

Neil Dansie

Neil Dansie is a former batsman for South Australia and was Todmorden's professional in 1955 and 56. This interview was conducted on his visit to Todmorden in August 2004

What are you earliest cricketing memories?

I used to go as a very young boy to watch our team called 'The Dansies' which was made up of my father, uncles, cousins etc.. At the end of their practices I would get a little bat. They used to throw me some balls underarm.

Would you describe yourself as a natural sportsman?

I think I could have been good at most sports but not truly outstanding at any of them. I played Australian Rules Football for three years for Norwood, 1946-49, but I gave that up to concentrate on my cricket. I also played 'A' Grade baseball.

Did you find that any of the baseball skills helped you in cricket?

Throwing. Baseball taught me to throw fast and flat – and I suppose the batting helped my hand-eye co-ordination. It was practise at keeping your eye on the ball.

How did you come to the attention of the South Australian selectors?

I had made a few runs in 'A' Grade and they had a look at me in the nets and then they selected me to play against New South Wales. That was in 1949. I went out to bat at 84 for 5 and made 36. I remember that Keith Miller was in the opposition and when I had got a few he walked past between overs and said to me: 'Keep going. You're batting well.' That's hard to believe from an opponent these days, isn't it? That generosity of spirit started to disappear when all the money came into the game.

Who were the other famous Australian players you encountered at the start of your career?

All of the 1948 team which toured England – Don Bradman, Arthur Morris, Ray Lindwall – all great players.

How did you come to hear of Todmorden's interest in you?

Arthur Richardson had played over here in the 1930s [for Bacup and Burnley] and had contacts in the Lancashire League. I was approached through him.

There is a famous story about Arthur Richardson's first appearance at Todmorden. He was overwhelmed by the scenery and stopped Todmorden professional Fred Root as he ran up to bowl so that he could admire the view. He declared it the most beautiful place he had ever played cricket and had great difficulty concentrating on his batting. That's right. Arthur told me it was a beautiful ground and a good place to play cricket.

How did you get here?

I was due to come by boat, but I was ill and taken into hospital – tubes coming out of me and all sorts – and by the time I got out I had to come by plane which was a lot quicker. It took two or three days to get here.

Had you been to England before?

No.

What were your impressions of Todmorden as a town?

Beautiful scenery and lots of industry. Most people seemed to work in the factories and looked forward to their cricket on Saturdays. There were fewer motor cars. In my time over here I bought a cloth cap and a raincoat and I still wear them. My Todmorden cloth cap is one of my proudest possessions.

What sort of accommodation did the club provide?

I lived with a family on Ewood Lane. They have moved now but I still stay with them when I visit England – I'm staying at their house this week. That's incredible isn't it? Through cricket I've made friends on the opposite side of the world and here I am visiting them nearly fifty years later!

What were your commitments during the week?

I would practise with the team and I coached everybody from the youngest to the oldest at the club. I ran nets for the juniors from 4pm till 8 and one young man was always the first to arrive and the last to leave. I said at the time, with his determination and enthusiasm he would go a long way in the game, and fifteen years later he was getting off the plane to play against Australia – Peter Lever.

What were your impressions of cricket in the Lancashire League?

Good. Every team had four or five exceptionally good cricketers. The grounds were mostly okay and the pitches were slow but quite good. I definitely returned home to Australia a much better player.

Which Todmorden players of that era do you recall?

All of them. I can tell you the whole team. There was Harold Dawson, John Crowther, John Ingham, Richard Crabtree, Kenny Walker, Peter Brownbridge, Colin Sunderland, Jack Hazeltine the wicketkeeper, Malcolm Heywood, Frank Saul, Ewart Clayton ...

Dawson and Crowther are the outstanding Todmorden batsmen of all time. What were their strengths?

They both had fine techniques. They both had great concentration – that's the key to batting – good concentration and watching the ball.

Can you remember any specific incidents or occasions? I believe you experienced snow at Bacup.

Yes. That was the first time I had ever seen snow! We didn't play that day but we threw snowballs on the outfield.

It may surprise people to learn that you did not return to Australia in the winter of 1955-56.

No. I spent that winter at Alf Gover's Cricket School in London. I went to be coached and to learn how to coach.

Who did you work with down there?

One who was there nearly every day was Jim Laker. He bowled fabulous off-spinners and spent that winter perfecting his arm ball – one that didn't spin which he disguised it so that it looked like his off-spinner – and of course the following summer he took his nineteen wickets against Australia at Old Trafford, the best ever performance by a bowler in a test match.

After your two seasons for Todmorden did you return to England again?

No. I was in my late twenties and got married. I had a son and two daughters and basically settled down.

(Neil's daughter Sue was an outstanding volleyball player and the first full-time female volleyball coach in Australia)

For how many seasons did you continue to play for South Australia?

I played until 1967, 124 matches in total. Not many have played more than that. Because I had played so long I was awarded honorary membership of the South Australian Cricket Association when I retired.

Who were your contemporaries towards the end of your career?

I played with the great West Indian Gary Sobers for South Australia. He could do everything – bat, bowl in every style, field – the greatest all-rounder there has ever been. I remember Victoria's captain Bill Lawry saying how easily they were going to beat us. Les Favell, our captain used this to motivate us. 'Have you seen what Lawry has been saying about us?' Sobers replied quietly 'I think we might win this one, skipper' and then got a hundred and five wickets. We won easily. Still Lawry didn't give up and in his speech at the Victorian end-of-season dinner said they hadn't been beaten by South Australia, they'd been beaten by Sobers. Then a lady stood up and said: 'Excuse me Mr Lawry. If Victoria is so good how come eleven Victorians have been beaten by one West Indian?'

I believe you had the privilege of batting with Don Bradman. What was it that made him so special?

His eye, allied to great footwork and balance. He was in position to play his shots faster than anyone I have ever seen. He just picked up the line and length of the ball so quickly. I batted with him in his very last innings in Grade cricket.

Who were the best pace bowlers you faced?

In Australia Ray Lindwall and Keith Miller were obviously great bowlers. Wes Hall was a great bowler for the West Indies. The quickest was Frank Tyson in 1954. He pro'd for Todmorden after me, I believe. I once had to bat out the last over against Fred Trueman for South Australia. I survived the first seven balls and Trueman only ran in four paces for the last one. It was the quickest of the lot and bowled me. Great bowler!

Your involvement in cricket has continued to the present day as a selector. What does that entail?

I've been a selector for South Australia since 1976 and the best piece of advice I received came right at the start from Bradman. He told me never to

raise anyone's hopes – don't tell a fellow he's nearly in the team or – even worse – you're going to pick him. We go to training camps at the start of the season and look at the players. Once the season starts we go to the home games and occasionally travel to another state to see an away game, but we also rely on reports from the coach. We don't see every game.

Are there any up and coming Australians we should look out for?

Michael Clarke is the best of the bunch at the moment.

Coming right up-to-date, you attended the 2004 Worsley Cup final last Sunday, a wonderful occasion with Lowerhouse beating Haslingden to win their first ever trophy in front of around 2500 spectators. What were your impressions of the game?

The ground was in very good condition and the crowd was fantastic. It was a great occasion and it clearly meant a lot to Lowerhouse to win. It makes me optimistic about the game to see such a crowd at a Lancashire League match. I was very excited by it and didn't get to sleep until 3 o'clock in the morning!

I believe you were on the ground for the players' warm-up last Sunday. Did you exercise to warm up when you played.

We might do a bit of stretching if we felt stiff but nothing like they do now. When Don Bradman was asked how he kept fit he just said: 'Running between wickets.'

There is much less cricket played in schools and there are far fewer games of cricket played by children in streets and parks these days, compared to even thirty years ago but the clubs now run many junior teams. Todmorden runs teams at under 11, 13, 15 and 17 plus three open age teams. Is the pattern the same in Australia?

I don't think we have been affected quite so much by things like computer games and videos because we have a better climate where the kids want to be outside - and we probably have the space to create better facilities. The new forms of entertainment for children are a worry for Australian sport too, though. The increase in coaching and teams is the same in Australia and it's the best thing that's happened to cricket in recent years. I still go into Norwood High School to coach and there are many coaching schemes at schools and clubs.

What advice would you give to any of the current Todmorden youngsters looking to make their way in the game?

If I'm coaching a youngster I always start with the basics – grip and stance. After that the most important things in batting are concentration and watching the ball. If you're batting against pace, go back and slightly across first and then forward from there if the ball is pitched up. If you're playing against spin, go forward first and push back from there if the ball is short. Bowling is about rhythm and having an action that repeats until you're consistent and accurate.