



MIDDLESEX'S MALAN FOR ALL SEASONS

No matter what you thought about the ideal make-up of England's Test team, it was hard not to feel for Dawid Malan last summer. In the spring, a decade of toil and near on 10,000 first-class runs finally seemed to be earning him what he deserved. His form was a rare high point in a sorry winter's Ashes series, with a landmark maiden Test century at Perth marking him out as a future lynchpin of England's batting line-up.

Instead, three Tests into the home season, Malan was dropped from the side. England's 4-1 victory over India might have served as cricketing justification of a cut-throat decision, but on a human level, Malan's axing stung all those who value the old-as-time tale of a tried-and-tested county grinder finally coming good.

It was clear then that Middlesex's skipper was hurting too. "After the winter that I had and the strides I made in international cricket it was disappointing to be dropped," he told me last September. "Eight Tests ago I scored a hundred for England. Four Tests ago in New Zealand I scored 55, so six innings ago I passed 50 for England in Test cricket.

“From that point of view there’s a lot of pride and a lot of disappointment that I didn’t score runs in these five innings that I’ve had since the winter. It’s quite tough. In my career across Twenty20, 50-over and Test cricket, I’ve passed 50 every 2.8 times that I’ve batted for England, which shows that I can play at that level. Deep down I hoped that they would have backed me a little bit more.”

In a way, any different reaction would have been cause for concern. Mild resignation and acceptance of his lot would certainly have been out of character. Malan’s determination and belief in his own ability has been, perhaps above all else, the trait that won him higher honours in the first place. The worry was that feeling hard done by would harden into resentment, rather than serving as fuel to restake his claim.

Happily, a winter spent piling on the runs in exotic climes for T20 teams around the globe has left Malan feeling refreshed. “I know we moan a lot about sitting in hotels and what have you,” he says now. “But we get to see different countries and parts of countries that you’d never have the opportunity of doing if you didn’t do that job. You end up seeing a hell of a lot of different places with the job I do.

“I’ve been all over the place, but I’d rather have it that way than be stuck at the indoor centre at Lord’s from November. From a cricketing point of view you always want to learn, so to be in different countries with different conditions and different people, you end up learning a hell of a lot.”

Malan’s sunny outlook is underlined by his pick for the best place he visited this winter – the West Indies, where he was a non-playing member of England’s T20I squad in their three-match series against the hosts. Previously, sitting on the periphery might have left him agitated, especially with his stellar record in the format – four fifties in five games at a strike-rate of 150 – perhaps warranting more.

Now, he describes it cheerily and a bit cheekily as his “two-week holiday”. “I’d only been to Antigua before for the Stanford T20 series with

Middlesex, so to get out there again and experience different islands was great for me.”

None of this is to say that Malan has given up on his England dream. He remains as committed as ever, but his dedication is laced with an acceptance that what will come will come, and what doesn't, doesn't. “It was fantastic to be around the set-up and be in and around the boys, but from a personal point of view it's obviously frustrating not to get a game, especially after the runs I'd scored in the five T20s that I've played before.

“You always want that opportunity, but you understand how it works with England. It's an honour to play, it's not a right, so as frustrating it is, it's just nice to be back in that set-up.

“It's a big summer ahead internationally so if I can score as many runs and win a lot of games for Middlesex, you never know what might happen. Without looking at England at any point, I'm just focussing on Middlesex and scoring as many runs as I can across all three formats.”

First up are two County Championship games, followed by a full Royal London One-Day Cup campaign. The 50-over competition is historically early in the season – this year's Lord's final will be the first-ever to be held in May – but the peculiarity of the schedule could suit the Seaxes perfectly.

“We've had a lot of injuries over the last year or so, especially with our bowlers,” says Malan. “So I think those two [Championship] games actually help us quite a lot to be able to get guys like Finny [Steven Finn] and Toby [Roland-Jones] back in the system and back into regular four-day cricket without bowling them into the ground in the first six weeks, so that's a plus point.

“Unless the wickets are really good I don't think it's the best time of year to be playing 50-over cricket, but that's the way it goes. It will probably bring our bowlers into the game a bit more. Our bowlers are certainly suited to if the balls doing a little bit in white-ball cricket so that might play into our hands a little bit.”

A newly bedded in coaching duo of Stuart Law and Nic Pothas will certainly be less than forgiving if Middlesex's white-ball woes continue. "Ultimately we can talk about our bowling all we want, but we haven't scored the runs we want to in white-ball cricket," says Malan. "The exciting thing is we have new coaching staff, a new way of looking at things, so hopefully the boys will have a new outlook to one-day cricket and to be challenged to improve.

"It's not the same coaching staff that will just pick players constantly, if you're not performing and don't seem to be cutting it, I'm sure the new coaching staff will have a big say over whether or not you're part of cricket at Middlesex.

"You can't just do the same thing you've been doing for nine years and expect things to change. You have to be open-minded and willing to approach things a bit differently, test yourself in training, whether that's as a bowler bowling different lines, different lengths, different types of slower balls, and as a batter expanding your game, whether that's batting quicker in four-day cricket or having more options in white-ball cricket.

"[Previous coaches] Richard Scott and Richard Johnson have done a fantastic job for pretty much 10 years, but after a while it becomes a little bit monotonous with the same voice and the same ideas. To have two new guys in with a different, fresh approach has been exciting for the boys.

"It's a totally different feel around the team this year. Usually when I come back from being abroad and being away playing around the world, the boys look tired and drained whereas there's definitely a sense of excitement, definitely a sense of a willingness to evolve, which I've never really seen at Middlesex."

It will be a relief for Middlesex fans to hear after a disappointing period, a two-year Championship-winning hangover which saw them relegated in 2017 and finish fourth in Division Two last year.

"We'd be disappointed as a team if we didn't get promoted, especially with three out of the 10 teams going up," says Malan. "We weren't good enough

last year across all three formats. We had a lot of injuries to key players, we missed a lot of key players at certain stages due to international and Lions call ups. When you put all that into place, hopefully we'll get our strongest team available and firing for 10-12 of those 14 games.”

That said, Malan is wary of taking anything for granted. There might be a gap between the divisions, but more than that, the second tier sees a different style of cricket thrive, an all-or-nothing approach which makes missing out on a win feel like defeat. Middlesex won half their games last season, a higher percentage than any campaign since 2011, more even than their 2016 title-winning effort. It still wasn't enough to see them promoted.

“There's no reason why we shouldn't be pushing for promotion, but cricket's a funny game. In Division Two everyone seems to beat everyone. Draws don't seem to matter in Division Two because all the other teams beat each other. We have to find a way to play good consistent cricket and put ourselves in a position to win as many games as we can.”



The advertisement banner features a yellow background. On the left is a cover of the magazine 'WIDEN CRICKET MONTHLY' with the headline 'THE REINVENTION OF BEN STOKES'. In the center is the Royal Coat of Arms crest above the text 'WIDEN CRICKET MONTHLY' and 'THE INDEPENDENT VOICE OF CRICKET'. On the right is a black circle containing the text 'SUBSCRIBE NOW AND SAVE 33%'. A small vertical text on the far right edge reads '*Savings based on Direct Mail price'.