

**“As a batting side the mindset has to change; to be brave enough to see the positive in everything, because there are a lot of mixed messages in ODI cricket”**



# A whole new mindset

The England squad in Australia for the Carlton Mid ODI Tri series and the ICC Cricket World Cup 2015 has a whole new attitude – and leading the way is their wicket-keeper batsman Jos Buttler. RICHARD ASHER reports

**“**LOOK AT THE WAY he plays. I’m trying to learn those skills and improve all the time in 50-over cricket.” These

seemingly innocuous words belong to an established England player with over 150 ODI caps. They refer to a 24-year-old with only about 40. And they speak volumes.

That a man of Ian Bell’s standing is looking to Jos Buttler for lessons tells you everything you need to know about Buttler’s importance to England limited-overs team. You might say the wicket-keeper batsman holds the key to English hopes of shocking doubtful Australian punters in this huge summer of cricket.

When Buttler smashed a 74-ball innings of 121 against Sri Lanka all the way back in May, the belief that he might be the breath of fresh air England have desperately needed really took hold. The Lancashire player has since continued to show the invention typical of a modern limited-overs player: he switch hits, reverse sweeps and Dilscoops with the best of them. He had, at the time of writing, a strike rate of 120, of which the likes of Bell could only dream.

It’s that kind of effortless scoring that England are finally targeting as they build towards the ICC Cricket World Cup 2015 in February. The criticism of their conservative batting style, along with selections inspired by the very different game of Test cricket, are now being acted upon. England are looking to break the shackles now, going after scores of over 300 from ball one, and Buttler is central to making that ethos work.

His defining innings at Lord’s proved as much. England were chasing 301, but top-order batters Joe Root and Gary Ballance each made scores in the 40s with strike rates in the 60s. That approach left even a power hitter like Buttler with too much to do, and the game was lost despite what was arguably England’s best ODI knock in years. It certainly did make England sit up and think.

Buttler, who offers extra value by taking the gloves – though he’s still developing his keeping – epitomises England’s new direction. He knows what that direction should be, and he knows his role in it. “I think everyone knows we need to get bigger scores,” said Buttler a few weeks ago in Sri Lanka. “You look around the world, and people are getting big scores these days. As a batting unit you

have to be able to post big scores if you want to win tournaments.”

Here is a man who is intelligent enough to see the bigger picture, and use that insight to motivate his teammates. “For me, those big totals come down to mindset as well as skills. Traditionally, if you get out trying to go over the top, people say ‘he got out caught, bad shot’. But when the same shot goes for six the next day, the same people say ‘great shot, he went over the top!’ So you can see the glass as half-full or half-empty.

“Personally I like the positive approach. So, look at the positive outcome first, but accept that at times you’re going to fail. I play my best cricket when I’m enjoying it and not trying to think about it too much.”

Fear of failure is an accusation that has regularly been levelled at England limited-overs batsmen. The Buttler way – enjoying the game with a clear mind – has not typically been the English way. The plan this southern summer is to change all of that.

A year ago, England’s ODI team was enduring a miserable time in Australia, following an even more miserable and fractious Ashes drubbing. With players like Jonathan Trott and Graeme Swann leaving the ranks, and Kevin Pietersen





England's Test players now seem to be working better as a team

causing distractions from afar, morale was not at its best. That much was clear from some of the comments that later came out from Swann.

In recent months, though, the tide has been turning. Other players, like Eoin Morgan, have been critical of England's one-day thinking and structures in public. He has had social media support from other players, Buttler included. But the criticism has been constructive, and, with a new coaching regime having come on board in April, it seems to have caused the mindshift everyone wanted.

The results may not have come at first, with England losing both their home ODI series against Sri Lanka and India last year, but squad culture and selections gradually became more positive. For example, in Sri Lanka in November, England tried the attacking Moeen Ali at the top of their order, to give them the fast starts so crucial in 50-over cricket.

This Carlton Mid ODI Tri Series forms the backbone of an ideal ICC Cricket

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World Cup 2015 preparation period for England. They haven't had the distraction of any Tests since August, and their white-ball group has been together since Sri Lanka. If a new mindset is ever going to take hold, it will be now.

But the time for excuses is past, and Buttler knows it. “This squad has a lot of talent,” he says. “But it's a young squad and talent can only go so far. It's about performance for us now.

“It's a really big advantage to get a group of guys together for a long period of time, with a clear goal at the end of that period. Hopefully we'll see a rapid development in our skills, since we've just been practicing white-ball cricket in that time, which is brilliant. I hope it will lead to a style that will enable us to win games and challenge for a World Cup.”

A year on from the squabbling that beset England's last visit to these shores, Buttler reckons that the player and management group have now addressed a lot of the issues that former players have aired in public.

“The squad's in a great place as a collective. Everyone's getting along great and communication has been brilliant. There's a lot of chatting about what works, what doesn't, and how we can get



better. People are brave enough to voice their opinion, and accept other people's opinion with no gripes.”

There can be no arguing with Buttler's assessment of his squad as talented. Apart from himself, England do have players born to play one-day cricket. There's potential opener Alex Hales, who is the only England player to have made a T20 hundred. There's experienced all-rounder Ravi Bopara. There's Morgan, one of the few English players global T20 franchises really seem to want. And there's the diminutive James Taylor, a man with a staggering domestic run-scoring record. There's Ali, there's Ben Stokes and bowling stalwarts Jimmy Anderson and Stuart Broad. The list goes on.

Brave selection remains the real challenge for England. Apart from that, it's really psychology that they need to get right over the next couple of months, says the ever-optimistic Buttler.

“As a batting side the mindset has to change. To be brave enough to see the positive in everything, because there are a lot of mixed messages in ODI cricket, along the lines of ‘hit fours and sixes, but don't get out.’ Can we hit boundaries in the middle, can we play spin, can we finish the innings well? We need to put all those things together.”

Look out for that to happen in this tournament. If it does, England may yet surprise you this summer.



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