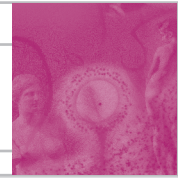


Test match special



James Drife

By coincidence, the South African cricket team is in town as I sit down to write this. The second Test Match is under way at Headingley, and England, after a promising start, are again under the cosh. But there's still hope. Headingley is legendary as a place of cricketing miracles. Though to us Leeds residents, the miracle is getting there. In that part of town (the student quarter) the roads are so narrow that there is a permanent traffic jam even when England aren't playing.

To the rest of Yorkshire, 'Headingley' means rugby. The cricket ground is back-to-back with a stadium that is home to both codes. Rugby union is played by the intellectual-sounding 'Leeds Carnegie', part-owned by a university. Rugby league, the working-class version invented in Yorkshire in 1895, was revolutionised in the 1990s, when the season was moved to summer and clubs got new names like 'Wakefield Wildcats' and, unexpectedly, 'Leeds Rhinos'. Any South African link is lost on the Leeds fans, who drive around with car stickers saying, 'Get horny ...'.

Moving a sporting season from winter to summer makes little difference here in England. 'How can they tell?' is the question. This week, at the height of our summer, the Test Match is being played under leaden skies and the Open golf championship at Royal Birkdale (75 miles west of here) is being lashed by gales from the Irish Sea. Out there on the links, an Irishman, a Korean and an Australian share the lead at the moment, but I'm backing the Irishman, who must be used to North Atlantic weather.

That's what we British like about golf or cricket. The forces of nature can intervene with lethal effect and great players, no matter how skilled, can find themselves brought down to earth in full view of the spectators. When we obstetricians see this happening, we sympathise. We know what it's like to have to deal with Mother Nature in all her capricious moods while the rest of the team, plus an anxious dad, look on. 'Here is the weather forecast for O&G: great big veins, dense adhesions and an ominous placenta approaching from the south-west'. It keeps us humble and makes us deeply sceptical about 'birth plans'.

Life for the obstetrician is not unlike a test match. Like fielders on the boundary, we face long periods of waiting interrupted by instants when we have to react quickly and get it right first time. Like the team captain, the

labour ward consultant spends time gazing pensively into the middle distance, tuning in to primordial voices that whisper which parts of the ground are safe and which are starting to crack up and cause trouble. And near the end of a long innings on call we can be caught out by momentary loss of concentration.

Ah, those sporting metaphors! I'm afraid they are very much out of fashion in our specialty these days. We are all supposed to be really scientific and we are assured by managers (and lawyers) that the play of chance can be abolished by risk management. But evidence-based obstetrics is like evidence-based cricket – the statisticians can analyse what happened, to several decimal places, after it is all safely over, but they are little help to the player making a decision on the pitch.

Admittedly, cricketers follow the principles of risk management. They practise skills and drills in the nets and they take to the field in body armour that would have seemed unmanly fifty years ago. To some extent they follow guidelines and protocols, though these are generally unwritten. But they cannot call for back-up when they are in trouble, or insist that the demon bowler is transferred to a tertiary centre where super-specialists can sort him out, or ask the anaesthetist to come and put the opposing wicket-keeper to sleep.

The biggest difference between cricket and obstetrics is that cricket still produces heroes while medicine, at least in Britain, no longer encourages 'characters'. For most of us, the cricketing greats were the people who achieved spectacular feats when we were at school. So in my case the golden age was the 1950s, when Surrey spin-bowler Jim Laker took 19 Australian wickets in a single test match, and Yorkshire's Fred Trueman bowled every ball as if it were his last.

At that time the England captain was legendary batsman P B H May. Later he was known as Peter, but the fifties was still the era of quiet players with proper haircuts and initials instead of first names. I'm glad to see that in 2008 one young South African is restoring the latter tradition. Which reminds me ... ah yes, switching screens I see that I have to congratulate South Africa on another win. This is becoming a habit.

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