



JAMES TROLLOPE AND NICK YAPP



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PRE-MATCH DRILL

It has been said that the English, not being by nature a religious people, invented cricket to give them some idea of Eternity. This is blatant bluffing, though it does indicate that cricket is not to be treated lightly or dismissed as merely a sport. The English did not invent cricket, but they acted as its wet nurse, nurtured it, and finally made it their own. This is because cricket needs endless patience, unthinking loyalty and a slavish mentality: not the sort of game you can see being enjoyed by the hordes of Genghis Khan, the Sioux, the Paris mob of 1789 or the Bolsheviks.

GM Trevelyan – famous historian and useful late-order bat – once suggested that, if the aristocracy of the Ancien Régime had spent more time playing cricket with their serfs, the French Revolution would never have taken place. The truth is that neither the French aristocracy nor their serfs could ever have wanted to play cricket; it is not their game.

Bored almost beyond endurance, the uninitiated spectators and even players of cricket will moan: ‘What’s

the point of it?' Bluffers know that there is no point to cricket, any more than there is a point to tennis, ballet, rose gardens or *nouvelle cuisine*.

Cricket maintains its precarious existence because 'the show must go on.' It has to be demonstrated that people can:

- Bowl faster.
- Score more runs.
- Make more appearances for their county.
- Take longer to score a run than ever before.

This, you must maintain stoutly (cricketers do lots of things stoutly), provides proof of human progress.

Support for English cricket – the distinguished variety which is the main focus of this guide – fluctuates with the performance of the national team. During decades of defeat, first by the West Indians and then the Australians, and then everybody else, it was reduced to a hard core of thermos-gripping fans scattered thinly across increasingly shabby county grounds. But then, as the England team did better, interest revived. Smart new stands went up, new technology was introduced and a shorter form of the game called Twenty20 began pulling in large crowds. Winning The Ashes in 2005, after 18 miserable, soul-searching years, was a vital turning point for England. Fair-weather supporters suddenly appeared in droves, with politicians and other inveterate bluffers

suggesting that they'd been lifelong fans all along. A few even hinted that, in their time, they'd been more than useful players themselves. When it was reported that, during an extended post-victory bender, Ashes hero Andrew 'Freddie' Flintoff had relieved himself in the prime minister's rose garden, even some of the stuffiest cricket followers found it easy to smile indulgently.

Meanwhile women's cricket (more on this later) was emerging from the shadows with Charlotte Edwards the standout star in a side which was not only competing effectively against the Australians but winning the World Cup in 2009. Although England's men topped the world rankings in 2011, they fell to earth in 2013 when Aussie fast bowler Mitchell Johnson ripped them apart in a 5-0 thrashing. But at least fans could console themselves with a series win by the women who triumphed again in the 2017 World Cup and fought back bravely in a drawn Ashes series that year, while the men, after a home Ashes victory in 2015, were humiliated down under once more.

With the sport gathering supporters across the sexual divide, an ignorance of cricket has become a social handicap, carrying with it risk of exclusion from pub, party and office chat. To the rescue comes a new, updated, equally authoritative *Bluffer's Guide*.

Cricket bluffing ranges from hinting that you know more than you do, which is the general idea, to extravagant claims of a dazzling cricketing past, which is somewhat riskier. An extreme bluffer may even take the dangerous step of accepting an invitation to play. This is not recommended.

Before you start bluffing, a word of warning. Size up your victim. Try to sound out how much, if anything, they know. Take particular care at a cricket ground. If they are wearing a lurid 'egg-and-bacon'-coloured blazer – the preferred uniform of members of the MCC, which effectively runs the game – or walk with pigeon feet (sign of a pace bowler), proceed with caution. If they are carrying a copy of the cricket annual *Wisden* or, worse still, a scorebook, run a mile.

This short but definitive guide will conduct you through the main danger zones often encountered in discussions about cricket. It will equip you with a vocabulary, easy-to-learn hints and evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer – and might even allow you to be accepted as a cricketing connoisseur of rare ability and experience. But it will do more. It will give you the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your knowledge and insight – without anyone discovering that, until you read it, you didn't actually know the difference between bowling a maiden over and bagging a pair.