PLAYING WITH FIRE
BY NASSER HUSSAIN
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Nasser Hussain 2019
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I always felt nervous as hell. I always liked to stay fifteen or twenty minutes away from the ground if I could. I am proud of my career. I am relishing having more time with my family, enjoying them and my house, and doing things that never entered my head to do when I was a player. I am so pleased that I have no bitterness or bad feelings about anything that happened. I calmed down a bit as I got older because I saw other people throwing their gear about and I felt I must have looked a prat when I was doing it, but for much of my career I had to hit something on my return in order to get it out of my system. I couldn't eat, couldn't read a paper for fear of seeing something negative, so from 5 a.m., I would lie there, looking at the clock, hoping it wouldn't move so that the batting wouldn't come any nearer. I feel humbled by my career. I get a feeling of warmth and calm when I look back on my career now. I have been through a huge cricketing adventure and have come out the other side happy and content. I have even been strawberry picking! I have made incredible friendships and have the most amazing memories. I have never been very good at returning messages or ringing people for a chat. I have so many memories and I have been shown such wonderful support from so many people. I like to think I will have it with me for a long while yet. I never wanted to outstay my welcome and lose this support. I think back to myself and Atherton playing schools cricket together, and I reflect on the fact that between us we have captained England in around 100 Tests. I was always happy in the middle. I was always nervous when I batted. I was awarded the OBE at the start of 2000, a huge honour and one that is totally dedicated to my parents. I was never able to change my ways, I just coped with it. I was never very sociable in the evening if I had to bat the following day. I would hear spectators saying 'Good luck' or the
chirps of opposition fielders as I made my way to the crease. I would normally fall asleep about 1 a.m., having fiddled around with my bat to make sure it felt right for a couple of hours, and then wake up again at 5 a.m., opening one eye in the direction of the alarm clock before thinking 'God, I'm batting today. What's going to happen? Am I going to nick one early on? Am I going to get runs today?'
Part 1:  

I'd been speaking to Duncan Fletcher, our coach, at length about Zimbabwe because he actually comes from that place and was feeling more stress than anyone about our predicament. I'm ashamed to say that going along with what was just seemed the best way to make sure we didn't go – the right decision made then, for the wrong reasons. I've toed the party line until now, but they way they behaved over the whole affair shouldn't have earned anyone's silence.

I accepted that. I addressed them and said, Look, I know sometimes when we are discussing cricket and tactics, some of you fall asleep at the back during my team talks, but that doesn't concern me now. Some of you are going to have to take some serious growing-up pills and take this issue very seriously indeed. I know a lot of you are young and I apologize for putting this on you, but it's looking as though everyone is going to leave us to make some pretty big decisions here. I also received a lot of correspondence on the issue from all over the world. I arrived in England, as you will read, as a seven-year-old boy, my parents giving up a lovely life in India because they wanted their children to grow up and be educated in England. I asked Malcolm Speed if that was what he wanted: people being beaten, arrested or worse, much worse, simply over a game of cricket.

I can honestly say they all spoke brilliantly. I can't tell you how much I admired them. I could understand that. I couldn't believe it.

I did actually feel for Lamb at this point, but he kept on telling me the moral argument was irrelevant and I just couldn't accept that. I didn't believe Lamb. I don't expect people to bow down at my feet as England captain, but I
do think that administrators should appreciate and have an understanding of what cricketers are all about and our point of view. I don't think I will ever vote.

I ended up doing an emotional press conference, denying I had done anything which necessitated an apology from Lamb; but I was finished with the ECB by this stage.

I felt it was unforgivable.

I had a mistrust of the ICC, and now I felt the same with the ECB. I had agreed with them to say that we as players were pulling out for security reasons, but not now. I had kept quiet, acted like the dumb cricketer throughout, and now Tim Lamb, who, I reckoned, had behaved in an unsatisfactory manner throughout the whole business, was apologizing on my behalf? I had thought we were going into a meeting to get an explanation from the ICC as to why they thought the game should go ahead in Zimbabwe, but all I got was a declaration that we were going to play there, that it was safe to do so and that was the end of the matter. I had to do a double take. I have always liked Morgan but right now, in a new job, he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I have to set the record straight.

I just felt a sense of relief.

I kept on reading that he was saying, *If the authorities think it is right for England to go, then they should go,* but I couldn't understand that. I knew I would have my ups and downs. I knew it would be tough. I know some people felt that, as a Zimbabwean, he could have made more public pronouncements in support of me, but Duncan doesn't have to make public statements just for effect to do his bit. I know there has been a shift in cricketing power to Asia away from England, but I also know how
much it means, in terms of both prestige and finance, for countries like India to tour England.

I mentioned that documentary in the course of a press conference soon afterwards and said that clearly we had some big decisions to make, a move which led to the producer of the programme writing to me and sending me documents relative to what he had seen out there. I might have been isolated by my government, my employers, and the sport's governing body, but not by Duncan.

I never dreamt that all my hard work at cricket, all the sacrifices of my dad and all my ups and downs would lead me to the top of the game. I never swore and I was never offensive.

I said it was impossible for us to change now. I said, Sorry, chairman, you are fucking kidding me aren't you? I said, You have come here, you have given us half an hour, you are dealing with players who have been in tears over all this and don't know what to do, and I hold you, Malcolm Speed, and the ICC responsible for this mess. We are three days away from the biggest tournament in cricket, you have known about this situation for months and you could have had this meeting with us at any time over those months. You know this is a sensitive political issue for England because of our historical ties with Zimbabwe, but you have fudged this issue. You are supposedly running this game and protecting the image of this game, can't you see the damage that is being done by this and what damage will be done if we play this game? I started listening again. I started with the youngest, Jimmy Anderson, and went on from there, trying to make sure that the young players didn't just copy what the senior ones were doing. I still couldn't believe what I was going through. I switched off now.
I then asked Ronnie to speak to Andy Flower, a teammate of ours at Essex, to find out what his thoughts were about the whole thing. I then asked Speed why the situation vis-a-vis India and Pakistan was different, and he said that was because their governments told them not to visit each other's country rather than advising their players, as ours had done. I think, deep in his heart, Duncan Fletcher would have liked us to have gone the whole hog and worn armbands because he is a very brave man who was at my side throughout the whole affair. I think they wanted us to think things through fully. I thought he was going to pick people off, so I asked Richard Bevan to sit in on the chats. I thought Lamb behaved abysmally though it all and, while I accept that he did a lot of good work at the ECB, I shed no tears for him when I heard that he had resigned from his job in 2004. I thought, No, sport has moved on. you can't separate it from politics. I have asked my players to grow up and it's about time the ECB grew up too. I thought, Thank God we didn't go. If that had been England, it would have been ten times worse. How could I have sat here and lived with myself? I thought to myself, This is going to look really good. We're playing a game and this bloke is outside, beating someone up. That's going to look really good for the TV cameras. I told Ronnie, an old friend, that I respected what he was saying and that all I asked was that he explain to everyone the alternative argument when we next met as a team. I told the players that we were going to have to address the whole business, but our difficulty at that stage lay in not knowing what people in England were thinking and saying about Zimbabwe. I took this back to the team and, to be honest, the idea of wearing black armbands did not go down too well.

I wanted to make sure my decision wouldn't bankrupt the game. I was calm. I was in Stewie's room, talking about whether we really were doing the right thing. I was just hoping he had been misquoted and, in any case, who was
I to question Nelson Mandela? I was not surprised. I was offered a meeting with the great man and maybe I should have gone in order to hear what he had to say, but there was so much going on at this time that the last thing I wanted was to be further confused by Nelson Mandela. I was sitting there there with an Essex teammate, discussing the most important and weighty of topics: both Andy and Henry admitted they were scared about what they were going to do, frightened for the future, but that they were doing something they had to do. I was so disillusioned. I was sure South Africa were determined to support Zimbabwe in order to guarantee their support over the South African bid to stage the 2010 football World Cup. I was the most proud and confused I have ever been. I was walking around the ground, carrying the flag of St George at the head of my team, and I could see the players looking around, taking it all in and thinking how great it would be to come back here for a World Cup final or semi-final. I wasn't sure I warranted a meeting with him – and, in any case, how could he understand what a group of cricketers were going through? I went back to my room in a state of utter confusion, and it didn't take long for the phone to ring. I went to see Duncan Fletcher and told him I had to resign over this.
Part 2:  

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Part 3:  the field

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cricket
Statistical Appendix:

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