

BBC
RADIO **5** LIVE

TALL TALES
**TEST
MATCH
SPECIAL**



THE GOOD, THE BAD,
AND THE HILARIOUS FROM
THE COMMENTARY BOX

JONATHAN
AGNEW & PHIL
TUFNELL
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WITH CARLOS BRATHWAITE, EBONY RAINFORD BRENT,
ISA GUHA, ALISON MITCHELL AND AATIF NAWAZ



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Dramatis Personae

From the *TMS* Team

Jonathan Agnew – aka Aggers – Leicestershire and England fast bowler with over 650 first-class wickets. Now BBC cricket correspondent, *TMS* elder statesman and commentator.

Phil Tufnell – aka Tuffers – Middlesex and England spin bowler with 121 Test and over 1000 first-class wickets. Now broadcaster and *TMS* summariser.

Isa Guha – Member of England's 2009 World Cup winning squad. Now TV presenter and *TMS* commentator.

Ebony Rainford-Brent – Member of England's 2009 World Cup winning team and the first black woman to play for England. Now Director of Women's Cricket at Surrey and *TMS* summariser.

Carlos Brathwaite – West Indies T20 captain and all-rounder with 88 T20, ODI and Test caps. Now *TMS* summariser.

Alison Mitchell – *TMS*'s first career female commentator and leading BBC Sport reporter.

Aatif Nawaz – *TMS* commentator, cricket lover and award-winning British-Pakistani actor, writer, TV presenter and comedian.

Key characters from *TMS's Tall Tales*

John Arlott – broadcasting great whose poetic ball-by-ball commentary featured on *TMS* between 1957 and 1980.

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Mike Atherton – England captain, technically outstanding opening bat who amassed more than 7700 Test runs.

Baggy Bagshaw – opened the bowling with Aggers at his first village club – Ufford Park CC, Stamford. Despite having only one eye, Baggy was unerringly accurate.

Trevor Bailey – England all-rounder and determinedly concise *TMS* summariser.

Jack Bannister – Warwickshire bowler turned cricket commentator who achieved the rare feat of spoofing Aggers in a TV ‘interview’.

Peter Baxter – *TMS* producer who somehow managed to keep the show on the road for 34 years.

Don Bennett – Middlesex head coach who first signed Tuffers as a full-time pro cricketer.

Henry Blofield – aka Blowers – a *TMS* commentary great and favourite spoofing target for Aggers.

Geoffrey Boycott – Outstanding England opening bat with over 8000 Test runs. A *TMS* summariser whose well-worn phrases were eagerly anticipated by listeners playing so-called Boycott Bingo.

Richie Benaud – Australia captain, all-rounder and later masterly, if oft-mimicked, TV cricket commentator.

David Constant – Leading English umpire who no-balled Aggers’ first delivery in county cricket.

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Jeremy Coney – New Zealand medium pace bowler and guest *TMS* summariser.

Hansie Cronje – disgraced South Africa captain at the centre of match-fixing scandals.

Phil DeFreitas – Leicestershire and England all-rounder who played with both Aggers and Tuffers.

Nancy Doyle – much-loved Lord's head cook known for her feisty approach to interference by players and officials.

Roddy Estwick – Carlos's PE teacher and 'father figure' at Combermere Secondary School, Barbados. He later became a West Indies assistant coach.

John Emburey – England and Middlesex spinner who together with Tuffers was one of the Middlesex 'spin twins' of the seventies and eighties.

Duncan Fletcher – England coach who formed a successful Test partnership with England skipper Michael Vaughan. Became something of a *bete noire* for Tuffers however.

Gus Fraser – Reliable, accurate England and Middlesex fast-medium bowler who became one of Tuffers' closest friends in the Middlesex dressing room.

Bill Frindall – long-serving *TMS* scorer credited with inventing the modern system of scoring.

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Mike Gatting – England and Middlesex captain, who scored over 4400 Test runs. The man who persuaded a rebellious Tuffers to adopt a more professional approach to cricket.

Graham Gooch – Outstanding England and Essex opener who captained both club and country and scored 8900 Test runs.

Alf Gover – Surrey and England fast bowler who ran an acclaimed coaching school in Wandsworth, London, attended by Aggers.

David Gower – One of the English game’s classiest stroke-makers with over 8000 Test runs. Aggers’ England and Leicestershire captain and occasional England team-mate of Tuffers.

Kaush Guha – Isa’s big brother. She attributes much of her bowling success to being cajoled into bowling at him for hours in their garden.

Ken Higgs – Leicestershire fast bowler, captain and a mentor of Aggers during his early years of county cricket.

Gordon Jenkins – One of Tuffers’ long-suffering coaches in the Middlesex youth academy. He later became a close family friend.

Brian Johnston – aka Johnners – much-loved BBC broadcaster, war hero and iconic *TMS* commentator. Together with Aggers he delivered one of BBC Radio’s most memorable moments in what became known as the Legover Incident.

Mel Jones – Australia captain and leading batter who later captained Ebony at Surrey.

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Mr Keating – Aatif’s PE teacher at Preston Manor School, Wembley, who survived being struck (inadvertently) by Aatif’s broken bat.

Peter Kelland – Sussex bowler who became Tuffers’ first coach at Highgate School, north London.

David ‘Bumble’ Lloyd – England and Lancashire opener – Aggers’ first victim in county cricket – now cricket broadcaster.

Simon Mann – sports journalist and *TMS* commentator.

Vic Marks – England and Somerset spin bowler, later *TMS* summariser and cricket writer.

Christopher Martin-Jenkins – BBC cricket correspondent and *TMS* commentator who famously invented his own swearwords.

Peter McConnell – Australian umpire who famously had a potty-mouthed exchange with Tuffers during Phil’s 1990 England debut in Melbourne.

Henry Moeran – journalist and *TMS* commentator.

Don Mosey – cricket writer and *TMS* summariser

Adam Mountford – current *TMS* producer.

Dan Norcross – *TMS* commentator.

Eleanor Oldroyd – BBC Sport reporter and broadcaster.

Shilpa Patel – *TMS* assistant producer and fixer extraordinaire. Was often tasked with spotting celebrities in Test match crowds and persuading them to be interviewed.

Terry Rawlings – Aggers’ first club captain at Ufford Park CC, Stamford.

Jack Robertson – England and Middlesex batter, later Middlesex youth coach. He persuaded the teenage Tuffers to switch from quick to spin bowling.

Eileen Ryder – Aggers’ first cricket coach at Taverham Hall prep school near Norwich.

Andy Roberts – West Indies fast bowler with over 200 Test wickets who helped steer Aggers’ early career at Leicestershire.

Andy Zaltzman – *TMS* scorer

Marlon Samuels – The batting partner who watched Carlos hit four sixes in the final over of the 2016 ICC Twenty20 championship to ensure West Indies beat England.

Allen Stanford – US fraudster whose 2008 sponsorship deal with the England and Wales Cricket Board ended in huge embarrassment for administrators.

Micky Stewart – Surrey batter and later England tour manager who played pivotal roles in both Tuffers’ and Aggers’ England careers,

Les Taylor – Quick bowler who came late to professional cricket with Leicestershire after working as a coal miner.

Mike Turner – chief executive at Leicestershire known simply as The Boss.

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Frank ‘Typhoon’ Tyson – England bowler, among the fastest in cricket history, who took Aggers under his wing for a season in Australia.

Fred Titmus – Middlesex, Surrey and England all-rounder and briefly Aggers’ coach at Surrey.

‘Fiery’ Fred Trueman – One of England’s greatest fast bowlers, with over 300 Test wickets, and a *TMS* summariser.

Michael Vaughan – England’s most successful Test captain who won 26 of his 51 Tests. A graceful opening bat with over 5700 Test runs, he became a *TMS* summariser.

Peter Willey – Leicestershire and England all-rounder who presided over ‘Sweaty Betty’ card games in the dressing room.

Bob Willis – England fast bowler with 325 Test wickets who inspired one of his country’s greatest-ever Ashes victories at Headingley in 1981. Later endured the unenviable task of managing a Young England team, featuring Tuffers, on a Caribbean tour.

Don Wilson – Marylebone Cricket Club head coach who was instrumental in getting Tuffers a professional contract with Middlesex.

Jenny Wostrack – niece of West Indies cricketing legend Sir Frank Worrell. She played for Surrey, later worked on the club’s community programme and discovered Ebony playing street cricket.

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CHAPTER 1

EARLY STARTS



In which members of the *Test Match Special* team – Jonathan Agnew, Phil Tufnell, Alison Mitchell, Isa Guha, Ebony Rainford-Brent, Carlos Brathwaite and Aatif Nawaz – tell how they fell in love with cricket.

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AGGERS

It doesn't take much for the greatest game on earth to lure kids in. A handed-down bat, a scuffed rubber ball, a stretch of garden or side street, your pal or a sibling – it's so often a sibling – and suddenly a dramatic Test match is being fought in the gathering gloom with enough disputed lbws, marginal run outs and dodgy catches to sustain days of outrage and argument. You won't forget the ball you managed to nip back to castle your brother or that towering six unfurled into the garden three doors down. You've discovered cricket and, once discovered, there's no turning back.

Which is how it was for pretty much every member of the *Test Match Special* team featured in this book. I'm going to bat first as I go back furthest, so I'm taking you to the late sixties, an idyllic farm on the south Lincolnshire border, a barn full of newly harvested wheat and barley, the rich, dulcet tones of *TMS* commentator John Arlott echoing out from a battered portable radio and, listening intently, the eight-year-old Jonathan Philip Agnew wondering if there would still be enough time for garden cricket with his dad before bed. There usually was.

Dad would spend hours teaching me a basic bowling action and how to grip a ball. He wanted me to be an off-spinner like him so in those early years that was my thing. Dad knocked around for a few local village clubs – Burghley Park was one – but although he was an enthusiastic cricketer it was hard for him to commit to games because he'd be tied up on the farm. He contented himself with

Test Match Special whenever it was on and that became the sound of summer for me. If I wasn't helping him I'd be inside watching entire Test matches on our black-and-white telly, curtains drawn, Mum interrupting with the occasional sandwich. And afterwards, my brother and I would dash out into the garden to copy what we'd seen.

Sometimes this would be taken to extremes. We noticed Ray Illingworth always bowled with his tongue poking out of the side of his mouth so we did that too when we were doing Ray's bowling style. He later became my first county captain, which now seems completely mad. In those years I just loved cricket. Lancashire was my team but I wrote off to all the counties asking for autographs and in those days they all sent autograph sheets back.

It was at prep school, though, that my cricketing talents began to flourish. I was dispatched aged eight to board at Taverham Hall, near Norwich, where my first proper cricket coach was Eileen Ryder, wife of one of our English teachers, Rowland Ryder, who later emerged as a well-respected cricket writer. The whole family was of sound cricketing stock and his father, confusingly also called Rowland, was secretary at Warwickshire CCC for 49 years. I later learned that the long-demolished Ryder Stand at Edgbaston was dedicated to Rowland Senior in recognition of his leadership during the club's formative years. He is said to have staged Edgbaston's first Test match in 1902 virtually single-handed.

Dear old Eileen always reminded me of the comedienne Joyce Grenfell, who played the hapless police sergeant Ruby Gates in the

St Trinian's films. She wore these long skirts, and was very old-fashioned in her mannerisms, but she had this shared love of cricket with her husband. She was my first coach when I arrived in the wilds of Norfolk and she took me under her wing. I will always remember the way she encouraged and supported me, and I know she thought I would be a decent cricketer one day. Years later, I managed to see her during a County Championship match at Edgbaston. We met outside the gates at the end of play – she must have phoned the dressing room or something – and I think it was pretty special for her. She was so kindly, incredibly enthusiastic, very matronly, very gentle and just perfect for both that sort of school and me.

NICE LINE

The essence of cricket

In addition to his teaching duties at Taverham School, Eileen Ryder's husband Rowland wrote three biographies, including that of a future president of the Marylebone Cricket Club, the senior Second World War British Army officer Lieutenant-General Sir Oliver Leese, KBE, CBE, DSO. Shortly before he died in 1996, Ryder published a series of essays titled *Cricket Calling* – a chapter of which, 'The Essence of Cricket', began: 'Cricket is not so much a game as an extension of being English: a gallimaufry of paradoxes, contradictions, frightening logic and sheer impossibilities, of gentle courtesy and rough violence.' A later essay told how Ryder once wrote to P. G. Wodehouse asking whether the writer's best-loved fictional character Jeeves was indeed named after the Warwickshire bowler Percy Jeeves. Wodehouse replied: 'Yes, you are quite right. It must have been in 1913 that I paid a visit to my parents in Cheltenham and went to see Warwickshire play Gloucestershire on the Cheltenham College ground. I suppose Jeeves's bowling must have impressed me, for I remembered him in 1916 when I was in New York and starting the Jeeves and Bertie saga, and it was just the name I wanted . . . (I remember admiring his action very much).'

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To me, Taverham had elements of Arthur Ransome's children's adventure novel *Swallows and Amazons*, in which a group of children spends an idyllic summer camping, exploring and generally getting into mischief. And perhaps my love of pranks and practical jokes, which *TMS* colleagues have endured over the years, stems from those days. Boarding school isn't for everyone but it did me a lot of good. There were vast woodlands where you could go and build huts out of dead branches with your friends and then attack your neighbours' huts by setting fire to them – usually with boys still inside. Taverham was a beautiful old building on the River Wensum with two enormously long driveways. I well remember the sinking feeling as I was ferried back from holidays along these. But once you were there you got on with it and you were away. There was a lovely cricket field, a beautiful little pavilion and I was very lucky to have such a fortunate start in life.

My best mate was Chris Dockerty who went on to become an army major. Sadly he died aged 33 in that dreadful 1994 Chinook helicopter crash on the Mull of Kintyre during a flight from Northern Ireland to Scotland. I remember him as a very nervous, very homesick little boy yet he somehow rose to become this incredibly high-up figure in British military intelligence. He and I would improvise and play cricket anywhere – a tennis racket, table tennis bat – anything would do.

It was around this time, to the chagrin of my dad, that I started to feel spin bowling wasn't my true calling. For one thing, it had none of the glamour of fast bowling – storming in off a long run, terrorising batsmen with bouncers, flashing withering looks – which

all seemed much more fun. I can even remember the precise moment I made the decision to switch; it was 1971, I was 11 years old and Dad had taken me to watch my beloved Lancashire playing Kent in the Gillette Cup final. It was a match we won comfortably by 24 runs with my hero Peter Lever posting figures of 11.2-4-24-3. I remember watching him bowl from the Nursery End. I had never seen anything like it and I told Dad: 'That's who I want to be.' Peter has since become a great friend – it's incredible how the wheel has gone full circle – and he's the loveliest, gentle man. He's the bowler I began to copy properly with his smooth, slinging action and long curving run-up. I modelled myself on him, although Dad was gutted.

To my surprise, I soon found I could bowl faster than anybody else of my age and quite substantially so. It was remarkable because I was so unbelievably thin. If you look at me, even in 1984 playing against the West Indies, I appear to be a walking bamboo cane. I was 12½ stone and 6ft 4in all the way through my career – there was nothing on me – and yet I could bowl a decent pace. I suppose it was coordination because it certainly wasn't brute strength.

There weren't that many opponents but we played each other home and away so we got plenty of games. There were school fixtures against Old Buckenham Hall and Gresham's, and our big local rival was Town Close, a Norwich prep school, which must have had one of the tiniest cricket grounds anywhere in the world. It felt like playing on a handkerchief. God only knows how I managed to fit in my run-up.

Once I became a fast bowler at Taverham, word soon got out among these other schools because I was the only player who could bowl bouncers at the age of 12. I had to give my wicketkeeper a code for when one was coming so I would reach the end of my mark and lift one foot behind me at a 45-degree angle, making it appear as though I was standing on one leg. Not very sophisticated but it did the job. The poor keeper would then have to retreat sharpish, hoping the batsman didn't clock what was happening, and take a ball zinging round his nose.

By the time I moved to senior school – Uppingham in Rutland – I was playing three years above my age group. It felt like quite a hard school environment – up on a hill, rather bleak and on winter nights you'd sleep with your clothes on. It also had a strong rugby-playing tradition and, although I loved watching rugby, I knew I would be a hopeless participant on the grounds of being far too feeble. I'd have been broken in half. The funny thing was that although I was something of an insignificant oik so far as the older lads were concerned, things changed rapidly when they saw how quickly I bowled.

During winter terms, I'd encounter the big bruisers from the 1st XV striding along the corridors, shoving me aside, and generally showing off to the girls who had just started being enrolled. But then those same lads would sidle up to me in the summer term, ahead of the annual staff v. pupils cricket match, urging me to make life uncomfortable for certain teachers. Conversations would go: 'Hey, Agnew, Dave Prince put me in detention last week. Sort him out, will you.' And I would bomb poor old Mr Prince, who taught

English and fancied himself as a bit of a batsman, and I'd be very popular for the summer term. But it would all revert to type in winter and I'd go back to being the lanky, weedy character who got pushed aside.

We played against several men's touring teams such as MCC and Leicester Gents, and I would certainly have been the quickest they'd seen. For schoolboys, with no real protection, or teachers who wandered out to the crease clad in a schoolmaster's mac, it would have been an interesting experience let's say. But every fast bowler is a bit of a bully and you need to have the competitive gene. I soon found out that quick bowling hurts. It's hard work and it's painful. You need to summon aggression and determination from within you. That's why, today, people are sometimes surprised to find the genial cricket commentator getting his dander up, but I'm still a fast bowler inside and I'll never lose that. So, if someone has a go at me, which has happened once or twice, I'm afraid it rises to the surface. That's how I got to be an international fast bowler. That said, most fast bowlers, when you get off the field, are thoroughly pleasant, friendly, intelligent people.

Uppingham was also where I had my first encounter with Brian Johnston, the man who years later would be my *TMS* partner-in-crime during the programme's most listened-to moment, when ball-by-ball commentary briefly bowed to unbridled, unstoppable hilarity. Johnners and I were on air together for what became known as 'The Legover', a radio event that *Radio Times* once called the 'funniest sporting blooper of all time' (see Chapter 12). But back in the mid-seventies, Johnners was a well-known celebrity outside cricket – he'd

commentated for the BBC on various state occasions such as the Coronation in 1953 and the weddings of Princess Margaret and Princess Anne. He'd also served for ten years as the BBC's cricket correspondent and later became the permanent host of Radio 4's popular Sunday afternoon show *Down Your Way*, in which he would visit villages across the UK, interview the inhabitants and play their choice of music. So booking him as guest speaker gave Uppingham considerable kudos and he easily filled the 700-seat-capacity school hall.

I was still young, only in my second year. I'd heard him on *TMS* before and Dad said to make sure I went along to listen. I can recall exactly where I was sitting, gazing up at this tall, angular man standing at the lectern. He told all his usual stories but the one I always remember was his old chestnut about commentating for TV on the Queen Mother launching some ocean-going ship. As it slid down the ramp, the director suddenly switched to a shot of the Queen Mother. As Johnners tells it, he wasn't looking at the screen and was concentrating on the launch. So viewers saw the Queen Mother's face just as he said: 'There she is, the vast metal hulk of her', or words to that effect. It was typical Johnners and there's even a chance it might have been true.

TUFFERS

Around the same time that Aggers was politely listening to vaguely plausible Johnners stories at Uppingham, I would have been sat in the back of my dad's Ford Cortina, bound for a family summer holiday in Cornwall, desperately excited at the prospect of beach cricket and conscious that someone on the radio – probably John Arlott – was talking about a Test match. That's my first memory of *TMS*. I'd have been aged around six or seven, Dad would be driving and Mum would be handing out sandwiches in Tupperware. All I cared about was getting on to the beach with a bat and ball and having a knock with my brother and dad before bed.

Both my parents were sporty. We were a Middlesex and Arsenal FC household and that meant Denis Compton was a hero as he played for both. Mum was a decent net bowler and a good centre-half – she really would get stuck in – and so in winter our back garden would be a football pitch and in summer it would be a cricket ground. There was never much left of it. The roses never stood a chance.

I started off in all the top sets academically at Highgate School, which was a pretty posh public school. At the start, it was endless PE and sport with a bit of maths and English thrown in. We had some fantastic playing fields there but as I got older the sport got whittled away and the academic stuff got more important. I rebelled a bit against that, what with cricket and girls starting to look more fun. **Copyrighted Material**

Our cricket coach was the former Sussex bowler Peter Kelland. I used to come steaming in, left-arm fast in those days, and although it may be hard to believe I opened the batting for our school and was seen as a reliable covers fielder. In fact, I was the youngest pupil to win cricket colours and that was entirely for my batting. I do sometimes ask myself what on earth happened to Tufnell the batter. Whatever, years of playing with my brother in the back garden obviously got me a head start and Mr Kelland got me a youth trial at Middlesex. I was playing for the county Under 11s when I was still only 9.

Gordon Jenkins and Jack Robertson were my first coaches at Middlesex. Gordon was a stalwart of the Finchley indoor cricket school and I owe much of my success to him. He became a close family friend. Jack was a former England and Middlesex batter and an unforgettable coach. He would rock up, looking immaculate with his flicked-back, grey, Brylcreemed hair, white cravat, white dress shirt, flannels with turn-ups and whitened leather boots. It was an image that imbued confidence and suggested he knew what was what. It was Jack who first suggested I try spin bowling and I can remember word-for-word him saying: 'Yes, Phil, you're quick, nice action, but there are lots of quick bowlers around and not many left-arm spinners. Why not give it a go?'

I hadn't the faintest idea how to bowl spin so he showed me the grip, cut down my run and told me to 'open the door handle' as I released the ball. Crikey O'Reilly, my very first ball turned a bit, the kid at the stumps missed it and a little something sparked inside my head. My mum, always a canny observer, was sitting up on the

viewing gallery, with her Coke and packet of crisps, when this happened. On the way home she said quietly: 'That looked good. Those batters didn't know what was happening. You should keep working on that.' And so I did.

ALISON

I was a sport-obsessed teenager for whom cricket was an essential part of family life. I grew up with an English dad, John, and an Australian mum, Kath, and although my brother Greg and I were both born and brought up in the UK, we travelled back to Australia every other Christmas to spend time with Mum's side of the family. There was a lot of family banter whenever an Ashes series was played and during the eighties and early nineties, Mum got the best of it. But it did gradually turn around. My dad and one of my Australian uncles bought a replica urn, which they would ceremoniously pass between them over a few beers whenever the Ashes changed hands.

Cricket was a huge part of our lives, as was Richie Benaud during those Aussie trips. We loved him and, inevitably, mimicked his commentary all the time. Then, much later, just before I obtained my journalism qualification and knowing I wanted to work in sports broadcasting, I managed to fix up a season with Channel 4 cricket for the 2001 Ashes series. I became Richie's tea- and coffee-maker, and in return got an amazing insight into the art of commentary and the discipline of broadcasting. Just being able to watch and observe a man whose voice was ingrained into my childhood – that was very special.

I was sports mad as a kid – hockey, netball and tennis, which were on offer at school – but this was a time when cricket wasn't usually offered to girls and aside from playing against my brother I hardly featured in competitive cricket matches. I spent loads of time down

at the Embankment Club in Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, which is where my dad played, and I inherited my love of the game from him and my brother. Mum was involved too, and I'd help out with the scoring and the teas and then play on the boundary with the other kids, having a brilliant time. Cricket studs clattering on concrete steps is such an evocative sound for me because it conjures up those summer days as men would go in and out to bat.

I did fill in a couple of times for my brother's club side and he actually taught me a pretty good forward defensive stroke (although I'm more of a fan of a good swipe now!). I never bowled but I got to bat once. I had to use whatever kit was lying around and by then he and his team-mates would have been 15 or 16, a couple of years older than me, and the pads were massive. I ended up batting with one of his mates who had gone through a growth spurt and took one stride for my three. So he'd already completed a second run while I was still floundering halfway down the pitch in these ridiculous pads trying to come back for two. It wasn't a lengthy partnership.

I never pushed to pursue playing cricket myself. I was happy playing with my brother and cousins in the garden and enjoying my hockey and netball. I never questioned why girls weren't offered the chance to play cricket or football at my school. Thankfully there's been a generational shift and girls' cricket is now much easier to find in clubs and schools, and of course now feeds into professionalism. There are role models visible on television. We now even hear of girls who have got into cricket because an older *sister* has played.

ISA

My cricketing apprenticeship was particularly unforgiving because it revolved around my elder brother Kaush needing batting practice and requiring someone to bowl at him. Who better than his little sister? It was the classic sibling story. Kaush was seven years older than me and would usually get me out first or second ball, whereupon I would have to bowl at him for the rest of the evening. It hardened me up, though, and at least I got used to bowling uphill into the wind as our garden sloped upwards. It was long and thin – pretty much cricket-pitch shape – and we would be forever nagging Dad to cut the grass. He was very supportive although less so when the ball smashed a window.

I learned a lot just by watching my brother play. He was very wristy and by the age of 15 had a good technique. He went to the Royal Grammar School in High Wycombe, renowned for its cricket prowess, so I just tried to copy his batting. As for bowling, I just had a go and nobody told me I was doing anything wrong. I then got into a boys' colts team at High Wycombe and there were a couple of guys there who spent a lot of time coaching me. One was Kelly Rogers, originally from the Caribbean, and the other was Bob Lester with whom Dad set up a girls' team. My parents didn't see any problem with a girl playing in a boys' team and so no-one else did either. As for the boys, the only thing they cared about was not getting bowled by a girl.

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At first, my bowling action felt strange and unlike anything my fellow players were doing. In my delivery stride I would jump with my right foot but wouldn't cross my legs over before it landed again, by which time my arm was already over. The rhythm wasn't there. I'd look at other bowlers and think: 'Why can't I do that? I'm not doing it right.' I'd tried and failed to sort out the problem in the nets but then suddenly, in the middle of a game, it just clicked. From that point on, I was fine. I was always a visual learner, I had to see things rather than feel them.

My love of cricket stems from my dad Barun and my mum Rama, who were both massive fans. It was in their genes. When Dad was growing up in Kolkata he would go to Eden Gardens to watch cricket. And if he couldn't get in he'd climb up the outside of the stands to get a decent view. He saw a few classic Test matches like that. Mum was really proud of my progress as a cricketer – she was a huge influence on me but she never piled on the pressure. For her, it was all about letting us do what we wanted to do.

They both played a big role in my development as a player; Dad would drive me all over the country – cricket in the summer; badminton in winter – while Mum would take me to matches in the evenings. They even used to come on England tours with me. Parental support is vital, which is why it's even more of an achievement when people are able to excel in sport without family help.