

PART ONE

It was Saturday 8 June 1996, when I had my first encounter with cricket. I cycled straight into a thin, barely visible rope surrounding the square at my local park and ended up spread-eagled on the pitch. As introductions go, it was some way short of ideal. Not many great cricketing careers began with a near-decapitation. Most at least had a bat or ball in hand and hardly *any* were on a bike. Even fewer were wearing a Transformers t-shirt with the sleeves cut off and singing the rap sections of 'Killing Me Softly' by the Fugees.

The unkempt playing fields at the park were the exclusive domain of mad, mumbling men who drank cheap beer and swore at strangers, dog walkers with incontinent pets and enormous teenagers playing terrifyingly aggressive five-a-side football, while their girlfriends smoked funny-smelling cigarettes by the swings. It was a bit like a warzone with a cycle path and monkey bars.

Generally speaking, it was the sort of place to avoid, but swept up in the euphoria of the upcoming Euro '96 football tournament, just hours from starting at a sun-drenched Wembley 80-odd miles away, my brother Josh and I cycled down for a kickabout. After finding a postage stamp-sized patch of turf free from dog shit, fag-butts and half-crushed lager cans, I began pedalling aimlessly while Josh hoofed and toe-punted the ball at me to try and knock me off the saddle.

It was the sort of masochistic practise session of which Brian Clough would have approved. It was also, self-evidently, about as pointless as Mike Gatting's completely spherical head (seriously, look at it; it's like someone has drawn an angry little goatee and some beady eyes on a volleyball).

After one effort fizzed past my nose, I wearily chased the stray ball. As I raced further away, a golden strip of land inched into view through waves of summer heat. Well, through waves of summer sort-of-heat. It was June in England, after all. Come to think of it, it was probably more like tsunamis of torrential summer rain.

If the rest of the park echoed with the clatter and chatter of creaking swings and agricultural swearing, this part of the fields was green, pleasant land. Even the smell was different – a fresher, healthier smell than the 'after-party at a Snoop Dogg concert' aroma of the cigarettes being smoked by the girls near the swings. It was the first time I had ever seen a cricket pitch up close.

Seconds later, I felt the hot friction of wiry rope cutting painfully across my midriff and forearms, sending my bike and I cart-wheeling apart. I lay on the dusty surface for a few seconds; arms and legs jutting in opposite directions like a miniature John Travolta (except for the Transformers t-shirt) in *Saturday Night Fever*.

"Get off the bloody square!"

A man's voice boomed at me from my right. I sucked in humid June air and rubbed my arms in pain as I scanned the park to see exactly whose square – whatever one of *those* was – I found myself lying upon. I hauled myself to my feet gingerly brushing dust and loose blades of grass from my clothes. A man in his early sixties and wearing a faded white flowerpot hat, cream knitted jumper and dark blue shorts, was breaking into a semi-jog towards me. He looked a bit like Worzel Gummidge on his way to a squash match.

"Get off the bloody square you little shit!" he hollered once more.

It almost definitely wasn't Worzel Gummidge. I'm not sure Worzel Gummidge ever used language like that, (certainly not towards a child, he might have told the odd crow to piss off, but then he was a scarecrow, so fair enough) but whoever it was, his voice, at first croaky and smoke-damaged, was now clearer and biting with anger. Panicked and still in some discomfort, I propped my bike up, hopped into the saddle and fled, my feet whirring at a Road Runner-esque, smoke-producing speed. I sped past my brother and out of the park, only stopping to catch my breath once the man's shouting had faded into silence. I didn't want to go back to the park ever again. There was no point; our football was probably slowly deflating on the prongs of a gardening fork.

But even so, the image of that cricket pitch stayed with me for weeks, inflaming my interest in the game. A fascination began – springing like a post-traumatic reflex from the shock of riding into the rope and the threat of a walloping from a drunken middle-aged man – with all things cricket.

That day, while England limped to a 1-1 draw with Switzerland (and I gingerly limped around the house rubbing the rope burn on my arm), within the relative quiet of Edgbaston cricket ground in Birmingham, an impish-looking batsman called Sachin Tendulkar was scoring a flawless century against England's cricketers, smashing 122 out of a meagre total of 219. The best any of his team-mates could manage was 18. It was a display of utter genius that not only transcended the mediocrity around him but highlighted it, too. It was the cricketing equivalent of Alan Shearer scoring a double hat-trick, but England losing 7-6. To the Germans. On St George's Day.

Like most people in the country, I was oblivious not only to the supreme achievement of Tendulkar that day, but entirely unaware of what a phenomenon he already was. I was more interested in Gary Neville's long-throws than Sachin's back-foot cover drive, which is a bit like saying you preferred

ready salted crisps to cheese and onion or that your favourite Beatle was Ringo. It was sporting sacrilege.

The rope burn healed, but my interest in cricket grew exponentially over the coming weeks. Rosh, a short boy from Malaysia, was the only friend I knew at school who liked cricket. A mutual love of professional wrestling (the sort where American men called 'Randy' in luminous, skin-tight lycra hit each other with metal chairs) had brought us close in the classroom, and it seemed only natural to turn to Rosh for an introduction to cricket. Not that he knew that, of course, when I invited myself over to his house to watch a video of an old Wrestlemania.

"I'm thinking about playing cricket, Rosh," I said as we stared at the TV.

"Cool."

He didn't bat an eyelid. In his defence, *ex-Baywatch* star Pamela Anderson was escorting a wrestler to the ring. My attempts to strike up a conversation were no match for Rosh's raging pre-teen hormones, but I persisted. Well, actually I joined in with the ogling for a bit and then I persisted.

"Yeah, so I was wondering if you could help me get into it, Rosh."

"What?"

"Cricket."

"What about it?"

"I want to start playing cricket."

"Cool." Pamela was jiggling about. I left him to it and gazed out of the window. Oh alright, I leered at Pammy too. 'Pamela' seemed an unlikely name for her to have. I only knew one other lady called Pam, and she was a 70-year-old lady who lived on our street. She didn't like wrestling, had never starred in *Baywatch* and as far as I remember, never wore anything as revealing as Pamela Anderson did, which was a relief. Although she certainly would have got people talking at the next Neighbourhood Watch meeting (probably

about not inviting her to the next meeting if she insisted on wearing the red swimsuit and carrying that flotation device) if she did.

Rosh's father, near-identical to his son save for the fact he always seemed to be wearing slippers, shuffled silently into the room as we gawped at the screen. Within seconds the wrestling tape was whisked from the VCR on the grounds of its 'puerility'. I wasn't sure quite what it meant, but it sounded mucky. Neither Rosh nor I protested too much. We quickly snapped out of our hormonal reverie.

"Adam wants to start playing cricket, Dad."

Rosh's father's bright white eyes peered over the top of his glasses at me as I sat on the floor. He always reminded me of Kermit the Frog, if Kermit wore tank tops three sizes too big for him and worked as a business trouble-shooter, which as any Muppet fan knows, he did not. He didn't have time for anything like that. And if he did, any business that thinks a small, furry frog with a man's hand up its arse is the answer to its problems should probably just shut up shop anyway.

"That is wonderful, Adam," he said. "Rosh has lots of cricket videos. Rosh; why don't you both watch one?"

Begrudgingly, Rosh agreed and thrust a tatty-looking VHS into the player with a petulant pre-teen huff. After the tape adjusted to the tracking mechanism and the mangled images bobbed into focus, we both sat cross-legged in close attention. A tall man with jet-black hair started his run-up from the bottom of the screen, his clumping, leaden-footed charge ending in a flurry of arms and legs. At the other end was a tiny man whose bat appeared to be two-thirds as big as him. One elegant, effortless swing and a pleasingly bassy clunk off his bat later, the ball zipped away. The contrast between the bowler – his every limb seemingly at war with the other as he bowled – and the balletic movement of the batsman could not have been more marked. It was all rather lovely.

"That's Sachin Tendulkar, the greatest batsman in the world."

I turned to see Rosh's dad watching the video intently, his beady eyes wide – or at least wider than normal – with excitement.

“I taped this for Rosh, he must study how Tendulkar bats if he wants to get better as a batsman. Nobody else can hold a candle to Tendulkar's talent.”

We watched again as Tendulkar elegantly clubbed the bowler, the curiously named Ronnie Irani, twice more. The bowler grinned and shook his head in begrudging appreciation for the shots being played. The little batsman's balance, timing and power were incredible, almost otherworldly. From beneath his blue helmet he seemed a picture of quiet, brooding confidence, and yet he looked no more than a few years older than me; a cherubim-faced boy surrounded by the grizzled features of the England fielders.

In between deliveries he shuffled nervously with his gloves, adjusted his pads obsessively and scanned his dark brown eyes around the ground, anxiously seeking gaps between the scattered fielders. But the moment an English bowler began his run-up, a calm descended as Tendulkar stood statue-still, upright and unflinching, his bat hovering perfectly perpendicular to the ground. Even through layers of tape fuzz he transmitted an intangible quality that marked him out from the other players on display. It was sporting love at first sight.

India, the commentators said, were under the cosh, battered and beaten into near submission by England. The young batter was the only player holding firm. So began a fascination with Sachin Tendulkar.

Punctuating each of his boundary-bound shots were the giddy celebrations of the English bowlers as they claimed Indian wickets with ease. The crowd cheered every dismissal – a nicer, less taunting sound than a football cheer – but incredibly, rapturously celebrated each breathtaking shot Tendulkar played, too. The camera panned to the spectators

irregularly throughout, and most were patently English; all pale skin, nylon football shirts and half-empty plastic pint pots. Yet they cheered each graceful blow by the young Indian like it was a German penalty soaring over the crossbar, their eyes fixed in awe on Sachin as though he were a 5ft 5in tall Pukka pie.

Rosh and I continued to watch as Tendulkar reached 50, raising his bat with little fanfare to all corners of the ground. He continued imperiously towards his century, removing his helmet when he did so to salute the crowd. He barely cracked a smile, merely raising his arms aloft before adjusting his equipment and readying himself for the next ball.

Finally, he was dismissed, a simple BBC graphic undermining the beauty of his innings: 'S.R. Tendulkar 122, c. Thorpe b. Lewis'. His dismissal drew a huge cheer from the English contingent in the stadium, a belching, late-in-the-day roar of relief that slowly mutated into a standing ovation for his efforts. As he walked off, even the umpire, a portly, ruddy-faced man, acknowledged Tendulkar's brilliance with a nod of congratulations to him. I had never seen sport – or sportsmanship – like it. The tape ended. I was transfixed.

For the rest of that afternoon, I sat entranced as an uninterrupted succession of cricket videos flew in and out of the video player; England's cricketers toiling on impossibly fast and bouncy pitches in Australia, the West Indian, Brian Lara, wristily smashing hot and bothered-looking England bowlers around dusty, sun-baked Caribbean grounds and a pair of Pakistani bowlers called Wasim and Waqar splaying stumps with balls seemingly hurled at the speed of light. I was amazed by the endless different types and characters of players; from the dour grittiness and permanently furrowed brow of England's Mike Atherton to the shrill, peroxide-coloured exuberance of Australia's Shane Warne. But among the myriad of new faces and techniques, no one came close to the calm, almost divine simplicity of Tendulkar's batting.

Over the remainder of the summer, Rosh and I walled ourselves off – literally, in his enormous back garden – from football’s iron grasp on the sporting schedules. With a tennis ball half-covered in sellotape (‘it makes the ball swing’, according to Rosh), a tatty Gray-Nicolls bat and a plant-pot for stumps, we played for hours on the uneven sun-faded pink paving slabs, mimicking the batsmen and bowlers we admired.

Throughout those balmy few months, I perfected cutting and driving with a flourish as a replica (albeit right-handed) Lara, and could bowl loopy leg-breaks like a pint-sized, mousey-haired Warne. But most impressive was Rosh’s impression of Tendulkar. Upright in his stance, technically perfect and naturally as short as Tendulkar himself, bowling at Rosh was as close as it got to bowling at the great man. We watched and studied that video of Tendulkar at Edgbaston until the tape warped and perished from the strain of repeated viewings. We dreamed of one day meeting our hero, perhaps even playing against him.

Such thoughts were extinguished early and in resounding fashion. I made my cricketing debut later that summer. This, I told myself, was the first step towards emulating Tendulkar’s career. True to my prediction, I, like the Little Master, was dismissed in my very first game for a duck. So far, so on course to emulate my hero.

But doubts began to surface soon after. I discovered Sachin’s next run of scores after that maiden zero included a pair of triple centuries. *Triple centuries*. I’m not sure I’ve scored 300 runs in my life.

By the end of his first year in junior cricket, Sachin was averaging over a thousand runs per innings. After my first four games, my average was zero, and the backyard bowling skills I had developed were not serving me very well on real pitches either. My best moment came when I athletically stopped a smashed cover drive in a school game. Well, I say

‘stopped’ – it was more a case of it smashing into my knee. I hobbled off with tears in my eyes.

Already, the signs were clear; I would never dazzle my hero with my batting talents, nor get the chance to bore him out with my slow-medium bowling. It is a sad day when a boy realises he will not play for England – even now I am realistic enough to acknowledge it would take at least two or three injuries to key England players for me to get a call-up (or the discovery of a South African grandfather).

Rosh and I drifted apart over the years too, as we swapped afternoons inside watching cricket videos for nights down the pub with mates, and substituted ball games in the garden for days at the beach with our girlfriends. My boyish idolisation of Tendulkar turned into a more adult, sober appreciation of his talents.

And that is how things could have stayed. The tape of Tendulkar’s 122 disappeared and Rosh’s near-perfect Sachin impressions became a memory. Life moved on.

I had not seen Rosh for more than a year when we bumped into each other at a party one early May evening in London. Like recovering drunks recalling hedonistic days gone-by, our conversation soon turned to cricket, and back to those sun-dappled days playing with the taped-up tennis ball. Empty beer bottles soon snaked around us as we relived our childhood cricketing adventures. Praise pinged elastically between us for our ability to ape Lara’s high back-lift or defend like Michael Atherton; we even talked about digging our whites out and playing some proper cricket again. Standout backyard innings came flooding back to us like Technicolor highlight reels. It was a nice jog (we were too drunk to have driven) down memory lane.

“My Tendulkar impression was the best, wasn’t it, Ad?” Rosh suggested. I nodded in agreement and sipped my beer.

Warm memories rushed back of the boyish excitement we both felt about Tendulkar.

“In fact, did you ever even bowl me out when I was batting as Tendulkar?” he asked. “I don’t think you ever did.”

It was a ridiculous thing to say – in backyard cricket, wickets fell about every three seconds. My reply lacked subtlety.

“Bollocks. Of course I did,” I spluttered. Rosh sipped his beer and smirked. No one likes a smirker.

“*I bloody did*,” I persisted, “I remember bowling you a big inswinger which hit the very top of the plant pot.”

I didn’t remember it exactly, but it was a punt worth taking. If I threw him some invented specifics about the incident, maybe he would assume I was right.

“I think it went just over. It was given not out on referral.” *Clever bastard*. He’d called my bluff.

“No, no,” I insisted. “I definitely got you out when you were batting as Sachin. I remember celebrating the wicket in a big way.”

“Rubbish. You never bowled Sachin.” Rosh was adamant. He sipped at his beer again and swallowed his mouthful with another irritating smirk.

Red mist descended. I went ‘postal’ as the Americans say. By which I mean I got incredibly irate, rather than I started trying to stuff his stamp-covered face through a letterbox, although the thought did occur to me. But stamps are expensive.

“Rosh, this is crazy,” I whined, “I definitely bowled you. It was an incredible delivery. I can still remember it clearly, it dipped and swung and you tried to defend it, but it went between the bat and your leg and knocked you over. It was good enough to get the real Sachin Tendulkar, let alone you doing an impression.”

Whether we agreed to disagree or bemused onlookers were forced to intervene at this point in our frankly ridiculous

conversation, I don't remember. But as I woke in my bed with a hangover the following morning, a seed had been sown.

Tendulkar, for the first time since I was 13 years old, was at the forefront of my mind. Burying my head into my pillow and groping for my phone on my bedside table, I fished it closer to check the time. The screen displayed an unfinished text message.

'Track dwn sachnin tendulkar n bowl him out.'

Ignoring my terrible spelling, snatched fragments of another conversation immediately came wobbling back into focus. I closed the message draft down and called Rosh. Perhaps he knew why I had left this cryptic, drunken note for my sober self to pick up the next morning.

"Ugh, what," he groaned, answering the phone.

"I just found a text I wrote to myself on my phone," I said "It's about Sachin Tendulkar."

Rosh said nothing. Clearly, he had no idea what I was on about. This bizarre memo was obviously of my own doing.

"I don't know what you're on about," he yawned. "Have you just woken me up to talk about a text?"

"Well, it said: *'track down Sachin Tendulkar and bowl him out'*. It just sounded like something you might know about."

Saying it out loud made me sound a bit mad, like I'd woken up with a piece of toast or a signed photo of Sir Ian McKellen under my pillow and then called him demanding to know who had put it there. Neither of us said anything for a few seconds.

"So how are you going to do it?" he yawned.

I felt a bizarre rush of adrenaline fizz through my stomach. The same sort of rush I would have got if I'd woken up with a picture of Sir Ian, probably.

"No, I'm not going to do it," I replied instinctively. "I just wondered why it was on my phone this morning."

"What?" Rosh replied, suddenly sounding wide-awake. "Why the hell wouldn't you do it?"

“Why *would* I do it?”

“Well, fairly obviously, because you might get the opportunity to bowl at Sachin Tendulkar,” Rosh countered immediately.

It was hard to fault his logic. It was flawless. We said our goodbyes and both went back to sleeping our hangovers off. I closed the text message down.

I have never run a marathon, climbed a mountain, or cycled from Lands End to John O’Groats and until that moment I had never understood why anyone – charity fundraising aside – ever felt the need to, either. Such tasks are hard work mentally, physically draining and yet ultimately, entirely pointless. *I climbed the mountain because it’s there*, mad adventurers always seemed to bleat when any right-thinking person asked why on earth they were doing it. All that adventuring felt like something other people did; people who didn’t have satellite television, wore Birkenstocks and enjoyed herbal tea (it *all* tastes like sweat – it lures you in by smelling lovely, but then the taste – *ugh!*). I had always preferred to go to the pub or eat dry cereal from the box, because they, conveniently, were *there*. I didn’t need a Sherpa or an anti-malaria jab to go to The Yorkshire Grey (unless it was over-45s singles night, in which either might come in useful at some point).

But bowling to Sachin had always been a dream since childhood – and did I need any other reason to do this than that? *I would* track down Sachin Tendulkar and bowl him out, simply because he was there – or more specifically because he was *here*, in England, on probably his last tour of the country with India. Was this a plan? It felt like a plan.

I got up and made myself a cup of tea. (Earl Grey. With milk. And sugar. And a malted milk biscuit with a picture of someone playing hockey, I think. Or maybe it was horse racing. It was hard to tell.) I thought about pulling myself together. *This is a ridiculous idea*, I thought. Only it wasn’t

what I thought at all. ‘*Oh my word this is the best idea ever and I absolutely have to at least try*’ would have been closer to my actual inner monologue. Like a tunnel-visioned sprinter dashing towards the finish line, I had seen my goal and now nothing would throw me off my stride. I would travel far and wide to get the chance to bowl one delivery at my hero. I would bowl a ball of such judicious accuracy and deceiving guile it would fox the great Tendulkar.

Amazingly, none of that sounded the least bit farcical to me any more. Tendulkar would be in England for the summer. He would be playing cricket. I might be able to find a way to bowl a few balls at him. It all seemed simple enough. It was no longer an idea, now it was a *project*. I called Rosh back.

“I’m going to do it,” I announced grandly.

“What?”

“Track down Sachin and bowl him out,” I panted excitedly.

“Ha,” Rosh chuckled, dismissively, “don’t be stupid.”

What? Where was this negativity coming from? Not long ago he was convincing me I *had* to do this. I sipped my tea and angrily bit the hockey player/jockey on my biscuit in half.

“What do you mean?” I moaned, meekly.

“Well,” Rosh huffed, derisively, “you’ll never bowl him out. You never even got me out when I was batting as Tendulkar in my back garden. And you never will, either.”

This time I let it go. I knew he was wrong and even if he wasn’t it didn’t matter. The endless viewings of Tendulkar’s 122 at Edgbaston had taught me one thing – besides the fact that Sachin was as close to cricketing infallibility as it got – that eventually, after the highlights reel of thundering shots, it took just one ball to get Sachin out. And get out he did, just like every other batsman. All I needed was the opportunity. If Ronnie Irani could have a go, so could I. No offence, Ronnie.

For the next few days, I pored over hundreds of online videos of Tendulkar’s best innings and read countless quotes from the great and good of the game on the Little Master. One

from Shane Warne, spoken after Tendulkar had clobbered the great leg-spinner to all parts, read:

“I’ll be going to bed having nightmares of Sachin just running down the wicket and belting me back over my head for six.”

For Warne, the thought of Sachin Tendulkar smashing one of his deliveries into the stratosphere inspired nightmares – but for me, just being there, ball in hand, watching Sachin poised in readiness at the other end of a cricket pitch was the stuff of fantasy; it would be a dream just to watch him clobber one of my dreadful deliveries at such close quarters.

Not that he would of course, because I was going to knock his off stump over.

Probably.