



RIPPING UP THE RULEBOOK



Saying that Middlesex have been poor at one-day cricket over the last decade is a bit like saying the maiden voyage of the Titanic didn't go completely according to plan. When they last qualified for the knockouts of England's premier one-day competition in 2009, Ireland were one of the participants and Barack Obama had just been inaugurated for the first time as the leader of the free world. Since then, every other first-class county except Leicestershire have made it past the group stages at least once.

Before the start of this season, Middlesex's players decided enough was enough. "We sat down as a team and we all decided, along with the coaches, that we want to go with this mantra, 'No matter the situation you play how you want to play,'" Seaxes batsman Nick Gubbins says now. "We've wanted to evolve our white-ball games for a while. We'd rather get bowled out for 150, going for 330 or 340, rather than trundle along to 260 and the opposition knock it off anyway.

"When it's put like that to us players, it gives us the freedom to go out and play. If you look at the way that the white-ball game has now evolved and the scores around the country, we had to do something different, we had to change the way we were playing because 270-280 isn't winning you too many one-day games now."

Gubbins himself is a perfect example of the funky thinking that Middlesex are now engaging in, no longer beholden to pre-existing roles or arcane game plans. Having spent most of his career opening in all three formats, he has batted every innings so far this season at No. 6, and had success too. His 56 in Middlesex's opening game kept up the momentum as they posted 366-8 batting first against Essex, while his unbeaten 98 saw them home with a remarkable 46 balls to spare in a chase of 284 against Gloucestershire.

"It all came from Stuart [Law, new Middlesex head coach]," says Gubbins. "I'm used to batting up the top and playing through the innings and laying that foundation. But Stuart laid out his reasons why. He just wanted me to come in at six and play pretty freely, run hard between the wickets and knock the ball around."

Gubbins isn't your archetypal death-overs slogger. "I'm maybe not an absolute consistent whacker of the ball over the ropes," he admits. But there is far more to finishing an innings than simply smashing maximums, something Law knows better than most.

"He's been with the West Indies where they hit a lot of sixes, but end up not winning a lot of cricket matches because they miss out on the bits in between," says Gubbins. "So I think that's why he wants me at six, because he realises the importance of the in-between boundaries at that stage of the game. That's my role really. To hit it hard, and run hard between the wickets, knowing that we have players that can hit around me in George Scott and Toby Roland-Jones coming down the order. It's a nice mix."

It's this game intelligence that makes Gubbins so useful in the middle order. Former Middlesex batting coach Dave Houghton described him as one of the best problem solvers he'd seen. Coming in down the order, you could find your side 50-4 or 350-4, so being able to get to grips with a situation quickly is key.

"When you come in at six," says Gubbins, "the game's already unravelled. So you've just got to do what's best for the team in that situation whereas up the top of the order it's been about laying a foundation, and the game is all ahead of you. Whereas when you come in at six, it's pretty crystal clear at that point what the team needs from you." Gubbins makes it sound simple, but it's anything but.

Gubbins may well move back up the order soon, with opener Paul Stirling set to leave for Ireland duty in the near future, while the arrival of New Zealand batsman Ross Taylor will also prompt a rethink. He remains comfortable doing whatever is asked of him.

“Batting never really changes too much,” he reasons. “There’s still just a ball coming down at you.” What’s changed now is that the Seaxes, more often than not, are trying to cream that ball to the ropes, or, with ball in hand, searching for wickets, uninhibited by the fear of getting out or going for runs.

“In the past few years it’s kind of been about back loading,” says Gubbins. “Building an innings patiently and then at the end have a big last 10 or 20 overs. This year it’s about taking the game to the opposition. If you’re in and you’re batting and you want to take a bowler down, the coaches have given us the license. And vice versa with the bowling. If you want to try something against a particular batsman, you’ve got the whole backing of the whole squad and coaching staff.”

Middlesex’s batsmen and bowlers might be encouraged to try anything, free of judgement, but in the field they’re being set against each other, part of an attempt by new fielding coach Nic Pothas to overhaul that aspect of their games. Having formerly been fielding coach at West Indies and Sri Lanka, his fresh approach has been warmly received by those at Middlesex.

“He’s a very energetic bloke,” says Gubbins. “He’s been massive on the fielding side of things, getting us prepared first and foremost but then during a game marking us and putting us up against each other. It’s a fun squad thing to do which keeps everyone going and provides a bit of banter in the field. There’s a lot of coordination drills, two balls coming at you and you’ve got to catch a particular colour ball with a particular hand, that sort of thing. There’s a lot of drills that have been thought up by Nic. You turn up to training and there’s always something new. It’s not just the same old.”

The willingness of the Middlesex squad to engage with new ideas, change roles to suit the team, even change their whole approach to playing, speaks volumes of their own characters and of the quality of the new coaching team to get them to buy in instantly. It also, perhaps, bears hallmarks of a national side similarly unfettered and reaping the rewards. One man has, of course, had a hand in both.

“At 30 for 3 chasing 280 [against Gloucestershire], Morgy [England captain Eoin Morgan] danced the down the wicket and put three sixes into the stands,” says Gubbins. “That just epitomised where we want to get to as a side. No matter the situation, he comes out and plays the way that he wants to play. There may be a few hiccups along the way but you’ve got to accept that if you want to evolve as a side. We know it can be a tricky brand to play, and things can go wrong, it’s just an acceptance that when things go wrong, we don’t want to revert back to type.”

These are, of course, still early days, and having won their first two games, Middlesex lost their third against Hampshire. While there is no shame in losing away from home to the One-Day Cup champions – “an absolutely quality one-day outfit” in Gubbins’

estimation – it was a defeat which highlighted the pitfalls of the Seaxes’ new approach. Chasing 302, they raced to 95-2 at better than a run a ball before losing six for 42, including three wickets to Aiden Markram’s part-time off-breaks.

The temptation among the fans and the press will be to admonish and chastise, advise that caution can be the better part of valour. As with England, prone to a horrendous collapse but the world’s best ODI side all the same, so Middlesex must commit fully to going full throttle. They might still come up short, and it will undoubtedly take time to stick. But it also might be how they finally put paid to their one-day woes.



The advertisement is set against a bright yellow background. On the left is a thumbnail of the magazine cover for 'WIDEN CRICKET MONTHLY' featuring Ben Stokes and the headline 'THE REINVENTION OF BEN STOKES'. In the center, the title 'WIDEN CRICKET MONTHLY' is written in large, bold, black letters, with 'THE INDEPENDENT VOICE OF CRICKET' in smaller text below it. To the right, a black circle contains the text 'SUBSCRIBE NOW AND SAVE 33%'. A small vertical line of text on the far right edge reads '*Savings based on Direct debit price'.