

chapter

effing cricket

On why cricket is not everyone's favourite thing

Cricket is not a quick game.

It is among the least family-friendly of sports, for the simple reason that it takes most of the day. I imagine around-the-world-yachtsmen have less sympathetic wives, but there's always someone, isn't there?

Superficially, it looks idyllic. Children play with their own little bats and balls around the boundary, toddlers gambol around tartan picnic blankets, pretty Mums in floaty sundresses laugh tinkling laughs and drink ice cold rosé.

Birds twitter in the boughs of majestic oaks, cows graze in the middle distance, rabbits frolic in the dappled sunshine beneath the hedgerows, and bees buzz lazily between wild flowers.

Sometimes, it really is like that.

Quite magical, it is, when it happens.

Other times though, there is mizzle. Mizzle is a particular kind of English weather which favours summer weekends. A cross between mist and drizzle, it's the kind of rain that doesn't so much fall as hang. It gets you wet by attrition, without you really noticing. Not wet enough to stop play, but definitely wet enough to stop picnics, mizzle is an English summer staple.

On this kind of day, "Why don't you come over the field with the kids and watch?" is not something a wise man would suggest.

To be honest, even if the weather was still fantastic, the picnic blanket might begin to lose its appeal after a few weekends in succession.

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And I can absolutely see why. If my wife took up a leisure activity which required me to sacrifice a day every weekend to sit around in a field on childcare duty, I'd be as enthusiastic about it as she is. Which is 'not even slightly', in case that's unclear.

There's not really a compromise to be reached here. If you're young and single, obviously your weekends are yours to do with as you wish. Even if you're attached, chances are your other half will be more than happy to amuse herself while you go and get grass stains on your whites. Most girls relish a Saturday afternoon to themselves, whether she's shopping or gardening, getting her hair done or riding a horse, going to the gym or staying in bed with the papers.

But if you have kids, there's a very good chance she might not be quite so easy going about it.

This is because of the immutable law of parenthood: if one of you is having me-time, the other one is having the kids.

And cricket represents a fair proportion out of a weekend. Much worse than football or rugby. Even worse than golf. (Worse still, it goes without saying, if you're one of those foolhardy lunatics who's prepared to admit that he's monstrously selfish enough to harbour hopes of playing cricket AND golf. Shhh. Best not mention it.)

Sometimes it's more than just one day out of a weekend. We play in a midweek league too, though that's not generally a problem, as Wednesday evenings are simply not as precious as Saturday afternoons in anyone's book.

One of the things that causes real problems is 'fixture congestion'. There's always one mad week, usually at the end of May or beginning of June, a few weeks or maybe a month into the season. Before anyone's really got used to the idea of cricket again, it completely takes over.

This congestion is largely caused by knockout competitions. For us the problem tends to be short lived, as we get knocked out fairly quickly, which clears the calendar nicely.

The other factor is the Great British Summer, which as everyone knows can be capricious at best, especially in May, and tends to exacerbate the situation.

Here's an example from a couple of years ago:

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Saturday league game at home, then a National Village Cup fixture away on Sunday, which had been rained off from the previous week. Then, similarly postponed from the week before, a midweek Cup game away on Monday evening. Then a Wednesday evening league game at home, then, assuming we won on Monday, a third round Midweek Cup game on Thursday, also at home. Then Saturday league away, then a long standing friendly game at home on Sunday – unless we won the previous Sunday, in which case we'd have to cancel the friendly because we'd be in a regional semi-final that day. Either way, that's seven games in nine days.

Was there ever more cause for marital disharmony than seven games in nine days?

In case there's any doubt let me add that this particular week also happened to be half term, and for good measure my wife's parents were arriving on Wednesday, to stay for the weekend.

Fortunately, (I hesitate to say 'fortunately' about losing, but in this case it definitely was,) we lost both cup fixtures, so the busiest week of the year was six games, of which I played four. Which made me feel I was being perfectly reasonable and observing the spirit of compromise, and made Soph feel I was deliberately being awkward by being out of the house, like, ALL THE TIME, and playing as much cricket as I conceivably could at the least convenient time OF THE WHOLE YEAR and generally making her life as difficult as possible. On purpose, with malice aforethought.

It is this kind of thing that has led cricket to acquire a prefix in our house, which from May to September it is rarely to be found without. It is routinely referred to, sometimes jokily, sometimes not entirely without heat, as "Fucking Cricket."

Often the epithet carries sufficient venom to convey either the deep rooted unfairness of it all, or wearily resigned acceptance, depending on what stage of the summer, and indeed what stage of the week, we are in.

So ubiquitous has the prefix become, that even when she is censoring herself – usually due to the proximity of children – she leaves a slight pause in the sentence to indicate its presence, as in "what time have you got to be at... cricket tomorrow?" so that I know she's thinking it, even if she can't say it.

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For two-fifths of the year, the calendar is liberally riddled with cricket fixtures, highlighted in red (home) or yellow (away) to signify their “unbreakable commitment” status. I do this to try to be helpful, to keep conversations starting “Well, it wasn’t on the calendar,” to a bare minimum, but in more honest moments I can see that this could easily be interpreted as deeply annoying.

By the end of April she despairs of ever being able to offer friends ‘free’ weekends that we can see them, as most, if not all, involve the effing c-word somewhere. Sometimes, whisper it, twice.

Dennis Norden knew of this problem: “It’s a funny kind of month, October. For the really keen cricket fan, it’s when you discover your wife left you in May.”



I know it’s not just Dennis and me in this one, either. I know I’m not alone because it is a constant topic of conversation on the bench outside the pavilion.

“You playing next Sunday?”

Marky D is rolling a cigarette. Without looking up from his task, he grimaces and sucks in a breath dramatically, like a plumber surveying a leak.

“Don’t think so mate.”

Mark is not a plumber. He’s a tree surgeon, or something like that, and so never has conversations like this with customers. He’s clearly wasting a talent. There are a couple of real plumbers who play for us, and they can’t pull off the cliché plumber voice at all. Though maybe they’ve consciously worked hard not to ‘do’ that voice. Or maybe it’s something, like a ‘CORGI’ badge, they only put on during work hours.

“I’m playing Saturday, see, so Sunday, y’know...”

Of course I know. Mark’s kid Frankie is still very little. It needs no further explanation.

But Mark likes Sundays. Saturdays are important, because they’re league matches and the league *matters*, but Sundays are fun. Sundays are ‘casual’ games, friendlies. On a Sunday, Mark is

more likely to bat, more likely to bowl, more likely to take catches, more likely to laugh.

The week after Frankie was born, Mark's first game after a month or so of I'm-about-to-pop-so-no-you-are-not-playing-fucking-cricket was on a Sunday. He took five-fer eleven off four overs and hung on to two steeping catches in the deep.

Still concentrating on the construction of his cigarette, Mark is now doing a rather childish and inaccurate impression of his wife in a silly squeaky voice, which includes the phrases "ner ner ner ner" and "fucking cricket".

The rendition provokes titters of recognition. Not of Heidi, who we all know as a lovely, friendly, reasonable person, but of the speech itself, which we all recognise as a familiar and intrinsically unwinnable argument.

"Nahhhh," he finishes, to illustrate that he's not blaming her, but, well, y'know.

Yeah, we know.

"I can do Sunday," James pipes up, adjusting the velcro straps on a pad.

"Yeah? How come?"

"Broke up with the misses."

There's a silence, during which we try and assess whether he's serious. And if he is serious, whether he's upset about it.

"Sorry to hear that mate."

"Yeah, well. It was all getting a bit... y'know."

"Sure. Put you down for Sunday then, shall I?"

"Yeah, mate. Every Sunday."

This tends to be as in depth and personal as relationship talk gets at cricket. This is one of the reasons it's so convivial, I think. During six or seven hours in each other's company, the conversation will be in-depth only about cricket itself: the fortunes (or lack of) of the national side; musings on the game generally; our specific situation in this match in particular. Otherwise it will be silly, inane, untaxing, safe. It is generally, as all sport is, a safe haven from the serious business of real life.

Henry and Joel are scoring. Both are young, working, but still living at home, in that brief, blissful period in life where you've got yourself some disposable income but have yet to acquire

commitments for it. As a result, they are almost entirely unfamiliar with the ‘fucking cricket’ phenomenon.

“H, Sunday?”

“Yeah, ’course.”

“Joel?”

“Yep.”

They’ll find out. Couple of years, a decade if they’re lucky, their weekends will no longer be theirs to command. They might still get to play cricket, but boy will they know about it.

“Ah,” says one.

“What?”

“Paul’s out,” the other confirms.

James passes Paul on his way out to the middle. They pause for a few words. It’s more likely to be commiseration than a ‘what’s it doing’ chat. Neither of them are big on finding out what’s happening out there till they actually get out there. Some people like those chats, some don’t. These two don’t.

Paul trudges the rest of the way in, sighs heavily, and leans his cherished bat carefully against the pavilion wall, muttering under his breath, “Fucking cricket.”

“Unlucky mate.”

“Nah. Stupid. Should have left it alone.”

He sits, still padded up, sighs again, and reaches for his papers and backy. Paul and Mark belong to an age where sportsmen actively advocated smoking; when the England Captain did cheesy to-camera endorsements for tobacco companies, and the proof that you’d arrived in top flight sport was not a sports drink sponsorship deal, but your appearance on a cigarette card.

“You playing Sunday?”

He pauses before answering, like he’s not sure.

But we all know he is.

He shakes his head slowly, in the universal, unspoken negative.

“Yeah,” he says.