



THE GOOD
MURRUNGU

A Cricket Tale of the Unexpected

ALAN BUTCHER

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Year 1

1

In My Beginning Is My End

I WAS at home with nothing but returning to an Open University degree course on the horizon. I was taking a break in the garden. Our resident robin was inches from taking a breadcrumb from my outstretched hand for the very first time when the phone beside me on the garden bench rang.

The robin backed off but didn't fly away.

'Bugger.'

Should I answer or stay with the bird? It had taken a long time to get him this close, a lot of patience and stillness. But time was one thing I wasn't short of. I had loads of it to spare. I answered and I'm glad I did. It was my old mate, the Zimbabwe great David Houghton.

'Butch, what are you up to?'

'Nothing much.'

'I think you should apply for the Zimbabwe job. You're just the kind of guy they need.'

'Oh? I wasn't aware the job is available.'

'It is, but closing date is next week. If you're interested I'll get them to hang on a bit for you if you want.'

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‘Mmm. Okay, sounds interesting. Give me a bit of time to think about it and discuss it with Maddy. I’ll get back to you quick.’

‘Okay Butch, but I really think you’re perfect for the job. See you, mate.’



My recent experience of job hunting had taught me to be cautious. In the previous month I had got to the final two for head coaching roles with the West Indies academy and the Kenyan national team. On both occasions my rival and I waited for six weeks for a decision, only for me to find out I had not got the job by reading it on the cricket website ESPNCricinfo. My eggs were not going to be put in one basket, but I decided to give it a go.

On 18 February 2010 I was booked on the 5.30pm Air Zimbabwe flight to Harare where I was to interview for the position of Zimbabwe national cricket coach. I had been tutoring an ECB Level Three batting module in Derby which was scheduled to finish around lunchtime that day. I figured it would give me enough time to get to Gatwick for the flight. I knew it might be tight but I had only just started tutoring for the ECB and didn’t want to give it up. After all, I might not get the Zimbabwe job.

I enjoyed the course in Derby; the module had gone well. I had a quick lunch, decided to change at Gatwick, said my goodbyes and jumped in the car to head for the M1. Fortunately I had the radio on as ten minutes into my journey the traffic news informed me that the motorway was closed between junctions 20 and 16 with no immediate prospect of reopening. Panic! Okay, think – what to do? Think. Think.

I decided that my best bet was M42/M40/M25, a circuitous route but I couldn’t think of a better one. To make matters worse it started to snow heavily. Traffic was getting worse and the snow slowed things down; several stoppages on

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the M25 made me think I was going to miss the flight, which was really not going to look good. Fortunately the traffic eased as I got close to the airport and I arrived at Gatwick with limited time to spare. There was nothing for it but to change in the car park, much to the surprise of the woman in the car next to mine. Her obvious embarrassment reminded me of being stuck on the M11 for ten hours a few years before and, glancing to my right, I saw the woman in the car next to mine peeing on the road between our cars, jeans and panties around her ankles. Where to look!

I sprinted to the check-in desk which by now was empty, but fortunately still open. Then I had a relatively calm saunter to the departure gate followed by a comfortable executive-class seat. Despite everything I was on my way.

I was travelling with another applicant, Zimbabwean Grant Flower, who I knew to be a good bloke, although we had some issues later. Both of us, I think, preferred to make the journey separately to give ourselves time to think and prepare for what was going to be a busy few hours ahead.

We arrived in Harare at 6.30am and were transported to the Holiday Inn on Samora Machel Avenue to find our rooms unavailable until midday. Breakfast was also not yet available so I decided on a short walk to kill some time and get a feel for the place. I wandered up Fifth Street in what I knew from previous visits to be the direction of Harare Sports Club. My first impressions were of a grey, sad, uncared-for city, a far cry from the pristine one I had first come to in 1970 and again in 1976. I reasoned that this was unsurprising given Zimbabwe's recent history and I am glad to say that three years later I left a much brighter and more vibrant place.

I only got as far as the Athientis Shopping Centre on Fife Avenue, a place I was to get to know quite well for its excellent supermarket and, more interestingly for me, two live music venues – Book Cafe and the Mannenburg. This morning, tired and hungry as I was, the drabness around me was too depressing and I turned back to the hotel. Once there

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I bumped into Grant who suggested looking for a coffee bar in the city. I'm not sure how long it was since he had been in Harare but I sensed he too was shocked and saddened by how down-at-heel the once beautiful city appeared.

Our rooms were eventually ready at 12.30pm, but with the interview to take place at the Imba Matomba Hotel in only two hours' time I resolved not to sleep for fear of not waking. I showered (fortunately there was water; I was to learn that this is not a given!), shaved and went over my presentation until it was time to dress before being picked up at 2pm.

The 15-minute drive up the Enterprise Road through Chisipite to Glen Lorne, where the Imba Matomba was situated, served to lighten my mood. The vegetation was lush, green and as beautiful as I remembered it. I was focused on what was to come so I didn't take in too much beyond the greenery. I can't even remember who picked me up but I do know that it was by far the prettiest location in which I have ever undertaken a job interview.

Perched on a hill overlooking the Dombashawa Ranges, the main building, with its stunning thatched roof and interiors with more than a whiff of 'the great white hunter', looked down upon two rondavel-style outbuildings which flanked a beautiful and inviting pool. It can best be described as African/colonial in style, in contrast to Meikles in the city, which is purely and unashamedly colonial.

But I was not there to write a travel guide, although I made a mental note to return should I be offered the job. The interview took place in the larger of the outbuildings in front of a panel of about ten people, some of whom I knew, some I got to know and some who remained a mystery for the entire three years. Fortunately the technology worked; my presentation went well and I felt that I answered the panel's questions adequately. The interview lasted about 40 minutes and I then waited with a much-needed beer for Grant Flower to finish his ordeal before we returned to Harare Sports Club where we had agreed to watch the domestic T20 tournament

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that began earlier in the week, and which was approaching the semi-final stage.

This turned out to be a pleasant afternoon meeting old cricketing friends, making new acquaintances, watching some entertaining cricket and later, when a torrential downpour had stopped play, enjoying beers and wine in several sponsors' tents. Before things got too enjoyable Grant, myself and another candidate, Chris Silverwood, decided to retire to the Holiday Inn for a steak. Chris, of Yorkshire, Essex and England, was coaching the Mashonaland franchise and provided some interesting and helpful insights as to the state of cricket in Zimbabwe. The company and chat were good but Grant and I were tired and in need of sleep.

I was woken by an early call requesting my presence poolside at 10am for a meeting with cricket committee chairman Alistair Campbell and managing director Ozias Bvute. My fate would soon be revealed. At ten I was introduced to the MD and was immediately offered the job; Flower was to be the batting coach, although would not take up his post until October when his contract with Essex expired, Heath Streak the bowling coach with Steve Mangongo my assistant coach.

Some financial and logistical talk ensued after which I agreed in principle to take on the role pending some final discussion with my family. I was informed that should I accept I would start on 1 April but they would like me to travel to St Vincent on 9 March to observe the last three ODIs of their forthcoming Caribbean tour. I agreed to let them know before the end of the following week.

The rest of the day went by in a blur, my mind whirring and my thoughts only intruded on by the throbbing pain in my right foot that I knew to be the onset of an attack of gout. I was introduced to board members, players, coaches, committee members, admin staff and I saw an old mate of mine, Peter Chingoka, the chairman of Zimbabwe Cricket and *persona non grata* at the ECB since being refused entry to the UK in 2008 because of alleged corruption and links

to the Mugabe regime. I was pleased to see that he appeared more like the guy whose company I enjoyed so much when we played together for Universals Cricket Club in 1976 and not the one who was beset by political and financial problems that I ran into in Port Elizabeth in 2004.

My overwhelming feeling was one of excitement. I had no real idea of what I would find in Zimbabwe beyond a conviction that, just as I had in 1976 when I came during the height of the independence war, I would find a place totally at odds with the perception encouraged by the British media. In that conviction I was proved right as I found a country, or at least a population, that was trying to move forward, trying to accept; a country in which I felt safe and welcome wherever I went.

This is not to say there are no issues; I am not that naive, but at that moment I was bowled over by the excitement in the ground; the racial mix of the crowd; the age range and gender mix. It all felt like something good was happening, something that I really wanted to be a part of. It would be an adventure; as a boy I loved the series of *Adventure* novels by Willard Price. This would be my 'Zimbabwe Adventure'.

By early evening my foot was throbbing. I didn't want to stand talking and drinking until late; I was tired and conscious that I had a 7.30am flight the next day. A board member kindly offered to drop me at the hotel and informed me during the short journey that they were looking for me to be a 'father figure' to the players. I quite liked the sound of that and would soon understand how necessary that role would prove to be.

The return journey was comfortable and uneventful. Air Zimbabwe's business class would always have been my preferred means of travel to and from the UK, if only they had been able to keep their aircraft flying. It wasn't like BA or SAA business class but at only US\$50 more than BA economy it was spacious and comfortable. You were well looked after and as a direct flight it could knock at least five hours off the

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flying time via Johannesburg. The ten-hour flight was to give me plenty of time to reflect on what had brought me to this position and to wonder how it would all pan out.



I had not been in full-time employment for 18 months up to the point I received that call from David Houghton. For much of that time I had been feeling battered and bruised over my exit from The Oval in September 2008. I felt badly let down by management; I had turned a hopelessly divided dressing room around and gained promotion in my first year in charge and had made some tough but necessary and successful decisions to get us out of the relegation zone one season and to finishing fourth the next. The team had been set up and prepared well for a First Division championship challenge in 2008. We were among the favourites to win it and we were confident that we could.

Unfortunately, fate then took a hand less than a week before the season started and one by one the pillars of our side sustained injuries that they would not recover from. These things happen in sport and you have to roll with the punches. What rankled was repeatedly being assured that the committee knew we would have four or five lean years while we developed a new team and then being given six months to deliver. Mind you, I don't know why I expected any better from cricket administrators; a triumph of hope over experience maybe?

So I wasn't in a great frame of mind for some time after this and eventually sought some counselling to help me get my thinking straight. During this time I realised first of all how tired I was. Ten years of a five-hour daily commute and plenty of working hours had left their mark, but I didn't notice until I stopped.

I also made a big mistake in applying for the job of Lancashire head coach. You lose a high-profile job, you lose a

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good pay cheque, you also lose status, you've got a mortgage and family to provide for; you've got to get a job quick. These were the thoughts going through my head and I applied for a job that I had little interest in. Normally I know if a job feels right for me when I can visualise myself in the role; actually see myself working with the players and staff. I got nothing when I thought about Lancashire and I should have listened to myself.

I didn't even put a presentation together; I just gave one that I had used at Surrey. It was a good presentation, but not the one a table full of ex-Lancashire players wanted to see. Predictably I didn't get the job and I would not have been ready for it if I had. It wasn't all bad though; I really enjoyed a day out on the train to Manchester and back!

Around this time I made two very good decisions, with help – or, depending on which way you look at it, forceful coercion – from my wife Maddy. First I went to see a financial advisor. Then having admitted to myself that I was depressed, I went to see my doctor. Both meetings had positive outcomes; from one I learnt that I was in far better financial shape than I thought; that we were not going to lose the house or starve, at least not in the short term. From the other I learnt that I was in far worse psychological shape than I thought and came away with some pills and six free counselling sessions.

So the financial pressure was off while the counselling helped me focus on what I wanted to do in the future rather than dwelling on the past. In March 2009 Maddy and I enjoyed a trip to Antigua hosting a tour party for a travel company, ITC, to watch England's Test match on the island. The original match at the Sir Viv Richards Stadium was abandoned after three overs and the game moved to the decrepit but historic and atmospheric Recreation Ground in the heart of the capital St John's. This was excellent therapy. Beers, cricket and wonderful shared memories with fellow hosts, with whom I had many a battle over the years, by day; and rum, excellent food and good chat with clients at night.

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The accommodation, Blue Waters, was stunning and Maddy and I had a ball; who needed a job?

I enjoyed a relaxing summer watching my daughter Bryony play cricket, did the odd bit of coaching for Lashings CC and some consultancy work for the PCA. Then I decided to spend some of my pay-off from Surrey on a family holiday in Barbados. We joined my younger son Gary and his Bajan girlfriend for two magical weeks which was my first summer holiday since I was 12 years old. Life without cricket wasn't so bad after all; I was really beginning to enjoy it.

With that in mind I began to think about what I might do other than cricket. I had no interest in business; I thought I'd be hopeless at it. I was interested in psychology, a legacy of a fruitful relationship with the late John Syer, a gestalt psychologist and co-writer with Christopher Connolly of *Sporting Body Sporting Mind*. Between them they had coached and mentally prepared teams from a variety of sports to Olympic standard and had a big hand in Tottenham Hotspur winning back to back FA Cups in the early 1980s.

My association with John began when I joined Glamorgan in 1987 and continued through my coaching career at Essex and Surrey until his death in 2009. I took the bull by the horns and enrolled on an Open University psychology course. I had thought about it for years but knew that while I was working I would not have the time to devote to it. There seemed little prospect of a full-time job and I wasn't really looking for one, so why not?

Isn't it strange that when one is feeling positive, things just happen? A combination of an easing of financial worries, a more positively focused outlook and doing something I knew I was going to enjoy had got me to a very positive place; and I didn't even take the pills! Accordingly, before the ink had dried on my first OU assignment I had applied for head coach roles with the West Indies academy and Kenya; had been asked to tutor the batting module of the ECB Level 3 coaching award and to travel to Pretoria for three weeks as

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batting coach to a group of young English players who it was hoped would be the next crop of England Lions.

As I explained earlier, I got to the final two in both the head coach jobs and, importantly for me, I could visualise myself in both roles. Well really! Who couldn't visualise themselves working in Barbados? This was a message I must have subliminally put across during my interview because when I phoned the CEO, Ernest Hilaire, to voice my displeasure at being kept waiting for six weeks and then finding out on ESPNcricinfo I had not got the job, I also asked for some feedback. His response was that he thought I was more interested in the Caribbean lifestyle. If by that he meant that I preferred to wear shorts and flip-flops to sweaters and overcoats he got it completely right.

Kenya was exactly the same. Six weeks to decide between two people and then not have the courtesy to pass on the verdict? In this context Zimbabwe was a breath of fresh air and caught me a bit by surprise.

Pretoria was fun. It was enjoyable working with a group of talented young players and it was fun socialising with other coaches I had known for years, some of whom I had coached when they were 'talented young players' themselves. The other bonus was that the venue was a High Performance Centre for all sports and Argentina's base for the 2010 football World Cup. In fact the place was buzzing with excitement because Diego Maradona was soon to visit as part of a delegation to give his team's training base the once over. As momentous as this was it did not raise pulse rates to the same levels as the Swedish women's Olympic swimming team who were also training at the centre.

Their training schedules were frightening and intimidating but when lounging around the pool in the break between their twice-daily sessions they were not in the least frightening, if still a little intimidating! Once time had been called on our morning session it was amusing to watch the rush for the best poolside vantage points. 'If only I could still rush'

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was a recurring thought. Eventually the ice was broken and games of mixed beach volleyball became a regular feature of the evening entertainment.

If the swimming team was by and large gorgeous, the Russian rugby team was the total opposite; great beasts of men who rampaged through the buffet-style mealtimes like a plague of locusts. Fortunately we were on decent ECB expenses so on the nights when we were left with one chip and half a congealed egg between us, the coaching staff could find a restaurant in town.

Possibly the most interesting athlete in situ, considering her back story, was Caster Semenya, the South African sprinter whose gender has come under intense scrutiny. Understandably given the publicity surrounding her at the time she seemed to stick with a small group, possibly training partners and support team, and didn't really mix with anyone else. I guess she knew what questions she would be asked and had answered enough. She didn't hide away though and seemed confident in her skin. I remember feeling respect for how she was coping with things. I hope that it wasn't just a veneer.

If I have one regret about this trip it concerns the late and legendary Australian leg spin coach Terry Jenner who had a massive heart attack soon afterwards en route to KCS Wimbledon to undertake some coaching with my younger son Gary. I was instrumental in setting this up but I also shared many bottles of wine and cigars with Terry during the three weeks and hope that I didn't play a significant part in his demise.

* * * * *

It is now 9 March and I am aboard BA flight 2153 alone in the middle row en route to St Vincent. Discussions with my family had gone well, although there was obvious concern about me being away for such a long time. I had signed a

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three-year deal as Zimbabwe coach, but we agreed that as our twin daughters were soon to be starting A levels the disruption to their education should we decamp as a family would be too great. I had experienced the very same thing when my parents decided to return to England after five years in Australia back in 1970; picking up in the middle of an O or A level course is not easy. Fortunately for me cricket took a big hand and thus far I have never had a proper job. My five O levels and English literature A level have not been of much use other than to help me do *The Telegraph's* cryptic crossword and give me an appreciation of literature, theatre and the arts in general.

I had spoken independently to my daughters and they both gave me the same answer; that they would miss me but knew that if I didn't take the opportunity I would regret it. It helped me decide but also gave me a lot of pride that they made such a considered and mature response.

I had watched the earlier part of Zimbabwe's tour on television. Neither they nor the West Indies could by any stretch of the imagination be called good teams, but it was obvious that in Ray Price, Prosper Utseya, Graeme Cremer and Greg Lamb, Zimbabwe possessed a good spin attack, particularly on the slow, low wickets they had been playing on. They scrapped hard in the field but were lacking quality with the bat and in the seam department. All this aside the important thing for me was that I was excited; there was talent and I could visualise myself working with them; this was a very good sign for me.

Zimbabwe won the first T20 and lost the second; they won the first ODI in Guyana by two runs and lost the second – and I was intrigued by an apparent change of tactics from the batsmen in the second game. Where in the first match they had carefully built a total around Vusi Sibanda's 95, in the second they had seemed frenetic and gung-ho, losing wickets and consequently the match. Had they got excited by the win, got ahead of themselves, or had a change of approach? I would

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have to ask these questions when I got there although I was conscious of the fact that I was not yet in charge and my brief was to observe. I would have to pick the right time.

A couple of pre-prandial gin and tonics and some red wine with dinner helped me relax and get some rest. I was looking forward to whatever I would find.

I found, not unusually in the Caribbean, a very pleasant beachfront hotel, a young team in good spirits and a very welcoming coaching and management group. David Houghton was part of that group in a part-time capacity and it was good to see a familiar face who thought about cricket in much the same way as me who could fill me in with what had been happening. I introduced myself to the players as they wandered into the bar and dining area and had a few informal chats as the evening progressed. I was invited to the management meeting before the third ODI in the morning and after sharing a couple of beers with Mr Houghton found my way to my room for a good night's sleep.

The morning meeting was pretty routine; some more introductions and then a rundown of any injury and fitness issues plus management housekeeping. The team left in two small buses, a mode of transport that assumed greater significance later in my tenure when racism raised its ugly head after the World T20 in Sri Lanka, but which for now was just a means to get to the ground.

The records show that the West Indies won the three ODIs in St Vincent, which was of course disappointing, particularly so in light of the fact that Zimbabwe only had to score 200 in each game to have given themselves a good chance of winning two of the three matches. The fact that they only managed 100, 140 and 160 obviously served notice of a real problem with the batting. The matches and practice days showed me that almost without exception the batsmen just prodded on to the front foot; no one looked to play off the back foot, even the diminutive Tatenda Taibu and Stuart Matsikenyeri; and no one stayed down over the ball when driving. In general the

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batsmen were too static, too rigid and slow-footed. There was plenty of work to be done in that area.

The seam bowlers found it difficult to bowl a good length and line and most had inconsistencies in their actions which made doing so very hit and miss. It was no wonder that the team relied on their battery of spinners for control and a wicket-taking threat. There was yet more work to be done here.

In the field they were competent but lacked fitness and conditioning, impacting on agility and strength, most noticeably in the number of weak throwing arms. In Sibanda, Taibu and Shingi Masakadza there were outstanding athletes but too few in a squad of 15. Among the notes I made during this time was a single simple word, 'catching'. This single simple word was to haunt me throughout my time as Zimbabwe coach and according to reports is doing the same to my successors.

Some chances went begging during this series, enough at any rate for me to make a note of it. Over the next three years abysmal catching was to cost us a Test match win over Pakistan and innumerable opportunities to win ODIs. A few months later an old team-mate of mine and one of the best catchers of a cricket ball I've ever seen, Monte Lynch, was appointed head coach of the Southern Rocks franchise in Masvingo. I travelled the 270km south to see him and watch his team's first match. I can see the look of shock and horror on his face as I walked toward him hand outstretched in greeting, 'Butch... Butch... they can't catch mate... they can't fucking catch!'

'Hi Monte, how you doing?'



I was gaining information that would help me when I took over. Something that really interested me was the number of messages sent on to the field by the coaching staff. Hardly an over went by without a coach sending a non-playing reserve

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on to the ground with advice for the captain, sometimes twice or even three times. I wondered how the captain, Prosper Utseya, felt about it. I know that I would have hated it when I captained county sides. Surely it undermines the captain's authority on the pitch, makes him feel the coaching staff has no confidence in him, interrupts his thinking and any plans he has formulated for the next few overs. My first impression was that Utseya was not enjoying it either; I resolved to ask him.

Before I got around to talking to Prosper, informal chats with Alistair Campbell, David Houghton and Heath Streak, which took the form of match reviews and thoughts for the future, left me in no doubt that he was not the captain of choice. They said that he wasn't trusted, wouldn't look you in the eye when spoken to and ignored much of the advice from the dressing room. I didn't know the lad so I listened, made mental notes and knew that I had to get to know him and gain his trust quickly. He had been named captain for the next tour of the Caribbean in only a month's time which also took in the World T20. We needed to develop a strong relationship, and fast.

On balance I thought it best to leave the majority of the issues for after the tour when I was in charge, but I did ask him if he enjoyed the captaincy because his hangdog countenance suggested otherwise. His reply, 'sometimes', and explanation, told me he was irritated by so many messages, that he knew he was not popular with the management and reinforced the need for us to talk, and more specifically, for me to listen. He certainly found it difficult to look me in the eye.

This really interested me as in western culture it is regarded as rude and untrustworthy to avoid eye contact when spoken to. However, I knew that people who are auditory-focused learners tend to look towards their ears when assimilating or recalling information. I also seemed to remember reading that a high percentage of people from musical or story-telling cultures are auditory focused. I knew that in some cultures it was considered disrespectful to look a senior or so-called

superior in the eye. Did some of this or all of it contribute to the unease that the management felt about the captain?

I had experienced something similar in my role as Surrey assistant coach with the young Michael Carberry. I was trying to get him into the first team; I felt he was ready and that it was time for a young player to be introduced to the team so that the current side wouldn't all grow old together, as eventually happened. He desperately needed people to have faith in him, to feel part of the side and he didn't start too badly.

Eventually he was dropped and news came back to me that he wasn't trustworthy; he'd refused to field at short leg and wasn't a team man. Now this was a very honest kid, young, naive, immature and a bit over-indulged for sure, but a good, honest kid. I spoke to him about it later. As he tried to make sense of it all, feeling bruised about what had happened and suspicious about what might happen, as his eyes flicked from one corner of their socket to the other, looking to his ears for understanding, he looked undeniably shifty. He was of course angry, hurt and feeling very let down. He had needed help and reassurance not conflict and ostracism. He in turn found it hard to trust and moved from The Oval shortly after.

When asked, the tour manager and physiotherapist both assured me that to the best of their knowledge it was not considered disrespectful to look an elder in the eye in Shona culture. Within 24 hours I was treated to a demonstration of why it might be considered disrespectful *not* to look elders in the eye, together with a pretty damning indictment of either the motivation of the team or the management style of the coaching group – or both.

I had enjoyed my discreet involvement with the group on match and training days, gaining knowledge and understanding. I had enjoyed their company socially at the bar, on the beach or at dinner. In particular, watching the sheer joy on the face of pace bowler Chris Mpfu as he practised his newly acquired skill of swimming was both amusing and touching. They were a diverse, multi-cultural

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group who appeared to be getting on pretty well despite some obvious possible causes of tension. I felt a look into the team dynamic during a team meeting would benefit me so I sought and was granted permission to sit in on the pre-match meeting the afternoon before the final ODI.

To say that what I witnessed surprised me is an understatement. I think the meeting went on for 20 minutes to half an hour, just going over our tactical plans and highlighting some areas where we might improve on previous games. Throughout that time 15 pairs of eyes were fixed firmly on the floor at their feet. I did not see one player look up, not one player offered or was asked for an opinion. The coaches talked at the group, telling them what was to happen with no agreement sought; the team was expected to accept and carry out instructions. Clearly the players did not own their team and, worryingly for me, did not look desperately interested in doing so.

I guessed that their behaviour was a result of how they had been treated and in the months to come I was to find that the default mode of coaching and management in Zimbabwe was to tell. Players were expected to simply do as they were told because they did not have the capacity for independent thought. I knew I had to encourage them to think for themselves but if at that moment I thought that it would simply be a matter of affording them the opportunity I was soon to be disabused of that notion. This group of players either didn't know how or were too scared to form opinions of their own.

On the morning of our departure I asked if I could address the players to try to assess their mood or feelings and to offer some food for thought for the return journey and the next couple of weeks. We had lost by four matches to one and the squad seemed suitably disappointed. I asked them to accept where we are right now, that it was no disgrace. I told them I had calls and e-mails from people watching in England praising their fighting spirit. I put it to them that skill levels,

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techniques, had let us down, which is also no disgrace, nothing to be ashamed of; nothing to be ashamed of unless we do nothing about it. I let them know that in my team there would be no failure, only feedback and learning, but I only wanted the ones who wanted to learn.

Some eyes remained on the floor but most showed signs of interest. One very talented senior player later told me that he was pleased that I mentioned the need for improved technique. He felt that players and coaches were in denial about this and always blamed lack of effort, lack of team spirit or lack of mental strength for a bad performance. I could see how this could perpetuate a cycle of negativity resulting in lots of furious unfocused hard work for little gain.

On the return flight I was to leave the group in London and go home until it was time for me to take up my post at the beginning of April. I would only be in Zimbabwe for a week before heading back to the Caribbean for fixtures against West Indies A and then the World T20. While at home I made some financial arrangements and generally tried to tie up any loose ends that might make life difficult for my wife. On our return from the Caribbean we were scheduled to go almost straight into a tri-nations one-day series with India and Sri Lanka so some thought also had to be given to our preparations for that. The time flew by and before we all knew it we were standing at Heathrow departures saying our goodbyes. I was sad but very excited.