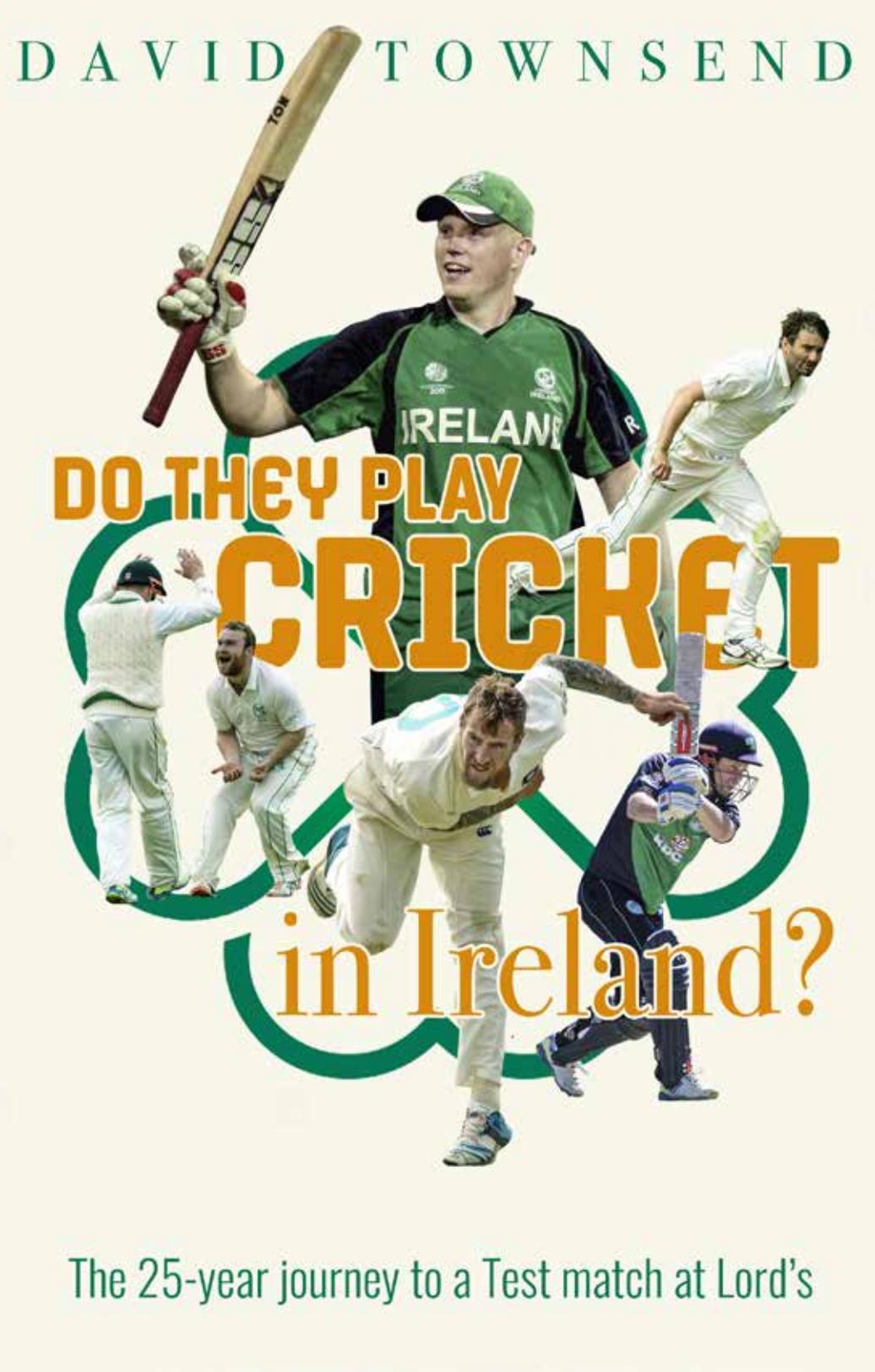


DAVID TOWNSEND



DO THEY PLAY
CRICKET
in Ireland?

The 25-year journey to a Test match at Lord's

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LAYING THE TRACKS

1994–1999

1994

Nairobi – 12 February

The first Ireland player I met was Alan Lewis, future chairman of selectors and international rugby referee, his megawatt smile illuminating a pre-tournament barbecue when the power failed. Lewie had assumed the captaincy on the eve of Ireland's first game when Stephen Warke ran into a roller during practice, and broke a bone in his elbow. The amateur nature of the set-up was immediately obvious, as was the friendliness of players drawn from all over the island. Lewie was a Dubliner, most of the squad played for clubs in and around Belfast and then there was Desmond 'Decker' Curry from the north-west, who, I was told, strangled sheep for a living.

This was new territory for all of them. After a first capped match during the Crimea War, Ireland had bumbled along playing half a dozen games or so a year without raising the consciousness, even among neighbours, that cricket was played to any great level on the island. Yet it was, and against the odds some decent players were ready to embark on their first global tournament after

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being elected to Associate membership of the International Cricket Council the year before.

There was ambition among the squad to show what they could do and to measure themselves against the more established Associate sides like the Netherlands, as well as their hosts Kenya who were expected to do well in familiar conditions. The challenge of trying to qualify for the 1996 World Cup was one to be relished, but if there was an enthusiasm to embrace this new world it was in a 'this is how we do it in Ireland' sort of way. They were very much innocents abroad, from the Hon. Sec. of the Irish Cricket Union in his knee-length trench coat and trilby, to journalist Philip Boylan using Perrier water to brush his teeth.

Inexperience and naivety shone through everywhere. Tips, for example. When room service delivered morning tea, we added the equivalent of 20p which seemed about right and were rewarded the following day with a complimentary plate of biscuits. Boylan, meanwhile, tipped his attendant £5 at a more upmarket establishment and the resulting misunderstanding had the poor man returning that evening wearing a pink shirt and a nervous smile.

The Nairobi hotels we encountered were all good, from the top-of-the-range Norfolk to the more basic three-star 680, where I was staying with a photographer mate. The staff at our place were top notch. A receptionist called me over as I was leaving to watch nets one afternoon.

'Excuse me, sir, a phone call for you.'

'What?' How did he know who I was? I took the receiver, expecting some sort of con.

'Hello, is that David? This is RTE radio in Dublin ...'

LAYING THE TRACKS

I'd wondered what had happened to their promise of work. No internet in those days so they would not have been able to reach me but for your man's intervention. I lashed out another 20p.

Boylan was a likeable wee fella who talked incessantly, often for the sake of it. In a reversal of tradition, he had come to cricket late through his son, Seamus, a useful club player. A chief sub-editor with the *Evening Herald*, Boylan senior had learned the Laws of his new passion and was umpiring at a high level in Leinster. Not very well, according to the Dublin-based batsmen in the squad, who ribbed him mercilessly. A lazy eye didn't help his authority. Bad enough to be given lbw, worse to see the finger raised by someone who could have been checking balls left in the over with his colleague at square leg at the same time.

For all Boylan's foibles, it was Ireland's best umpire, Paddy O'Hara, who set the cat among the pigeons early in the tournament with an outside-of-the-box ruling that was well meaning, but ultimately daft. The playing conditions set aside two days for the completion of each game, with play continuing while light allowed on the first day, but with a strict cut-off point on the second. Fair enough.

'Ah, but if there is no play on the first day, then the second day becomes the first day and play can continue,' O'Hara decreed, in his first game of the tournament. The ICC organisers enthusiastically went along with this nonsense, slapping the Belfast man on the back for his ingenuity. Those of us who understood limited-overs cricket could see the flaw and, Sod's Law, it was an Ireland game that exposed it.

Nairobi – 14 February

The first day of the Ireland campaign, a match against Papua New Guinea, was rained off although not before I'd rustled up some samosas and arranged a live radio interview for Warkie, in the Ngara club kitchen, where there was a landline phone. Remember those? The skipper was waiting to discover the extent of his injury and still hoping to play a part later on.

On the second day, which was now the first, Ireland made a decent 230/8, with Lewie stumped for 50 but recorded as run out, and were keen to bowl the minimum 30 overs to allow a result. That looked unlikely when a thunderstorm intervened with PNG on 45/4 at the start of the 22nd over. The Ireland players and supporters helped to cover the pitch and then mucked in with the mopping up. Deploying the O'Hara ruling, the game restarted after the official cut-off time. There was no chance of PNG facing their full quota and yet no set target from a reduced number of overs. The teams would play on until it was too dark.

The Pacific islanders never got close to leading on the run-rate calculation as a relieved Ireland squeezed in 32 overs. But imagine if they had? Imagine if it was so close that every ball mattered? I put this to Derek Scott, in his trench coat and trilby. Surely there has to be a cut-off point, otherwise how do you decide when the game is over?

'The umpires would decide that,' the Hon. Sec. insisted. 'That's how we do it in Ireland.'

So the umpires could come off with Team A leading, but Team B only needing a boundary from the next ball to get their noses in front?

'Yes,' said Scotty. 'That's why the umpires are neutral.' This lot definitely did things differently.

Nairobi – 16 February

Evenings were great fun, usually starting with a couple of beers in the 680 hotel bar, which was frequented by several hospitality girls. I enjoyed chatting to ‘Christine’ who used to be a distance runner in her teens, she said, and still looked pretty fit. The routine was that I would buy her a Tusker, on the understanding that if a potential customer walked in – a Japanese businessman, maybe – she would abandon both me and the beer. A few minutes later she would be embracing the poor fella, winking over his shoulder and, with her small finger, indicating that he wouldn’t trouble her greatly.

After a week, Christine asked me which room I was staying in? I explained that I was sharing with my photographer mate, Andy, but apparently that didn’t matter. A couple of days later there was a knock on the door as we were finishing our tea and biscuits.

‘What time you leave, darling?’

‘In 15 minutes, or so. What’s the problem?’

She wanted to walk out with us so that security wouldn’t be able to tax her night’s earnings, as was their custom.

A Chinese restaurant across the street was often the evening’s next stop. After eating there half a dozen times, I walked in one evening with Andy, John Carr and his former Middlesex mate Simon ‘Yosser’ Hughes, who was covering the tournament for the *Daily Telegraph*. Our regular waiter appeared, smiling. ‘Evening, Peter. Never mind the menus – just bring us four main courses and plenty of rice, please.’

He looked confused. ‘What do you want to eat, sir?’

‘Up to you and chef. Just bring us four dishes – we’ll leave it to you.’

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Peter soon returned with the food, looking very pleased with himself. A couple of our favourite dishes, and a couple we hadn't ordered before. Yosser poked at one of the new dishes. 'We don't want that!' Dearie me, leave the choice to the staff and then complain.

The Analyst and future editor of *The Cricketer* magazine didn't cover himself in glory in other areas, either, falling ill after slipping off to the Masai Mara for a few days' safari mid-tournament and then embarrassing himself when Commissioner of Sport Mike Boit dropped by the press box one afternoon. Although Kipchoge Keino had always been my favourite East African runner, now closely followed by Christine, it was a treat to meet one of the other middle-distance greats. The occasion was lost on *The Telegraph*, though.

'What was your sport, sir?'

'Athletics.'

'Were you any good at it?'

'I went to the Olympics.'

It took Yosser a while to live that one down.

What was your sport, Mr Bradman?

Nairobi was fascinating. Yes, it was poor, but most things worked, eventually, and there were signs of prosperity. The locals had smiles on their faces as they went about their various enterprises. Market traders would implore you to buy a souvenir because they hadn't eaten for three days and then produce a roll of banknotes for change. We would watch the Incredible Parking Man from our hotel balcony each morning as he ushered commuters into tiny spaces and collected a couple of bob for his efforts. A pittance, maybe, but multiply a pittance several times and it becomes a decent day's pay, as any freelance will tell you.

The trip was also memorable for the cracking company. The three-strong Irish press corps was completed by Peter O'Reilly, who had been sent by *The Irish Times*. A retired fast bowler, he had played for Ireland in the 1980s and spent time with Warwickshire, mostly injured and homesick. A good man for pints and an excellent writer. Then there was Andy Capostagno, who I had worked with at Cricketcall, the telephone commentary service, and a couple of British ex-pats who were writing for the local papers under bylines such as 'Third Man' and 'Nightwatchman'. It was rarely dull.

Nairobi – 27 February

Aided by their dubious victory over PNG, and canters against Gibraltar and Malaysia, Ireland reached the second round where their limitations were exposed by the United Arab Emirates, Bermuda and Canada. In their final game, one of the northern club pros played out a maiden 45th over, stroking five of the six deliveries firmly to short extra.

'He didn't give me anything to hit.'

Dave Houghton, hired to assist coach John Wills, managed to keep a straight face. The Zimbabwean batsman would have seen the quality in that squad, though: Lewis, Warke, Harrison and Alan Nelson, a whippy fast-medium bowler, could all have had careers in county cricket. But it was noticeable how few young players there were in a squad packed with tried and tested old soldiers, set in their ways.

Nairobi – 6 March

The ICC Trophy was won by the UAE who beat Kenya in the final by two wickets. Rumours had circulated throughout the three weeks about the origins of the Emirati

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side which contained only one indigenous player, skipper Sultan Zarawani. 'Their passports were all issued on the same day,' we were told by people who didn't know.

The UAE was an emerging nation then. Fast forward 25 years and no one is surprised that the majority of their team are born overseas. In 1994 it was a bone of contention, especially to the hosts who desperately wanted their name engraved on the trophy. The bad blood boiled over at the tournament dinner, held on the night of the final, where Basheer Mauladad, the chairman of the Kenyan Cricket Association, made a most ungracious speech which ended with the barb, 'We too can employ slaves to win a tournament.' Zarawani stood up and instructed his team to leave, rather proving the old boy's point.

The ICC closed ranks. Poor chap's got diabetes. Blood sugar levels too high. Didn't realise what he was saying. Nothing to see here. Move along.

The world governing body then was unrecognisable from what it has become, at least at Associate level. If no longer in name, it was still the Imperial Cricket Conference, a bastion of old-school colonialism – an organisation that allocated Gibraltar the same funding as Ireland and, crazier still, Bangladesh, and that allowed its World Cup qualifying tournament to be run by an expat from Newcastle, a former British Army sergeant who had more pies than fingers.

Nairobi – 8 March

Talking of fingers, my return home was delayed by news that my brother had been involved in a bus accident and was in casualty at the Aga Khan hospital. It wasn't the best way to end an otherwise perfect three weeks. William had

flown to Nairobi to begin a round-the-world trip, and had been a great addition to the party, entertaining us royally one evening by joining an Ethiopian dancer on stage to perform a duet of jiggling breasts. Hers were covered.

Bill's tourist bus to Mombasa had veered off the road and down a ravine. Three people had died, he had nothing worse than a badly damaged hand and was waiting for a girl he was travelling with to come out of surgery with one less finger than she had going in. 'Look on the bright side, I'll be able to do my nails quicker.' Aussies, eh? Bill retained all his digits, but the world tour was delayed for another year.

I flew home with a good few quid in my pocket, some great memories, and absolutely no intention of working with the Ireland team again.

Leicester – 26 April

Except ...

As a freelance, it's always good to have a specialist subject, a regular earner. A niche. From what I could see, Ireland played at least half a dozen games a summer, often on my side of the water, and they were a great set of blokes. Why not? The *News Letter* would be sending their man, Ian Callender, to cover the Benson & Hedges Cup match at Grace Road, but *The Irish Times* would take copy, as would the *Belfast Telegraph*, and both Radio Ulster and RTE wanted voice pieces. Double bubble, times two.

It was also a chance to catch up with Boylan, re-live a few of his Nairobi adventures, and see Warkie bat for the first time. He constructed a classically correct 53 from 140 balls, before Ireland lost by nine wickets. In the bar after, Lewie's eyes were twinkling.

'I've added Phil Simmons to my collection, DT!'

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What collection? Having long ago given up hope of beating a county side, never mind one of the Test teams that would stop off for a tour match, Lewie had started to 'collect' international bowlers he had struck for four or six, and a much smaller list of those he had dismissed. So when he found the ropes with a glorious cover drive, the newly confirmed captain of Ireland was able to add the future national coach to his personal Haul of Fame.

Northampton – 21 June

For all the appearance of confidence, and the 'this is how we do it' approach, there was an awe of county professionals in the Ireland dressing room. Yes, Middlesex had occasionally employed the left-arm spin of Monty, while Mark Cohen was also on the staff at Lord's and O'Reilly had tried his luck with Warwickshire, but none had made a career of it. So there was little reference to this mythical world of the full-time cricketer.

During a rain break in the NatWest Trophy tie at Wantage Road, I ventured that the Ireland team – now bolstered by three-Test former India all-rounder Bobby Rao – had the beating of Northants, if they all played to their potential.

'But these guys are *professionals*,' Lewie said.

'That just means they get paid to play – it doesn't mean they're better than you.'

I pointed out Nigel Felton, who was opening for the home side: a batsman who barely averaged 30 during 13 seasons with Somerset and Northants.

'You're a better player than him, Lewie. Seriously.' His Hollywood smile was flashed in appreciation, but I could see he wasn't convinced.

The tie was carried over into its reserve day before the home side won by seven wickets. Double bubble, times two. Twice. Happy days.

Glasgow – 22 July

OK, so I was starting to get a taste for this. It was decent enough cricket, and well-paid work. More than that, it was good to be involved with a team again. I'd spent three seasons commentating on Middlesex in the late 1980s and became a quasi-member of the squad, much like the scorer or physio. It was both a privilege and a delight for someone who never rose above Oxfordshire Under-15 level to be accepted into such an elite group. It wasn't quite the same relationship with Ireland yet, of course, but there was an easy access to the players, a willingness to have a chat and trust was building.

My time with Middlesex had taught me when to contribute and when to stay quiet; to put forward an idea or opinion in the form of a question; to know when not to approach a player. There is a form of tact required. It's usually just common sense but not always.

I once found myself in a hospitality tent with Peter Such, the Essex off-spinner, who was a hopeless batsman in his early career. That day, though, he had smashed it all over the place, comfortably making his highest score and possibly doubling the runs he had made the previous season. Something like that. One of my colleagues rattled off whatever the stat was, thinking it would be well received. It wasn't. All it was doing was reminding the bloke how useless he had been.

I tried: 'Have you been working on your batting?' A smile. Yes, he had, and was more than happy to talk about it.

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Lewie was always more than happy to talk about anything, but especially about Ireland being too amateur in their approach and the need to blood younger players. He spelt out a few of his ideas while Warke and Michael Rea were putting together an opening stand of 174 against Wales at Titwood – a game Ireland had to win to avoid the Triple Crown wooden spoon after losing to an England XI and Scotland on the two previous days.

‘I don’t want to be one of those committee men in a blazer in 20 years’ time, watching us playing the same stuff at the same level,’ Lewie said. ‘We can do better than that, DT. We need to have more ambition. Why shouldn’t we play in a World Cup? Look what someone like Cookie brings to the side. It’s fresh, it lifts everyone. We need more of that.’

Lewie was right about Gordon Cooke, a greyhound lean teenage seamer from the north-west, who had bowled four maidens and taken a couple of wickets when Ireland gave the touring New Zealanders a scare at Comber earlier in the month. The Kiwis had scratched and scrambled their way to 233/6 and Ireland looked set for victory, needing 21 to win with six wickets in hand, when a panic set in and they finished six short.

While Cookie was playing his first mini-tournament, Warke was making his 100th appearance and fell five short of marking the occasion with what would have been his fifth international century – and last. He helped Ireland to 311/5 which proved 15 runs too good for Wales.

The textbook technique of the former skipper would have seen him open the batting for 15 years in the County Championship had he chosen that path. Lovely to watch from a classic viewpoint, but everything about the opener

was old school, from his forward defensive to his safety-first construction of an innings, and Ireland were ready to strike out in a new direction.

1995

Stormont Hotel – January

Nairobi had shown the need for direction and drive at the top and, pressed by senior players, the ICU advertised for their first full-time national coach. After a bizarre job interview, in which one of the few questions asked was, ‘What do you think of modern bowling boots?’ a somewhat bemused Mike Hendrick was collared in a corridor of the Stormont Hotel by Lewie.

‘We’ve got good players here but we need someone to show us how to compete. Can you do that?’

‘I can try,’ was the reply, and for the next four years the former England fast bowler threw himself into the task.

Unlike his successors, Hendrick settled north of the border, in a village on the outskirts of Belfast with three pubs. ‘Don’t drink in that one,’ he was told by an ICU official, ‘and I wouldn’t recommend that one either.’ Not impressed with the third, Hendo tried the second. Conversation among the other drinkers dropped when it became apparent there was an unaccounted for Englishman in their midst, three years before the Good Friday Agreement.

After a bit, a small delegation approached him. It wasn’t exactly a welcoming committee. ‘Who are you and what are you doing here?’ Before he could frame a reply, there was a second voice. ‘I know who he is – he’s that cricket fella.’

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The atmosphere eased, only for someone in the corner to pipe up: 'Cricket? That's a shite game, that is!' Hendo had found his local.

Dublin – 4 March

I'd become pally with Lewie in a long-distance sort of way and stayed with him in Rathgar on my trips to Dublin. His house was named 'Haynesville' after the great West Indian opener, who I knew from my time with Middlesex. The house sign was of a batsman playing an elaborate forward defensive. A black Warkie. We'd drink in town at Toners, and Doheny & Nesbitt on Lower Baggot Street, often in the company of Ger Siggins, sports editor of the *Sunday Tribune*. Ger knew both the game and the history of the game, and was a good man for pints.

I was at Haynesville for the weekend of the France rugby international. Great craic. The game kicked off early, so the drinking started even earlier. At a post-match feed near Lansdowne Road I was introduced to a Heat Detector, who turned out to be Heatley Tector, Lewie's best mate and future father of several very fine cricketers – Harry being the first to play for Ireland. I'd not encountered Heatley as a name before. Mind you, one of the ICU media officers at the time was Dexter Evans. Or was it Evans Dexter?

Kennington – 23 April

The unusual-names theme continued in the first game of Hendo's reign, an eight-wicket loss to Surrey in the Benson & Hedges Cup. Ireland were bowled out for 80, with Stratford Garfield Kenlock taking 5-15. Known as Mark, he didn't get his fellow Garfield, who batted at No.5 in a

bowler-heavy Ireland team. The new coach had spoken to the Irish press for the first time before the game.

Boylan asked: 'Who will be opening?'

'Stephen Warke and Michael Rea.'

'And who will be taking strike?'

What had he let himself in for?

Ireland put up a better show at Hove two days later. Replying to a Sussex score of 261/8, Rea made 73. At one stage the visitors were 123/2 and in contention. Michael Rea did like a deflection backward of square, past gully or down to third man. Sussex quickly picked up on this, and at one stage had six fielders stationed between their wicketkeeper and cover point. Still he found the odd gap.

Owen Butler had bowled fast down the hill and taken three wickets for Ireland. Butler had enough genuine pace to worry good county batsmen, but also spindly ankles that were never going to allow more than the occasional burst of brilliance between injuries. Towards the end of an innings, team-mates would encourage him to bowl yorkers with cries of 'In the blockhole, Buttsie!' Not a gee-up you would want to get the wrong way around.

St John's Wood – 7 June

The annual MCC game, this year at Lord's, gave me a first sight of two promising youngsters: Ryan Eagleson, a 21-year-old from Carrickfergus, who bowled beautifully controlled away-swingers, and Peter Gillespie, from Strabane in the north-west, who was also seen as a medium-pacer in those days, before developing into Mr Reliable in the middle order. 'PG' claimed to be the same age as Eagy but looked decades older. He was the oldest youngster I'd ever seen. Still is.

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The ritual of a two-day, four-innings match was followed – declarations, a fourth-innings run chase and on this occasion a draw. To the ICU blazers present, drinks in the MCC committee room was what the trip was really about. It was very social and on the final night I was invited to the team dinner in a local Italian restaurant. The chat was excellent.

‘All it would take to get us to the World Cup is a million quid,’ Uel Graham said. His theory being that for a modest salary the dozen or so players around the table could concentrate on cricket for the next two years and, without worrying about making a living, would improve sufficiently to guarantee success at the next qualifier in Malaysia.

It sounded revolutionary. I’m not sure whether Scotty was within earshot but the Hon. Sec. would have choked on his lasagne at such a blatant suggestion of professionalism.

At the end of the night we were presented with a bill that included all sorts of cheeky add-ons; cover charges, jugs of water, etc. Eyebrows were raised. Mutterings. A convivial evening was in danger of souring. It was a family-owned restaurant, we were just about the only diners and I asked to speak to the owner.

‘There are 20 of us,’ I said. ‘What say we pay £25 a head cash: £500. None of this cover charge nonsense. You’ll not have to worry about the VAT either.’ I might have added: ‘You weren’t open tonight, eh?’ with a conspiratorial wink. Alcohol had been consumed. My offer meant a discount of perhaps a fiver a head. Whether it was the lure of the cash, or the sight of 20 miffed blokes, the deal was agreed.

Then Lewie piped up: ‘Will it be all right if I pay by card?’

Dublin – 14 July

On the eve of the tour game against West Indies, I found myself in a pizzeria with the new coach and his captain. Lewie was bubbling about the changes and innovations Hendo had brought to the squad, and what could be achieved in the coming seasons. ‘You need to be realistic,’ the old pro said, wearily. ‘Ireland will never beat a county side.’

Was he downplaying expectations? Maybe. If Hendo believed what he was saying, it certainly wouldn’t be for lack of effort on his part. He worked tirelessly setting up the programmes and pathways necessary to funnel talent towards the national team, and changed the policy of picking wizened old performers who could be relied on for consistency but not flair.

Youngsters like the Patterson brothers, Mark and Andy, plus Cookie and others were promoted and moulded into a winning unit. It was said that Hendrick laid the tracks that his successor Adi Birrell would drive the train along.

That winter, he literally went out of his way to get Decker playing again. A cult figure in the north-west, Curry had his ICC Trophy cut short by a family bereavement and had only been available for four B&H group matches since.

Hendo drove over to Foyle Meats in Derry to visit the big hitter at the abattoir where he worked. ‘You’ll find him in the third rendering shed.’ A blood-splattered Decker, in elbow-length rubber gloves, approached the coach with a toothy grin. ‘How’d you like this for a job then?’

The two men looked at each other for a minute. ‘Do you want to play?’

A nod.

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Although, in the partisan politics of Irish cricket, he was accused of not visiting the area enough, Hendo loved the north-west. ‘It’s a working-class game up there,’ he said. ‘Small grounds, big hitters, passionate crowds who know their cricket – it reminds me a lot of the West Indies.’

It was, and still is, very different to the blazer and chinos, middle-class scene in Leinster. Checked shirts and blue jeans is the dress code whether you live in Derry or Londonderry. It’s a cultural as well as sartorial divide that makes for fiery clashes between clubs in the all-island Irish Cup. A trip to Donemana, the north-west village home of the McBrines, is viewed as a Deliverance-style adventure by posh southerners.

Bats instead of banjos.

1996

Hove – 28 April

There was little to suggest this would be a breakthrough year for Irish cricket when the season-opening Benson & Hedges Cup campaign brought four more heavy defeats by Hampshire, Sussex, Gloucestershire and Surrey. The Sussex game was memorable for the home side bettering the Ireland total of 190/8 in exactly 20 overs – a more than credible T20 effort seven years before the birth of the short form. Opener Martin Speight hit a ridiculous 64 from 26 balls.

Although humbling, the defeat did give a glimpse of the spirit that the younger players were starting to bring to the side, particularly Mark Patterson. The Belfast bowler took some fearful tap in the opening overs and, muttering ‘little spawny fecker’, he ran through the crease and bounced

Speight from 18 yards. The illegal delivery disappeared over the ropes as well.

If the age of deference was over, the heavy defeats certainly weren't. Sussex turned up at Ormeau in mid-summer and won a 60-overs NatWest Trophy tie by 302 runs, bowling Ireland out for 80. In a game that required two days to complete, the county were 323/7 overnight; they could have declared.

South Wales – 2–4 July

Little over a week later, a first trophy was in the ICU cabinet. The Triple Crown started with a defeat but easy wins over the hosts and the England club players, in Pontarddulais, delivered the title on run-rate. Justin Benson led the team for the first time in the absence of the injured Lewie, and Andy Patterson, the younger Patto, proved the surprise attacking package when he was promoted to open in the last two games.

Champions maybe, but they still couldn't buy a win against Scotland. In a game reduced to 40 overs per side at Ynysygerwn, surely 245/6 was going to be enough? No, Iain Philip scored a century and the auld enemy won with a whole three overs to spare.

Press facilities are not always the best on the smaller grounds, and gnome-like Scottish reporter Keith Graham and I found ourselves evicted from our temporary spot in the clubhouse almost immediately after the game to accommodate a geriatric dance class. As we stood in the cold, waiting to use the one public telephone to dictate copy, music wafted out from inside.

Keith said: 'Shall we dance?' and we waltzed around the windy car park, to the amusement of the pensioners.

Brondby – July

A friend of the missus, at the time, had moved to Copenhagen. ‘Anywhere near Brondby?’ I wondered, sensing a night out, perhaps, during the inaugural European Championship. About half a mile away, as it happened, with a spare room and a husband with a car. Happy days.

Jurgen and Mila were great hosts. Jurgen was in his late forties, unemployed and desperately trying to find a new job despite receiving around three-quarters of his previous salary as a benefit. ‘Our system is very generous, but it only works if everyone plays the game,’ he said.

This grown-up Scandinavian approach to state assistance was explained again when the visiting press were given a tour of the Brondby sporting complex, which housed a professional football team, and provided facilities for hockey, cricket and a couple of other sports, plus basic accommodation for visiting teams. Small rooms with hard, single beds. Our guide was very proud of the set-up and how it was funded. ‘You see this carpet? The old one was not very good so we ask the government for a new one and, of course, they paid for it.’

A pair of Scottish eyebrows shot up. ‘I’ll bet there’s a lot of fiddling goes on, eh?’

The Ireland team were buzzing after their Triple Crown success, despite the modest nature of the digs. I found Hendo after training, attempting to stretch out on a bed that was about 30 inches wide and certainly not long enough for his 6ft 6in frame. He had stayed in worse. The spirit in the camp? Yeah, very good. There had been laughter aplenty the previous day when Paul ‘Micky’ McCrum had led a walk-out of the northern players. Mimicking a breakdown in the latest round of political

manoeuvrings at Stormont, Micky and four others had stood up at the end of a team meeting and announced: 'We can no longer participate in these talks!'

Brondby – 15 July

The Netherlands considered themselves, with some justification, to be the top dogs in Europe and had insisted on decent opposition if they were going to be troubled to take part in this new tournament. The two groups were therefore lopsided, with the underwhelming Italy and Gibraltar in with the hosts and Ireland.

The Azzuri were led by their chairman, Simone Gambino, a bundle of energy and cricketing passion. Born in New York, he was sent to school in St John's Wood when things got a bit hot on the other side of the Atlantic – yes, those Gambinos – and had fallen for a game most Italians didn't know.

'I loved Geoff Boycott,' Simone said. 'I'm Italian, we love good defence.' His team did not show good defence, either in the field or at the crease. Ireland charged to 255/6, despite no one raising a bat, and Patto then castled the Italian top three in his opening spell. Gambino's men progressed at a Boycott-like sub-two an over to 86 all out.

Brondby – 16 July

Denmark, coached by the former Derbyshire fast bowler Ole Mortensen, were expected to provide a sterner test. After a superb breakfast of various cheeses, cold cuts, pickles and freshly baked bread, Jurgen decided he must find out what this game of cricket was all about. We arrived a few overs late, just in time to see Patto claim the first wicket. 'Ah, so the idea is to hit the three sticks?'

DO THEY PLAY CRICKET IN IRELAND?

He didn't stay long.

The home side made 218/8, a total that would have given them confidence, but there was no stopping the Triple Crown holders and half-centuries from Angus Dunlop, fittingly in his 50th match, and Neil Doak delivered a three-wicket win with nine balls to spare. The third group match against Gibraltar was barely a contest and Ireland were in the final.

Copenhagen – 18 July

Jurgen took me to see the sights of Copenhagen on the day off, and both of them were a disappointment. I'd always imagined The Little Mermaid to be a focal point, in the harbour, obviously, but near the middle of the city somewhere. Bless her, she is stuck out in the sticks, with nothing around, no context, just plonked down there. Like a dismantled old manual scoreboard that's been 'preserved' by moving it miles away, in a setting that means nothing.

Tivoli Gardens are more central, but in the middle of summer they had all the allure of a rundown seaside promenade in November. An amusement park seemingly in terminal decline, but it's still going two-and-a-half decades later so maybe I caught it on a bad day. Or maybe it's supported by the local government. Someone has to pay for the end-of-evening fireworks.

Brøndby – 19 July

The Dutch had also reached the final. Of course they had. And they would win it too, without much trouble, or so they thought. Ireland, though, were out to upset the favourites, in more ways than one. Assistant coach Bobby

Rao had a plan to throw in-form Pakistan-born opener Zulfiqar Ahmed off his game. It wasn't a very subtle plan. It involved the Ireland players learning a couple of phrases in Urdu to suggest that Zulfiqar's mother may not have had the highest sexual morals. Did it work? Well, Zulfiqar only made 14 in a total of 223/9.

Decker took 3-33 with his canny off spin and followed up with 55, but it was skipper Benson who secured the victory with a classy 79, his highest and comfortably best innings for Ireland, as they won by three wickets, with nearly four overs to spare. Benny lifted a second trophy in a month, alcohol was consumed and the balance of power in Europe had started to shift.

Linlithgow – 17 August

Lewie was back at the helm briefly for the annual first-class fixture against Scotland. The home side rattled up 380/5, with skipper George Salmond declaring soon after he was dismissed for 181; the visitors had four half-centurions in their reply of 323/6. The traditional final afternoon run chase was agreed with Ireland set 319 from 70 overs.

Lewie made 71 but Scotland looked like taking the spoils when Garfield joined Eagy with 110 still needed. The seventh-wicket pair began chipping away at the requirement. With 80 needed, it started to drizzle. The Scottish umpires played on. The target shrank to 60, and then 40. The precipitation got a little heavier, but still the umpires were unmoved. Eighteen required from the final five overs, both batsmen set. The umpires conferred and took the players off. Did I mention they were both Scottish? 'It was quite wet,' Lewie said, diplomatically.