

ON
PIETERSEN

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THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

‘In effect, South African cricket threw me out. Under the quota system, every state side had to include four players of colour. Three years ago, they [Natal] signed a coloured player who, like me, bowled spin. I knew that Natal would not play two spinners, so the coloured player would always have an advantage, regardless of ability. I firmly believe teams should be selected on merit alone and I was faced with a situation where my opportunities would be limited for other reasons.’

Kevin Pietersen, quoted in the Independent, 21 July 2006

‘The England team needs to rebuild after the whitewash in Australia. To do that we must invest in our captain Alastair Cook and we must support him in creating a culture in which we can be confident he will have the full support of all players, with everyone pulling in the same direction and able to trust each other. It is for those reasons that we have decided to move on without Kevin Pietersen.’

ECB statement on the sacking of Kevin Pietersen, 9 February 2006

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INTRODUCTION

FOR ANYONE whose job it was to report on the England cricket team, Kevin Pietersen was the gift that just kept on giving. He rarely did anything that was dull. He played some of the greatest innings seen by a man in an England shirt and even when he was struggling, as occasionally happened, he did it in interesting ways. Who would have thought he could have got into such a tangle against run-of-the-mill left-arm spinners? But it was not just what happened on the field that was eventful: he had a habit, which he never quite kicked, of saying, doing (or even once whistling) the wrong thing. As Michael Vaughan once observed, his lips did not work quite as well as his bat. Of course, this only added to the fun of the journalistic fair.

Pietersen himself saw it rather differently: he soon wearied of the trouble, much of which he felt was unwarranted and due to media mischief. In his last couple of years as an England player, he had a little to do with us in the press box as he could. He preferred to speak with allies in radio or television. He blocked us on Twitter. In return, he was held by some in little affection.

Once the 2013-14 tour of Australia started to go badly, it seemed more likely that Pietersen and England would go their separate ways: either he would walk off into a Twenty20-tinted sunset or Andrew Flower would make the case for rebuilding the team without him. When the axing came, though, it was still a depressing moment. Those of us who have spent years watching cricket for a living are pretty hard to impress, but there are a few players who demand attention and Pietersen was certainly one, along with Brian Lara, Shane Warne and Sachin Tendulkar (if only because you knew one billion others were watching him as well).

Perhaps England were right on all counts; maybe he was too much trouble and maybe there were no more great innings left in him. Maybe from his point of view, being sacked was a good career move on the basis that it left people wanting more. But England should be grateful for the good times: the Pietersen era brought them much success and but for him a lot of it would not have happened. It's going to be dull without him.

1

PIETERSEN AND IDENTITY

THE MYERS-BRIGGS Type Indicator is not something you hear much about in sporting circles, but in the increasingly scientific world of professional cricket it is one of many measures the English game has used to profile elite athletes. In essence, it is a means of psychological profiling, or a personality test and is commonly used in business, the armed services and government to help workers define their roles and develop team-work. In a team sport the aim is the same: to work out how divergent personalities might best blend into a smooth-running unit. Based on the theories of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, the test typically requires the respondent to answer more than 80 questions posing one of two possible answers. Based on their responses, four elements of their personality are determined – extraversion/introversion, sensing/intuition, thinking/feeling and judging/perception – and they are allocated one of 16 four-letter ‘types’.

So complex and contradictory is his character that psychologically profiling Kevin Pietersen might be something a lot of us might be keen to do. What on earth would the Myers-Briggs test tell us? Well, we don’t need to speculate too much because Pietersen let slip some of its findings during one of the more revealing interviews he gave.

Pietersen’s exchanges with the media could be frustrating affairs. Sometimes he just didn’t want to be there and offered nothing. At other times, generally when there was a TV camera present and there was an element of ‘live’ performance, he could be forthcoming and entertaining. In the build-up to the Ashes series in England in 2013, he agreed to an interview with BBC Radio; no doubt it helped that the man conducting the interview was a former team-mate, Andrew Flintoff, even if he and Flintoff had not always been bosom-buddies in the dressing-room because of their comparable superstar status. There was still an edginess, but with Flintoff safely in retirement, Pietersen saw a kindred spirit; a man who knew something of what he went through in his daily existence. In these circumstances, he trusted Flintoff and trust – or the absence of it – was always a good starting point when it came to Pietersen and relationships.

Asked how he had felt when he first joined the England dressing-room as a one-day player in the winter of 2004-05, Pietersen replied: ‘I was scared . . . Coming into any environment I think anybody’s scared, anybody’s nervous. I was certainly scared.’ He added: ‘I’m still scared . . . even in circumstances that I’m not comfortable now. I’ve got this reputation of being confident and stuff, yet you go and do all these psychology tests, all these Myers-Briggs tests, and I’m an introvert. I’m very much an introverted person. I like my own company, I like my own family. I don’t really go out . . . The confidence has grown from what I’ve achieved on the cricket field, but I’m not as confident as anybody thinks.’

At first glance, the idea that Pietersen might be scared of anything is extraordinary. He seems – has always seemed – one of the most confident people on the planet. That he describes himself as an introvert is surprising; with a bat in his hand, Pietersen appears to have few self-doubts and often little respect for even the finest bowlers. Fearlessness is a hallmark of his game. Most sportsmen are afraid of failing; it is what drives them on. Not him; at least not in the day-to-day business of batting. He confirmed this during a master-class he gave for Sky TV a few weeks after the Flintoff interview, repeating something he said many times when discussing the risks he took: ‘I’ve never been scared to get out.’ It was pretty evident from the way he batted that this was the case. So if he feared something, it wasn’t the individual death of a dismissal.

I would suggest that fear – specifically the fear of rejection – was actually a big part of Pietersen’s story. ~~Determined to achieve sporting success from an early stage, certainly earlier than anyone else~~ saw it for him, he set himself on a difficult course. Few high-flyers get to the top without experiencing bumps along the way, but Pietersen’s path was highly unconventional and awkward. Certainly it was not a path that could have sat easily with a middle-class boy from Pietermaritzburg, an hour’s drive inland from Durban and a place outsiders liked to disparage as having less life than a graveyard.

His mother was English, his father a God-fearing Dutch-born Afrikaner who demanded discipline and conformity of his four sons. Sunday mass was a ritual and one of Kevin’s two elder brothers, Tony, became a church minister. Pietersen barely drank and lived a clean life. They were a close-knit family but not especially well off, and Pietersen attended Maritzburg College, renowned for producing good white sportsmen, only as a day-boy. He said he developed his fighting spirit as a survival mechanism because he was one of four boys. ‘We all hated losing, whatever we did. We couldn’t even jump in the swimming pool without saying, “Let’s have a race”.’ Another time he said: ‘They [his brothers] battered me. I learned self-belief and how to survive.’ He wasn’t unfamiliar with being caned. He sold his conformity dear, as he always would.

The discipline of his other older brother, Gregg, who swam competitively in his youth, set an early example as to how to approach sport. Kevin was himself a good swimmer, good rugby player and became an obsessive, often solitary, fitness trainer, setting himself to beat all his peers. This became almost an end in itself.

Pietersen’s decision to leave South Africa for a career in English cricket is one of the best-known facts about him. It was, after all, the defining act of his life. Without it, he would never have been the cricketer he became, and would never have attracted the publicity that has rarely left his side since. What is less well chronicled is the early heartache that the move brought him and the extent to which his early struggle for acceptance shaped his personality.

The few weeks he spent playing club cricket in England in 2000, and the English summers that followed at Nottinghamshire, put him in precisely the kind of unfamiliar environments that he told Flintoff made him feel most awkward. At one point he was sufficiently homesick that his parents flew over to support him. But if he was to convince people of his worth as a cricketer, he had little choice but to clear these emotional hurdles.

In Nottingham, his first billet was a bed and breakfast. ‘It was very difficult at first,’ he recalled in an interview with the *Sunday Times* in 2005. ‘I was told that practice would be at ten o’clock next morning and I remember jumping in the car and driving around Nottingham and getting lost trying to find things. I was a young South African kid who didn’t know what to expect, chucked into a house with a lady I didn’t know. I was a long way from my family and couldn’t talk to anyone about anything. I’d go to bed by myself and my head would just spin. “What’s tomorrow going to bring?” I thought, “I have to make a success of this. There is no going back.” Adapt or die.’

Perhaps only Pietersen still believes that he left South Africa solely because he was disillusioned with the quota system that insisted each provincial team had to include several cricketers of colour. It was a controversial system, it was not popular with many people in the game, and it was eventually abandoned, but nor can it be purely blamed for Pietersen’s inability to break into the KwaZulu-Natal side.

The tipping point – according to Pietersen’s version of events – came when the KwaZulu-Natal selectors chose Gulam Bodi, of Indian extraction and like Pietersen a batsman who bowled spin, ahead of him. Pietersen was aggrieved and responded to the decision by petulantly throwing a water-bottle across the dressing-room. Dennis Carlstein, who was present, said: ‘Kevin was upset and moaned a lot. He was never one for hiding his feelings. In that way, he was quite immature.’

Pietersen, aged 20, phoned his father in tears. He was angry because he knew – *knew* – that Gulam

wasn't as good as him, but this was not a view shared by many within KwaZulu-Natal cricket. Bodi was a good all-rounder who, in the months after Pietersen walked away, scored his maiden first-class century and took a career-best six for 63. A few months later he was called up by South Africa as a replacement on a tour of West Indies (unfortunately he was injured before departure). In 2007 Bodi was included in South Africa's World Twenty20 squad. Pietersen obviously went on to much greater things, but back in 2000-01 Bodi's preferment was far from the travesty it was sometimes presented as.

The crucial point was that at the time Pietersen quit KwaZulu-Natal he had already received an offer to play for Nottinghamshire through their director of cricket Clive Rice, himself a South African and a man contemptuous of the way politics had taken over cricket in his country (Pietersen's grumbles about quotas were largely a parroting of Rice's views). Pietersen's original terms of a three-year contract were incredibly generous given that Rice had seen little of Pietersen and was acting on no more than a hunch that he could cope in English conditions. Rice had heard of Pietersen's heavy run-scoring for Cannock in the Birmingham and District Premier League, an assignment Pietersen had got by chance only after a first-choice signing pulled out.

Rice's instinct proved accurate but he took a huge gamble which few other county coaches would have dared take. Thus, when Pietersen sought various assurances about his future from KwaZulu-Natal officials and even from Ali Bacher, the then head of South African cricket, he was doing so from a position of some strength. Unsurprisingly, they were unwilling to back this near-nonentity to the same extent as Rice; indeed, in financial terms, it would have been very difficult for them to do so. Pietersen was paid £15,000 in his first year at Trent Bridge, almost four times the value of the junior contract that KwaZulu-Natal put under his nose as their best offer. Graham Ford, South Africa's national coach at the time and a family friend whom the Pietersens consulted as to Kevin's best way forward, said later that the choice was a 'no-brainer': he had to choose Nottinghamshire.

It was not a risk-free deal though. Thanks to the British passport he owned through his mother, Pietersen would be able to play in England as a local rather than as the one designated overseas player each county was allowed – this was part of the attraction of the arrangement to Rice – but he could no longer play in South Africa as a local as well. He could pursue a career in one place or the other, but not both. It was actually a wider rule governing cricket – that no player could appear as a local in two countries concurrently – that therefore determined the course of Pietersen's career, rather than South Africa's quota system.

Rice's offer may have been one he could not turn down, but that did not make the move to England to start a new life any easier for a young man whose existence to that point had been pretty sheltered. All the indications are that he was far from comfortable at the prospect of emigrating. Convincing himself that he had no choice – that South Africa had in effect rejected him – may have smoothed the bitter pill. 'In his own mind, his country had let him down,' Peter Roebuck wrote of Pietersen in 2008. 'Of course it was an over-simplification, but it has been a powerful motivating force.'

Only after his successes began piling up for Nottinghamshire did his statements about one day playing for England – for whom he could qualify after four years of residence – grow more assured. He admitted in his interview with Flintoff that when he first came over he was trying to pursue a dream of playing professional sport, not international sport, and at the end of his first season at Nottinghamshire he had a business card made up: 'Kevin Pietersen: Professional Cricketer.' On one level his talk about playing for England might have sounded presumptuous – it *did* sound presumptuous – but on another it bound him to live up to his big words. He had to rise, or face ridicule. Adapt or die.

PIETERSEN often gave the impression that he did not care whether he was liked, but this was not the

case. He did not always endear himself to people by speaking his mind with a bluntness that left Englishmen uneasy, and by his own admission he was not easy to get to know at this stage (was he ever?), but he certainly came to England eager for acceptance. Yet he got the opposite: downright hostility. This probably had less to do with him (although a three-year contract on the back of negligible evidence can't have helped) and more to do with where he came from. Home-grown English players had grown weary of foreigners, especially South Africans, and especially those armed with British passports, coming over and taking up positions that could be filled by locals. And so the Nottinghamshire players made Pietersen stand up in the dressing-room with Australian leg-spinner Stuart MacGill, the club's overseas player, and sing the words to the British national anthem, something Pietersen managed without difficulty, much to their surprise. Pietersen said the team put him through other 'tests' too, while those opponents hurling abuse certainly did not wait to find out whether they liked him as a bloke. Such a climate was hardly conducive to developing friendships.

Pietersen admitted to being shocked at the level of hostility. 'As a kid I had always supported England because it is where my mother is from,' he said in a newspaper interview shortly before he made his England debut in 2004. 'My hero was Rob Andrew and during the 1995 World Cup in South Africa I used to wear an England rugby shirt. I copped a lot of flak for this, but nothing like the flak I received when I first arrived here [England]. Wherever I played I was being abused for being a South African. Opponents would say that they had never met a decent South African and that I wasn't good enough and they accused me of coming over here and stealing their money. My first game in England was a friendly against Derbyshire, and we all know what Dominic Cork is like when he starts to carry on. I used to walk out to bat, knowing I was on my own.'

In another interview at around the same time, he said there had been occasions when he wondered whether it might have been easier to return home. Nor was the antipathy confined to the cricketers; the wider public was also increasingly sceptical at the number of imports playing under flags of convenience.

Two things emerged. One was that Pietersen realised that if he was not to return to South Africa a beaten man, he had to create the right mentality: unless he believed in himself, no one else was going to. Flying halfway round the world to a B&B in Nottingham had taught him that. Any doubts as to whether he was good enough were buried deep within himself, never to resurface. 'Confidence in sport is everything,' was a phrase never far from his lips. He created what was almost an alter ego: a brash exterior topped off with a line in haircuts whose exoticism marched in step with the growing flamboyance of his stroke-play. The nearer he got to the controversy of a debut for his adopted country, the more outlandish his appearance became. Afraid? How could he be when he had the nerve to dress so outrageously? No wonder Ed Smith, years later, called him a 'genius of self-belief'.

The second thing he must have noticed was that when he got into controversy – as he had simply by leaving South Africa in the way that he did – it brought out the best in him. He may well have been scared when he found himself in uncomfortable situations, but it transpired that those uncomfortable situations could produce the sort of creative tension on which he thrived. 'He is at his most vulnerable when he has succeeded in proving himself,' Andrew Strauss, who captained Pietersen in 46 of his 104 Tests, wrote in 2013. 'If he is happy and comfortable, away from the limelight, he starts to resemble lesser mortals . . . Pietersen's history – moving from South Africa, frequently changing teams and a willingness to court controversy – suggests he knows this. If he has nothing to prove then he loses his edge.'

So, if creative tension was good for him, why worry if that tension arose in the first place? It became a vindication of itself: he could behave as he liked because even if he upset people there was always a good chance of redeeming himself. After a very public parting of the ways with Nottinghamshire in 2004, Pietersen had no trouble backing up his assertion that he needed to leave

because he was no longer progressing; his game immediately went up another level. Many of his most brilliant performances came when he was most troubled, or most troublesome, as evidenced by his astonishing century at Headingley in 2012 at the time of his falling-out with the England dressing-room.

Even so, it must have been a lonely, scary path in those early days: Pietersen alone with his dreams taking on a sceptical world. Had he any real concept of his place in it? Was he South African or English? Was he really this brash, confident, hard-working youngster bashing people's ears as to how good he was, or was he the polite, respectful boy who lowered his eyes while the family said grace before meals, and was nervous of what his peers really thought of him? Rather than ever being answered, these confusing thoughts also got buried deep beneath the surface of a personality that acquired any number of baroque ornamentations as his achievements on the cricket field grew – the diamond ear-rings and the tattoos, as well as the various manifestations of dyed hair. 'Anyone that arrives with blue hair has got to be able to play a bit,' said Michael Vaughan, Pietersen's first England captain. 'To be able to create that external image and then play to the standard which he did takes some doing.'

It is hardly surprising, given the circumstances, that Pietersen proved better at solving problems in his own area of expertise – batting – than at inter-personal relationships. As he said, he is an introvert. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator defines the introvert as someone who acts only after reflecting, and who needs to rebuild their energy through quiet time alone, away from activity. Although he was often castigated for choosing the wrong shot at the wrong time, Pietersen's success was based on a careful study of batting, a study that led him frequently to take calculated risks – often very successfully – and devise new strokes to deal with particular problems. Everything was underpinned by sound principles. Having thought through the consequences, he was not afraid to tear up coaching convention if he concluded it was the best thing to do: only someone who had given the matter a great deal of thought could have batted as unorthodoxly but as productively as he did. While many of his public pronouncements appeared clumsy and misjudged, he could speak with great clarity and intelligence of the science of batsmanship. It was, after all, a subject he knew inside out. He had an analytical mind and sought depth of knowledge rather than breadth of knowledge. All this categorises him as an introvert according to Myers-Briggs.

So much peripheral stuff was attached to his life – the celebrity, the controversies, the dramas – that it was easy to overlook his passion and obsession for his craft. He was often asked what motivated him, and his standard reply was that he was driven to get up every day to try and improve. Fielding and physical drills could be a bore, he conceded, but scoring runs – well, that was something he just wanted to keep on doing. Vaughan was immediately struck by the thoroughness of Pietersen's approach when he joined England. 'He trained harder than any other England player and [had] this kind of professional nature of looking at the opposition. He really analysed the kind of bowlers that we were going to be facing and the kind of shots that he was going to be requiring to play well against them.' He was a batting junkie.

It cannot have been easy when simple talent created a gulf between him and his colleagues. Certainly he sometimes found it hard to comprehend why others could not do what he did. 'We would be sat on the balcony during our innings and Kevin would be saying, "He should have pulled that ball," or "He should have driven that ball",' said Jason Gallian, who captained Pietersen at Nottinghamshire (and spectacularly fell out with him). 'It would frustrate him and he would be more than happy to tell you what the batsman should be doing. He expected other people to be able to do what he could do, which is sometimes impossible.'

After scoring a rapid 61 that almost took Hampshire to victory in his first Championship match for them, he walked back into the visitors' dressing-room at Hove, took off his pads and sat down between

Alan Mullally and Shane Warne. He said: 'Hey Al, I'm pretty good, aren't I?' Was this a remark prompted by sheer big-headedness or a desire for acceptance? Mullally was in no doubt: 'Kev had his insecurities, perhaps about not being born in this country, and he overcame that with arrogance and brashness . . . I can remember thinking at the time it was just him wanting to be loved, and being insecure.'

Mullally told his new team-mate to 'pull his head in', but a few weeks later Pietersen behaved in almost identical fashion after scoring a lustrous 91 off just 65 balls to take England to victory over Australia in a one-day international at Bristol. On that occasion he returned to the dressing-room to announce: 'Not bad, am I?' No doubt his England team-mates were grateful for the victory he had just delivered, but this was hardly a comment likely to endear him to a group still coming to terms with this new phenomenon in their midst.

By no stretch could Pietersen have been called a collectivist. He did not need interaction in the way many people do and this may have set him further at odds with the typical mood of a dressing-room. As he said to Flintoff: 'I like my own company, I like my own family. I don't really go out . . .'

He also told Flintoff that when he batted, he had to focus on his own game completely if it was to function properly. 'From my side, when I bat, I have to solely concentrate on what I'm doing to get my batting right,' he said. 'Then I'll do whatever I can to help the other batter to make him more composed.' This account was confirmed by Geraint Jones's anecdote about a mid-pitch exchange he had with Pietersen when they were batting together: 'Can't talk now, buddy . . . Too pumped.'

It is one of cricket's charms that it can accommodate diverse personalities and it would be wrong to condemn someone who doesn't conform to the norm as a dangerous maverick or selfishly wrapped up in his own concerns. Was it wrong that Pietersen wanted to drive a different sponsored car, or wear different sponsored shoes, from the standard ones offered to England players? Was he undermining the team ethic or was it a reasonable request from a man wanting to express his individuality?

Doubtful of being able to gain acceptance by conventional means, Pietersen perhaps sought approval by other avenues: by getting the Three Lions tattooed on his left bicep, by acquiring celebrity friends, building up more than 1.75 million Twitter followers, and earning more money than anyone else in English cricket. It was as though he was saying not 'That's how good I am,' but 'That's how much someone loves me.'

To Vaughan, love was the key with Pietersen: 'He needs a little bit of an arm round him. These superstars . . . those with all the lyrics, generally aren't as confident as their lyrics would suggest they are. Kev's no different to that. You need to manage these guys. You need to love them.' Much was made of Pietersen's marriage to Jessica Taylor, a pop star with the band Liberty X, but he was insistent that they had little interest in living up to the tabloids' wish for them to be the Posh 'n' Beautiful of cricket. He described Jessica as a 'very shy girl' and they declined to sell photographs of their wedding in December 2007. 'We're not interested in all the nonsense,' he said. 'People say I'm a showman and that I like flashy things . . . No. I like being successful.'

Surely only a lack of confidence can explain why, when Pietersen was promoting his first autobiography in the summer of 2006, he chose to take along with him to a book-signing session in London his agent, his parents, two brothers and a sister-in-law. 'He looks over at his entourage at least six times a minute, like a boy in a nativity play,' noted Rachel Cooke in the *Observer*.

Relationships tended to hit trouble when Pietersen could not see love, only a grievance. He believed he was wrongly manoeuvred out of the England captaincy after voicing doubts about the coaching style of Peter Moores, doubts that some senior players appeared to share. When he lobbied the ECB and England team management in 2012 to be allowed more time to play in the Indian Premier League – he had just signed a deal for \$2 million with Delhi Daredevils which depended on him playing a full season to get all the money – he felt he was engaged in a battle that needed fighting, and not just for

himself. They declined to accommodate him.

He was also upset in both instances – with the talks over his relationship with Moores and talks over his England contract – that details reached the press. With the contract situation still rumbling on in the summer of 2012, he was stung that a lampooning Twitter account turned out to have been created by a friend of Stuart Broad's and was being followed by several England players. 'It's tough being m in this dressing-room,' he famously said.

It was with that problem at its height that he lurched into one of his most catastrophic errors – there were a few – by sending text messages to South Africa opposition players apparently complaining about his captain Andrew Strauss. Pietersen had sometimes appeared happier mixing with opponents than his own team and he had got to know some of the South Africans during the IPL. He once described Australians as his favourite people because they shared his outlook on life. The South Africans and Pietersen insisted the text messages were merely banter, but once they came to light it was inevitable he would be disciplined. Strauss later wrote that the text affair was caused by the IPL and Pietersen 'falling out of love with the England team environment'; he said Pietersen had 'felt unloved and uncared for'. Whether or not Pietersen was justified in those feelings, it was revealing that that was his state of mind; so much for the teak-hard self-confidence.

Although Pietersen was soon recalled – under new captain Alastair Cook, Strauss having retired – was always going to be difficult to repair relations with the other senior players and Andy Flower, the team director. Strauss said that a chasm had been opened up between them. When Pietersen was deemed to have transgressed again during the catastrophic Ashes tour of 2013-14, he found that neither Flower, Cook nor – apparently – the senior players were prepared to come to his defence. This time he was not disciplined but sacked altogether from the team.

'We must support him [Cook] in creating a culture in which we can be confident he will have the full support of all players, with everyone pulling in the same direction and able to trust each other,' a ECB statement read. Pietersen took the news badly, allegedly cutting short a meeting with Cook and Paul Downton, the managing director of England cricket, before the reasons could be fully explained. The following day Pietersen posted on Twitter a picture of himself leaving the field at Sydney in the final Ashes Test of the winter: 'So sad that this will now be the last time I leave a field in an England shirt . . . incredibly.'

Why couldn't Pietersen rub along with people better? Why did his lips not work as well as his bat? It seemed baffling that he could not think more carefully before he spoke or display more diplomacy. Iain O'Brien, a recently retired New Zealand Test player, offered an interesting view on the Cricinfo website shortly after the text scandal. He suggested that dysfunctional dressing-room relationships were not that uncommon and that he himself had sometimes behaved in an aloof and detached manner not because that was how he really was but because he feared the judgement of his peers: 'You like me, don't you? I am pretty good, aren't I?'

'There is a very easy image to conjure of an arrogant sportsman: sunglasses on, chest out, tattoos, and a "you can't touch me" strut . . . Is that really what's going on behind the lenses? Behind my sunglasses I was always analysing . . . You can just analyse, be uncomfortable but safe in your own little world. As long as I knew what people thought of me – like me or not – I was more comfortable . . . Subconsciously you'd turn people against you, so at least you could control one part of the relationship. There are so many who just don't know how to handle themselves around their sport. They are good enough to play, and play for a long time. Some even get the Three Lions tattooed on themselves and strut around with egos, sometimes acting like they are bigger than the game. Or are they? Is there more to it than the simplistic "arrogant knob" label? Is it self-confidence? Is it pure arrogance? Or is it the exact opposite – a lack of self-confidence, a bluff, an "I just want to be liked but don't know how to get people to like me"?' O'Brien knew what it was like to feel that life was

tough 'being me'.

Perhaps by the time of the ill-fated winter of 2013-14, Pietersen was simply tired of the battle for acceptance, tired of the pretending. Perhaps he had always known, deep down, that what he had done, by turning his back on South Africa and pledging allegiance to England, was irreconcilable and would end, ultimately, in betrayal. The beginning of his story foretold the end.

2

PIETERSEN AS SAVIOUR

PIETERSEN COULD be forgiven for thinking he was important. After all, England were very keen to have him. In fact, they couldn't wait to get him in their side. They picked him for an A team tour two years into his four-year qualification and even named him for his first full England tour – a one-day tour of Zimbabwe – before that period was up. He officially became eligible for selection for England on 27 October 2004 and took the field for the first time in an international at Harare Sports Club on 28 November. There was a delay in him receiving his first shirt as the makers originally mis-spelt his name 'Pieterston'. It didn't happen again.

The previous year, when Pietersen's consistently brilliant performances for Nottinghamshire made it apparent that the matter was going to be of relevance, exactly when his residential qualification would be complete was the cause of some confusion. The regulations demanded that a person seeking to qualify should reside in the country for 210 days a year for four straight years, but logging such attendance was rarely easy. Asked for clarification by a newspaper reporter in July 2003, the ECB stated, 'Standard practice would be for Pietersen to qualify from the start of an English season, in this case 2005. But the registration committee could consider an appeal for him to be available immediately after the end of next season.' In the event, he was deemed free to play for England from the earlier date.

England needed players like Pietersen. There was no sure way of knowing if he would be good enough for the top level until he was tried, but if he was he was plainly going to play the sort of attacking game that few other batsmen in the country could provide. At the time that Pietersen started his county career, England's Test team was only just starting to shake off years of mediocrity. The 1990s had been a bleak decade. The country simply could not produce enough good bowlers, or keep fit those that were good enough, to assemble a potent attack, while many of their opponents were armed with some of the greatest bowlers of all time. West Indies had Courtney Walsh and Curtly Ambrose, South Africa Allan Donald and Shaun Pollock, Pakistan Wasim Akram and Waqar Younis and Australia Shane Warne and Glenn McGrath. Unsurprisingly England's batsmen struggled to cope.

Things started to improve once Nasser Hussain and Duncan Fletcher teamed up as captain and coach in 1999 and central contracts were introduced. West Indies were beaten in a series for the first time in 31 years and two series were won in Asia in the winter of 2000-01, but there was still no toppling the Australian ziggurat. Pietersen's first summer at Nottinghamshire coincided with England losing a home Ashes series 4-1; 18 months later in 2002-03 the result was replicated Down Under, England's eighth straight Ashes series defeat. The problems posed by Warne and McGrath seemed insuperable. World Cups had also become routine exercises in English humiliation: all the flair and firepower that other leading sides seemed to possess in abundance was all too evidently missing from their game.

When Michael Vaughan replaced Hussain as Test captain in July 2003, he and Fletcher began plotting for the 2005 Ashes. In Vaughan's first series, South Africa were held to a 2-2 draw, a scoreline that flattered England somewhat, but then in 2004 the components fell into place for a menacing four-man pace attack of Steve Harmison, Andrew Flintoff, Simon Jones and Matthew Hoggard. That year England played 13 Tests and won 11.

That left the main problem a creaking middle order, with the clock running down on the careers of Hussain, Mark Butcher and Graham Thorpe. Ian Bell was seen as a great batsman in the making but he

was young and, like many English cricketers of his age, diffident and unsure how to impose himself on international bowlers. Australia, past masters at bullying opponents and especially England, weren't going to be frightened of Bell and he could form only a part of the answer. Vaughan and Fletcher were on the look-out for people who weren't going to take a backward step. On the face of it Nottinghamshire's swaggering 6ft 4in batsman appeared to fit the blueprint.

Pietersen did well in Zimbabwe, scoring 104 runs for once out, and when Flintoff was withdrawn with an injury from a seven-match one-day series in South Africa it presented the perfect excuse to get Pietersen back in the team (Fletcher said Pietersen would have been added to the squad anyway after how he had played in Zimbabwe). Pietersen was originally spared selection for South Africa on the grounds that it might heap too much pressure on him, asking him to return to his homeland so soon. Vaughan and Fletcher, having got to know him better, now reckoned he was worth the risk. He did brilliantly, scoring three hundreds, one of them off 69 balls, the fastest for England in any one-day international. Back in England he played equally breathtakingly to win a one-day match against Australia in Bristol – the time he went back into the dressing-room and declared, 'Not bad, am I?'

'He played well straight away,' Vaughan recalled. 'Some of those knocks in that one-day series in South Africa were quite incredible. We played poorly as a team. He stood out hugely as an individual. Then we got to 2005. For two years we'd been planning to arrive in this [Ashes] series with a different mindset and a different set of players, younger players with no baggage from the past and a fearless and aggressive approach. I saw the way Pietersen had played in those one-dayers [against South Africa] and after the first century I walked up to Fletch and said he's got to play in the Ashes. He's perfect to take on Warne and McGrath, who had been our nemesis for so many series. They were the two we had to try to play a little bit better, at least more positively and score off them.' Vaughan and Fletcher saw Pietersen as the man that could do that. They dumped Thorpe, a veteran of 100 Tests, and brought him in. England had played seven Tests since Pietersen became eligible for selection. Over the next nine years, he would never again be left out of the Test team on grounds of merit.

ANY SPORTS team that is used to regular troughs in form will be familiar with the concept of the Saviour, one man who at a stroke can sort all the ills and deliver on the greatest wishes. Ian Botham did much to keep the idea prominent in English cricket mythology by turning an Ashes series on its head in 1981, but for sheer potency it was hard to beat the Saviour who arrived only after a prolonged period of waiting and anticipation.

Of course, not every proclaimed Saviour lives up to the billing. Few cricketers made a more eagerly anticipated England debut than the Zimbabwe-born Graeme Hick, who spent seven years qualifying under the rules in place during his time. Five years into his seven-year wait, questions were raised by an intrepid journalist at *The Times* – me, actually – as to whether he had actually fulfilled the 210-days-a-year rule, but a specially convened meeting of the Test and County Cricket Board (as the ECU then was) decided all was in order. England had reason to be even more keen to get Hick on board in 1991 than they would be later to acquire Pietersen; since triumphing in Australia in 1986-87 they had won only two series in nine.

It turned out the Saviour's feet were made of clay. Hick spent his qualification period pulverising county attacks, but he was a tall man with a front-foot game whose methods proved ill-suited to international cricket, where he was peppered with precisely targeted short-pitched bowling. Temperamentally, too, he was unsuited to withstand the aggression of opponents intent on not letting him settle in the Test arena; confrontation was simply not part of his nature. He came and went for ten years before England dropped him once and for all in 2001, so his case was still relatively fresh in everyone's mind at the time Pietersen prepared to make his entrance.

When Hick first set his sights on playing for England, his native country of Zimbabwe did not have

Test match status, so his decision to settle in England was received with a fair amount of sympathy. He was a fine player and deserved the chance to test himself at the highest level. Even so, as a character he inspired little warmth among English cricket supporters, especially as he repeatedly flattered to deceive. Those who had been so keen to recruit him were left looking grubbily expedient. Hick spent 25 years in England, but after retiring emigrated to Australia. There were echoes of the case in the mid-1980s of Zola Budd, a South African middle-distance runner who was brought to England by the *Daily Mail* in order that she could circumvent an anti-apartheid sports ban and run for Britain instead. Her career for her second home failed to meet expectations and proved short lived.

By the time Pietersen was closing in on an England cap, people were not so easily fooled by sports men and women declaring undying love for their adopted country. County cricket was awash with foreigners, many of them South Africans, who happened to own a British passport through their ancestors, playing as 'locals'; in May 2003 the Kolpak ruling, which granted workers from countries with trade agreements with the European Union the same rights as an EU worker, opened the door further to overseas cricketers. For many of them, their aspirations stopped at finding regular employment with a county. Others simply used county cricket as a training ground before returning home. In the mid-1990s Andrew Symonds, who had learnt his cricket in Australia but had been born in England, professed an ambition to play for England, spent a few seasons in county cricket playing as 'local', only to switch allegiance back to Australia when they were ready to pick him. He was, it transpired, a 'fair dinkum Aussie' after all. Cynicism was rife.

To his credit, Pietersen was ready for the fuss that surrounded his qualification, certainly much more so than Hick had been. He was 24 years of age when he first played for England, a year younger than Hick when he became eligible, and coped with the pressure and expectation much more easily. Like Hick he was a big man, which potentially meant problems against the short ball, but he was a more confident person, and smarter too. He was eager to solve any problems that might arise. He knew he would be under pressure when he entered Test cricket and knew he would be targeted in the same way Hick had been, all the more so because of how Hick buckled under the onslaught. But he could see the advantages to the position he was in.

Interviewed shortly before leaving for his first England tour, he told the *Daily Mail*: 'When Graem Hick qualified for England, the team weren't doing as well as they are now and he was seen as the saviour. For the last three years so many people have said, "There's so much pressure on you." But that's not the case. England are doing well and it's a matter of trying to break into the team. I'm not being seen as a saviour. It's a fantastic position to be in. There is pressure to perform because of what I have achieved but I just have to knuckle down and not worry about it. It's easier to come into a winning team anyway.'

What was not easier was the general hostility directed towards him almost from the day he arrived at Trent Bridge. This was not confined to the home-grown players on the county circuit. The media were also on the offensive. Pietersen had not yet completed his first month with Nottinghamshire when David Lloyd, who had coached England from 1996 to 1999 and was now a Sky TV pundit, criticised counties for scouring the world for flag-of-convenience players holding EC passports. Nottinghamshire's coach Clive Rice defended his signing as a *bona fide* British citizen. 'I wonder if these whingers will change their tune when Pietersen is in the England side after qualifying for selection . . . He's come here to make a commitment to English cricket and he's in our side [at Nottinghamshire] because he's the best player available to do the job.' Lloyd resumed his attack when the possibility of Pietersen leaving Notts surfaced two years later, saying on television that his next move should be to Western Province in Cape Town. Pietersen heard the remark and laughed.

Christopher Martin-Jenkins, writing in *The Times* towards the end of Pietersen's first season, saw a parallel with the career of Tony Greig, a strikingly tall, blond all-rounder who came over from South

Africa in the late 1960s: ‘The powerful Kevin Pietersen has . . . made an impact not dissimilar to that of Tony Greig when he first burst on to the English scene at Hove in preparation for a vividly successful Test career as an all-rounder for England. Pietersen, too, has declared his intention to qualify not just for county cricket but for England, a process that will take him four years. There will be those who seek to shorten the period, just as there were with Graeme Hick in the days when a change of nationality took longer. Of Pietersen it will be asked, however, as it was of Greig in John Woodcock’s famous phrase, whether he is English through and through.’

Recollections of Greig were awkward for everyone, because after his promotion to the England captaincy in 1975 he ‘betrayed’ the English game and his post by not only signing up to join Kerry Packer’s World Series Cricket but recruiting other English cricketers to join the enterprise. Deemed to have put lucre before loyalty – no matter that cricketers were paid footling amounts at the time – Greig was sacked and never played for England again. There were still those in and around the English game who felt that such behaviour was all that could be expected from people who were not ‘English through and through’. The concern was there from the very start: Pietersen might be good enough to play for England, but might he not one day betray them?

Before his fall from grace, Greig was a popular and charismatic figure, but he like Pietersen spoke a little too plainly for English tastes and landed himself in political hot water for suggesting his England side might make West Indies ‘grovel’. Pietersen was no less brash and no less tactlessly arrogant. In England, people preferred to wait for others to tell them how good they were rather than proclaim it themselves. But was all this really any more than the rub of cultural difference? English cricket seemed to want to have it both ways: cherry-pick the best foreign talent, then complain when that talent made decisions based on what was best economically for itself, rather than on an abstract notion of patriotism that simply could not apply to someone born and bred thousands of miles away.

The nearer Pietersen got to playing for England, the higher the temperature of the debate rose. In June 2003, a week after Pietersen had taken a double-century off Warwickshire, Kevin Mitchell wrote in the *Observer*: ‘There is a small time bomb ticking in English cricket and his name is Kevin Pietersen . . . Claiming he has been rejected in his own country, he makes no secret of his desire now to play for England . . . You can only assume either that he thought it would be easier to play for England than for South Africa . . . or that, as a professional sportsman, he saw more clout in the pound than the rand. However, while it would be personally satisfying for him, it would be less than ideal for the game if Pietersen were to play for England . . .’

‘Zola Budd and the *Daily Mail* have a lot to answer for . . . It’s not that genuine immigrants shouldn’t aspire to represent their new country; that is a desirable aspect of integration and you only have to look at the complexion of any of our national teams to see the lasting benefits of the process. It is different, however, when athletes use a country for their short-term needs.’

Andrew Strauss, who captained Pietersen in more Tests than anyone and ironically was himself the son of South African parents, though he was raised in England from an early age, described Pietersen’s relationship with England as having been like ‘an illicit affair’.

It was hard for Pietersen to convince his peers of his Englishness given how differently they interpreted things. Nishant Joshi described in *All Out Cricket* in February 2014 how he had attended a two-day academy trial at Trent Bridge in the early 2000s in front of numerous coaches and several Nottinghamshire players. Joshi worked out who Pietersen was from his ‘ridiculous, faux-hawk hair’. He said that the best bowler at the trial was a short, chubby Pakistani boy, the youngest triallist in attendance. He had come down from Edinburgh with his father and slept in their car overnight. At first glance it looked like he might provide some easy pickings, but it transpired he could bowl. ‘He was ripping leg-spin that was from another planet,’ Joshi wrote. ‘Flippers, googlies, sliders, all bowled by a kid who was unmistakably out of place. Pietersen took an interest, asking how he gripped it, and the

watched with befuddlement as batsmen were castled and lost balance against the spiteful bite that was being extracted. The boy did not make the cut. I overheard Pietersen saying that he had vouched for him vehemently, but the other coaches had vetoed it on account of his lack of fitness. He just *could not understand* how such an obvious talent . . . could be ignored in this country.'

Pietersen took the fuss over his switch of allegiance in his stride, as he had to. There was nothing he could do about the fact that the British media could use his immigrant status against him any time they liked (which was often). As he once told them: 'You guys are always going to make me the bad guy.' And he was capable of making light of the situation, even if they could not. He once quipped to Australia's Ed Cowan in 2010: 'I am not fucking English, Eddie. I am South African. I just work here.' Cowan recorded the conversation in a diary he published and was embarrassed when the anecdote made news in British papers that happily took Pietersen's words at face value. 'He said it as a joke,' Cowan protested. Pietersen, in fact, never showed any signs of wanting to return to South Africa on a permanent basis, marrying an English girl and settling in Chelsea.

Pietersen brought more trouble on himself in respect of the country he had left behind. Perhaps he felt he needed to convince people about his anger over the quota system. Whatever the reason, he said several times he was keen to see South Africa's cricketers 'nailed'; he said the same thing about their rugby players at the 2003 World Cup, which England went on to win. This only assured him of an even more hostile reception when he played in England's one-day series in South Africa in 2004-05. Graeme Smith, the South Africa captain, spoke unflatteringly about him. Pietersen knew, too, what the crowds would be like because he had seen what happened to Clyde Rathbone, a rugby union wing and former South Africa Under-21 captain who returned to his native Durban to play in a tri-nation for Australia. 'Every single time he touched the ball he was booed,' Pietersen recalled. 'When he ran on to the field he got booed. They absolutely nailed him.'

Even so, the greeting awaiting Pietersen at Johannesburg's Wanderers Stadium took him aback. He fielded first in the circle but Vaughan later dropped him back to the boundary in front of beer-fuelled Afrikaners who let him know precisely what they thought of him. 'It was cut-throat stuff,' he recalled. 'My parents were in shock – my mother was crying when they were swearing and shouting "traitor". People were hysterical.' When he walked out to bat, Vaughan, his partner, noticed the effect the booing had: 'He was shaking. He was clearly shaken up and I could understand why.' Such was the noise that Pietersen and Vaughan could barely hear each other speak and when Pietersen missed his first ball from Andre Nel the crowd went berserk. But urged by Vaughan to watch the ball he survived unbeaten on 22. Pietersen, in fact, quickly came to relish the attention and in his next five innings scored three spectacular hundreds. When he fielded on the boundary in Port Elizabeth and the crowd got after him, he turned and cupped his hand to his ear as though he couldn't hear what was being said. 'As much as he'll say he didn't like it, I think he loved it,' Vaughan said. 'The crowd were all about him.'

Pietersen invited further animosity by continuing to trash South Africa during newspaper interviews in 2005. 'When will he learn that you cannot change the past?' asked columnist Mark Keohane. 'You cannot wish it away. Kevin, please understand that you are not English. You don't speak like them, you don't act like them and you aren't one of them. They'll entertain your dramatics while you're scoring 158 runs to win them the Ashes, but they won't think twice to send you back to county cricket if it all goes to pot in the next eighteen months.'

Pietersen was unperturbed. In an autobiography published in the summer of 2006 he described South Africa's cricket system as 'bullshit', adding: 'It created an artificial team and that will never do anything to encourage the racial integration of cricket in South Africa.' He also described how Smith had had a go at him while he was batting at Johannesburg, the only one of the South Africans to do so. 'I had never met him before, but I thought he was an absolute muppet . . . I found his attitude pretty

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