

In Collingwood's Steps

A whistle-stop trip from a short leg to MBE

As an Eldon boy, following in Collingwood's steps wasn't something that naturally came to mind.

16 May 2010 - Paul, not Admiral Lord, Collingwood, led England to victory in the T20 World Cup. Paul, a Durham Cricketer, a Sunderland fan, an England Captain. Two things I was/had been, one thing I couldn't dream of. Paul Collingwood was the first England Cricketer to raise a trophy at a World event. He had received an MBE having been part of the famous Ashes series victory over Australia in 2005.

23 October 1981 - I was 16 months old and my parents took the decision to amputate my right foot. A birth defect meant that my right foot had not developed as it should. With the choice of wearing a platform shoe or amputation, they chose the most severe of options with the hope that I could go on to live the best life possible wearing a prosthetic limb.

Shortly after the operation to remove my foot, I was running around on my residual stump, a sight that became common place to classmates throughout my time at RGS. It wasn't long until I had a cricket bat in my hand, a football at my feet and a desire to enjoy whatever I was doing.

Having represented, and captained, the school team, played representative cricket for Durham and Northumberland and club cricket at Chester le Street and Jesmond, now home of RGS Cricket I'd managed to keep up with my two-legged counterparts throughout age group cricket. By the time I left school in 1998 I knew that I would not be able to follow some of my teammates from County cricket into the professional game. It was not the end of my love of cricket, but without a disability team, I knew I wasn't going to be able to go any further in the game.

Cricket wasn't my only sport. At school I'd kept up with some of the Rugby team, playing school rugby until the end of year 9, something I doubt would be an option in today's more safety conscious environment. There is still folklore of me taking a conversion in a match, only for my leg to sail over the cross bar having come loose. I'm sad to say that there is an exaggeration to the truth in that tale, but my leg certainly did fall off.

I suspect I am still the only pupil to have broken a leg on a school skiing trip, only to have a spare flown out by British Airways.

6-8 July 2012- Wimbledon Finals Weekend - Andy Murray lost to Roger Federer on the Sunday. 14 years after giving up on my dream of elite cricket, I attended my first training session with England Physically

Disabled Cricket team. I listened to the final of Wimbledon on the way home.

The dream was reborn. I'd spent the weekend with a group of hugely talented disabled cricketers. Some with missing legs, missing arms, some with cerebral palsy and other physical disabilities. It was great to be with people who had suffered similar setbacks to me, seeing them overcoming these setbacks, as I had always sought to.

There was a self-deprecating sense of humour throughout the group. I always found it disarmed people when I put myself down before they could get a word in. It appears the rest of the team did too.

It was time get fit. We had help from physios, nutritionist, fitness coaches. The might of the ECB was behind us, in a watered-down version, but we had every help to get us in shape. This, perhaps the most life changing of all the experiences of life with England Cricket.

I learned a lot about my body. I had been quite aware of my biomechanics as a result of my amputation. I'd spent a lot of time with prosthetists, working to make sure my leg fit in the right way. Add to that the expert views of physios, explaining how my musculature had developed as a result of my prosthesis and what I could do to balance up my power; I now know what is causing my aches and pains!! It's not just middle age.

March 2014 - My first international series: Dubai's International Cricket Academy hosted England vs Pakistan, the only countries who had developed their disability cricket to a point of producing a national team.

What an experience. Singing the national anthem, stood lined up with your teammates, friends, ready to take to the field really hit me. School choir helped me to remain pitch perfect, but there were some wobbles in there. All tension was eased when the second verse kicked in, something which none of us in the team, nor coaching staff were expecting or knew the words to!

The series went well, but we were on the losing side. A great learning experience for a lot of us and the emotions felt at the end of the final game were there for all to see. Something to steel us for future encounters we hoped, but we were told not to expect any further international games for at least 2/3 years. Budgets were tight and until the rest of the World caught up, we were unlikely to play again competitively.

January 2015 - The dream has just become reality. I was appointed Captain of the team. I was following in the footsteps of my heroes. The

players I'd watched through the 80s and 90s: Botham, Gower, Gatting, Gooch, Atherton, Stewart, not to mention the more successful captains or Strauss, Hussein and Vaughan.

For a cricketing 'badger', I was in heaven. Attending events with the men's and women's teams, alongside the other disability captains were great experiences. Being in the Members area of the Houses of Commons for events celebrating cricket, steeped in the history of the Place. Meeting people from around the game who had spent a lifetime making the sport what it is now.

Kit launches. Fashion shows alongside some of the biggest names in English cricket. Being interviewed on stage and appearing in marketing paraphernalia, getting some freebies!!

May 2015 - Just over a year after getting back from the disappointment of Dubai it was announced. A World Series, in Dhaka, Bangladesh with 5 countries participating. Where had they come from - they didn't exist just a year earlier. India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Pakistan and England, competing in the cricket-mad subcontinent.

August 2015 - We land in Dhaka after 28 hours of travel and were swept through the VIP area of the airport and onto a coach. We had our own truck to follow us with the amount of kit we travelled with. Spare limbs take up a lot of room. Pot noodles, biscuits, tea and coffee took up a fair bit too!

Dhaka, the 9th most populous city in the world has the 4th lowest living standards in the world.

It wasn't until we set off that we realised the madness of Bangladesh. Our accommodation was 25km from the airport. We arrived there almost 2 hours after setting off, such was the congestion on the roads. We had police escorts, armed with guns for safety and sticks for hitting vehicles who got in the way, yet still it took 2 hours.

I don't think we were prepared for the sights that we saw. Tin huts along roadsides, open sewers running through marketplaces, children working on building sites. It was certainly eye opening and made you think how fortunate we were.

It was from here that I became aware of the importance of what we were doing. It wasn't just about cricket. That's not to say that none of the teams were interested in winning but there was more importance on showing the value of disabled people, particularly in the subcontinent, but at home as well.

Many of our opposition struggled to gain employment, had not been fully educated through school. Those who wore prosthetics were certainly not on the same type of equipment that we were sporting.

The tournament had been supported by Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, Bangladesh's Tendulkar, a hero of the Country. Banners throughout the city told the locals of the tournament. The Prime Minister attended the opening ceremony. It dawned on us that this was quite a big thing.

Games were to be televised live on Bangladesh TV with pre-match interviews with the captains at the toss. Articles about the tournament were being read online and shared by millions. We were followed around the Army campus where games were taking place by hordes of young Bangladeshi cricket fans, desperately seeking autographs and selfies. It was to be a few weeks to remember.

It was the end of the wet season...almost. So, after a bit of a false start following some biblical rain, the tournament got started. We lost the first game to Bangladesh. The first time they'd played together. The atmosphere was amazing, as was the humidity, with temperatures showing a 'real feel' of 45c.

The fervour around cricket in Bangladesh is awesome. The noise made whenever a ball is hit is deafening. It's the number 1 sport in the Country and you can tell, but the noises that are made are different to that of our football stadiums. A cacophony of noise.

We knew we had to go the rest of the tournament unbeaten to make the final. Our game against India went our way. Next up the old enemy, Pakistan.

Our games in Dubai had been close calls and this time we came out on top quite comfortably, if that's possible in T20 cricket.

Afghanistan to play. A win gets us to the final. They needed 18 off the last over. Our best player was bowling. The first ball went for 4. The second ball, I believe, is still in orbit. 8 needed off 4 balls = squeaky bum time. They got two 2s. Four needed of 2 and they decided to change batting gloves, giving us a moment to breath and refocus. We took the final wicket on the fifth ball and won the game by the skin of our teeth.

Our destiny was in our own hands. The final against Pakistan, where crunch games had tended to go their way. Having won 3 on the bounce we were full of confidence, and we'd won the last game against them. Only an England team could mess it up from here. We did win this one to become the first World Champions in Physically Disabled Cricket.

The aftermath of the tournament was as much of a rollercoaster as the tournament itself. Full page adverts were taken out in the Saturday press by then sponsors, Waitrose, celebrating our victory. We visited Downing Street, were interviewed on Sky Sports, did a lap of honour at Old Trafford, appeared on Test Match Special and culminated in a game at the Oval as part of the Help for Heroes charity game, with some Legends of the game. I bumped in Vikram Aggarwal ON (1988-1998) in the crowd and had a good catch up 16 years after leaving school.

There were other tournaments; a tri-series with Bangladesh and Pakistan in Dubai in 2016 - we lost the final; another tri-series with the same teams in Worcester in 2018 - we lost the final; a World Series in Worcester with India and Afghanistan added from the year before - we lost the final. Perhaps I should be remembered for losing finals, rather than winning them!

After 7 years of involvement, 5 of which as Captain, I suspected that I had played my last game in the Final of 2019, knowing what was to come in my home life.

The closeness of the team in the final years was outstanding, with players who were looking out for each other, not themselves. I know I left the game and the team in a strong place. Absolutely not all down to me, but playing my part alongside excellent coaches, brilliant support staff and determined administrators, all working to keep the game moving forward.

18 December 2019 - After a tearful final session with the team at Edgbaston I was back to work. As a new email arrived, it peaked my attention - "Two England Legends announce retirement". Laura Marsh, part of England Women's World Cup winning team had announced her retirement. I was the other one.

21 May 2020 - The hole in my life after my retirement from cricket was filled. The arrival of our daughter, Cassie. She doesn't know it yet, but she's a future England captain in the making. I can't wait to tell her about my tales from the field, show her my clippings and see her flourish.

21 May 2021 - If it was enough of a day to celebrate, having missed calls from the same number over 2 days, I dialled the missed number - they must want something I thought.

"Hello, Cabinet Office" was the reply. I was expecting something about a car accident I'd been involved in as that appears to be the most common call at the moment, or maybe the issue with our broadband.

"We've been trying to contact you to send you a letter. We have your phone number but no email. Would you be able to share that with me?"

Now I don't know about you, but unsolicited calls from the Cabinet Office aren't regular things, so I doubted the caller.

"Can I ask what this is regarding?" The reply almost made me crash the car "It's regarding the Queen's Birthday Honours List."

After stumbling over my words for a few seconds, I duly handed over my email address.

All I did was live my dream of playing cricket for England. To wear the three lions, to sing the national anthem. To be recognised with an MBE was beyond words.

I don't take positive reviews of my performance comfortably. I didn't think that I'd done anything special, but it appears someone else thinks otherwise and I'm very grateful, incredibly proud and humbled.

The first international only took place in 2012, shortly before the London Paralympics. Since then, Physically Disabled has come on leaps and bounds, with the standard of play reaching new levels in the last World Cup in 2019.

All of those involved in the game have a big task on their hands as they try to bring it to the level it was before Covid struck. I would love to do something to help, and I hope that we will get to see the England disability teams in action on the international stage again soon.

I was the second man to lift a World trophy for England. A Sunderland fan, a Durham cricketer, an England Captain. I had followed in Collingwood's steps. Paul Collingwood MBE. Iain Nairn MBE.

I remain an Eldon boy!