

Small world



James Drife

It's a bit late to wish you Happy New Year, even if it is still January as I write. For the past few days I've been shovelling snow and checking the cricket scores. In England at this time of year we don't expect Test matches – or snow, come to that – and having both at the same time has piled trauma on trauma. Snow is lovely if it quickly melts after making the place look pretty, but this year, with the wind blowing from Siberia, it brought Britain to a halt. Our schools closed ('health and safety') and our media kept warning us to stay indoors. Of course, we all blamed the government.

But our meteorological curfew did give us a chance to watch the end of the South Africa v. England series. It had been an emotional roller-coaster with highs and lows for both sides, not to mention Graham Onions, archetypal English hero who became a legend for forcing draws with second innings scores of 1 and 0. Nevertheless, here in the northern hemisphere it seems unnatural to be watching cricket in January. Come the summer, soccer in July will feel almost as strange, assuming the other England XI gets as far as the quarter-finals of the World Cup.

Cricket in summer and football in winter. That's the biorhythm ordained by nature and reinforced at school. It was taken to the professional level by a few talented individuals like the England all-rounder Ian Botham (now Sir Ian), who played eleven football league matches for Scunthorpe United to help him convalesce after a cricket injury. Twelve men have represented England at both sports. Three of them were in the 19th century, when aristocrats did that sort of thing, but two were in my lifetime and the last of the double internationals, Arthur Milton, died as recently as 2007. At a marginally lower level Dennis Compton, who has a stand named after him at Lord's Cricket Ground, won the Football Association Cup with Arsenal in 1950. Just typing those words gives me a shiver. Schoolboy heroes don't get better than that.

Even so, I have only the vaguest idea what Compton looked like. Newspaper photos of the time were grainy and cigarette cards were hand-drawn. Today television brings Andrew Strauss and Graeme Smith into our living rooms in high definition, and this is what makes the world seem so small. The satellite technology on which it all depends began in the 1960s with Telstar. (Remember? – no, of course you don't.) At that time the pictures were in black and white – or rather, blurry grey – and when Glasgow Celtic won the European Cup Final in Lisbon in

1967, the commentator sounded almost as far away as Neil Armstrong broadcasting from the moon two years later.

Celtic were the first British club to win the European Cup and did so with a team consisting entirely of players born within thirty miles of Glasgow. When Arthur Milton retired from cricket he became a postman in his home town, Bristol. These men lived in a very different world from that of the jet-setting millionaires who will descend on South Africa in a few months' time to kick and dive for World Cup glory. Thanks to Telstar and its progeny, football's governing body will receive more than a billion euros in television rights – paid for, directly or indirectly, by all of us who like to witness great sporting moments, albeit electronically.

For me, the trouble is that you don't only get the memorable moments. You also get the pre-match build-up, the team's nervous emergence from the dressing room, the post-match analysis and, heaven help us, the participants' philosophy of life. 'Do you think that penalty should have been awarded?' is a question that would have tested Kierkegaard at his most existential. Mobile phones and the internet make things worse. Modern fans can text advice from the touchlines ('Buy a nu pr of spex, ref!'), and players are required to fill blogs with such penetrating insights as 'When you lose four wickets in the first hour of a Test, it is always going to be hard to drag it back' (this from today's England website). Am I alone in longing for the days when sporting immortals signed autographs silently and chewed gum?

But maybe I'm just jealous. I would like to feel as close to medical professionals worldwide as I do to sporting professionals. At present telemedicine is limited to procedures that use eye-wateringly expensive equipment, or to firms that can pay for costly emergency cover. Most places I've visited on my travels have a television showing English premiership teams in action, while in the hospital down the road, doctors work in near-total isolation. We should get ourselves linked up to exchange ideas and advice. If we have to wear scrubs with a sponsor's logo, so be it. Just don't ask us to do post-op interviews.

James Drife was Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at St James Hospital, Leeds, England.