachchi not out	51
I Udana not out	0
Extras (lb6, w2, nb6)	14
Total (for 6 dec, 100 overs)	431
Fall cont 427. Bowling Broad 18-3-69-3; Finn 20-2-93-2; Bresnan 15-0-59-0; Swann 19-2-91-0; Bopara 5-1-19-0; Patel 20-2-94-1.	
England XI First innings	
*AJ Strauss ret'd out	100
JL Trott ret'd out	102
KP Pietersen st MDKJ Perera b Weerakoon	26
IR Bell c Kandamby b Lakshitha	14
RS Bopara not out	11
SR Patel not out	13
Extras (lb2, w1, nb3)	6
Total (for 4 dec, 66 overs)	272
Fall 197, 217, 247, 247. Bowling Lakshitha 12-3-30-1; Fernando 11-0-49-0; Udana 7-0-39-0; Weerakoon 23-2-96-1; Lokuarachchi 13-0-56-0.	
Sri Lanka Development XI Second innings	
EMG Munaweera not out	26
BSM Warnapura lbw b Broad	4
†MDKJ Perera not out	7
Extras (b1, lb4, nb2)	7
Total (for 1, 8 overs)	44
Fall 24. Bowling Broad 3-0-18-1; Bresnan 3-1-14-0; Patel 1-0-7-0; Swann 1-1-0-0.	
Umpires WN de Silva and TH Wijewardene.	

3, 5, 10, 0 and now the 14 he made here before he clipped a gently reverse-swung delivery from the tall seamer Tharanga Lakshitha to the man perched at short midwicket for just such an eventuality.

The problem is that it is hard to spot what might be wrong beyond it all being something that just happens even to the best of players. He looks compact, and confident to all outward appearances in as much as he stepped inside his second delivery from Weerakoon and fairly belted it over extra cover and into the stands for six.

Perhaps he camouflages his anxiety well. Whether Andy Flower, who has invested confidence in him in having him on the trip in the first place after a dismal trip to the UAE that saw the back of Eoin Morgan, will be able to do the same we must wait and see. Bell is a proven Test match batsman of great experience now but ultimately there is a limit. The declaration means he will probably open second time around (or ought to at any rate) and get one more chance.

A land of concrete pitches and fragile dreams

Ivar Andersen visits a school in Afghanistan that has gone cricket crazy - thanks to Guardian readers

In 2010, Afghanistan's national cricket team played in their first major international tournament, the World Twenty20. Two years later, the team are on the cusp of repeating that success. Today they play Namibia in the semi-finals of the ICC's World Twenty20 qualifying tournament. A win would mean they take their place in the full tournament later this year.

When Afghanistan were knocked out of the competition two years ago, the Guardian, together with the charity Afghan Connection, launched a campaign to support the development of cricket in the country. It costs £2,200 to build a new school cricket pitch in Afghanistan. The generosity of the Guardian's readers meant that far more than that was raised. Earlier this month I travelled to Faqrullah high school, in the Surkh Rod district on the outskirts of Jalalabad, to see the cricket pitch paid for by those donations.

"Yesterday we met and beat Kalei Shahi, that's another school from this district," said Abdel Baset, the most feared fast bowler at Faqrullah high. For the first time, Baset and his Faqrullah team-mates were able to prepare for the match by practising on their new, purpose-built, pitch.

The concrete pitch has been constructed at the far end of Faqrullah's schoolyard. It is not big enough to contain an entire cricket ground, so all the overs have to be delivered from one end during matches. Faqrullah's PE teacher also serves as the team's coach. However, that title is mainly ceremonial, one of his colleagues explained. Cricket is, to a large extent, the sport of the young generation of Afghans, and as far as tactics and techniques go, the students often know more than their teachers.

Over time that will change. The charity Afghan Connection, who worked with the Guardian, has launched a series of training camps for coaches which have been funded by the Marylebone Cricket Club. Thanks to them, 24 teachers will train to the International Cricket Council's level one or level two coaching standards. Faqrullah high has just won a local school cricket jamboree, and if it carries on being so successful in provincial tournaments the team may be assigned a new coach in the near future.

With the unlikely success of the national team, cricket has established itself as the war-torn country's No1 sport, and is steadily growing in popularity. Nowhere in Afghanistan is this more apparent than in Jalalabad.

The bright green fields of wheat, irrigated by the melting ice of the Hindu Kush that fill the Kabul river, signify that spring has come back to the city. Besides being the capital of Nangarhar province, the city is also Afghanistan's cricket capital. Its proximity to neighbouring Pakistan is one explanation for that. It was there, in the refugee camps, that



Action from a cricket match played on the concrete pitch at Faqrullah high school near Jalalabad in Afghanistan, which was funded by Guardian readers and the charity Afghan Connection. Photographs: Christoffer Hjalmarsson for the Guardian



many who had fled the fighting at home first learned to play and to love the game. That means Jalalabad is rich in cricketering talent. Many of the national cricket team's current players come from the city or its surrounding areas.

On almost every street kids play, using plastic bottles as improvised bats. Baset is 17, but seemed older than his years. Unlike many of his team-mates, he was never a refugee. "I learned to play five or six years ago, right here in the district."

At Faqrullah the team trains twice a week, but the pitch is being put to good use on a more frequent basis - during every break and after school every day. Guardian readers' donations also paid for kit. Some equipment is still lacking, like proper stumps, that don't need to be supported by bricks or meticulously thumped back into the unforgiving dirt when they have been knocked over.

Those kinds of petty inconveniences, however, appear to be of little concern to the players. The students in the lower grades, serving as enthusiastic fielders, cheered loudly when Baset claimed another wicket.

Top local batsman Abdul Khalil proved harder to dismiss. The 18-year-old racked up fours and sixes. "The pitch really makes practice easier," he said as he stepped off the pitch. He picked

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up a passion for the sport in Pakistan, where he lived until his return home in 2005. And his favourite cricketer is still a Pakistani, the aggressive all-rounder and former captain Shahid Afridi. "But I also like Hamid Hassan of the Afghan national team, he's a very good fast bowler."

Hassan may well be the most common answer if the youth of Jalalabad are asked to pick their role model. It's small wonder. Hassan, who has appeared for the MCC and recently landed a £25,000 contract to play in the Bangladesh Premier League, is a native of Nangarhar's poor countryside. And as such, serves as proof that it might pay off to dream big. "I would like to pursue a career in cricket," Khalil confirmed.

For Baset, the choice is less obvious. "Of course, I would like to play cricket, but Afghanistan has many problems

and the future is uncertain. I want to go to university, that's the most important thing."

In a country ravaged by decades of war, and faced with the possibility of another civil conflict when the international security assistance force pulls its troops out in 2014, there are no guarantees that building cricket pitches will effect positive change. But as far as the kids of Faqrullah are concerned, the Guardian pitch does make the distance to their dreams some 22 yards shorter.

Baset also expressed a wish, that the intense interest in cricket will play a part in building a common national identity and healing Afghanistan's internal wounds. "The country needs to unite. The most important thing for this to be possible is peace," he said seriously, before adding with a smile: "But the second most important thing is cricket."