

The October 2007 edition of Spin magazine featured a special article on the new book, *Off The Beaten Track*

LEADING
EDGE

CHALLENGE KEMP

15: Spend a day with the professional cricket-watchers



Yorkshire's own Three Musketeers have seen a game a day for 15 years. Can SPIN class clown Alex Kemp keep up?

Kemp apostles won't believe it, but I'm a feeble man. It's true. Faced with even the mere suggestion of something mentally or physically taxing, I have to have a lie down in a darkened room with a damp tea towel over my head. So you can imagine my displeasure when the latest challenge is passed over to me along with the spy goggles and 'stalker...' to spend the day following three diehard cricket fans as they continue their decades-long mission to watch as many games of cricket as humanly possible.

Tony Hutton, Mick Bourne and Brian Senior, dubbed the Three Musketeers – by themselves – have been going to at least one game a day throughout the cricket season for 15 years. Mick, who retired early, has been at it even longer. Normally they fit in two or three a day. They call themselves "professional cricket watchers". They've even written a book about it, packed with accounts of windswept days in empty grounds across Yorkshire.

And I've been invited to follow them on their crickering odyssey. Since my attention usually wanders by the end of the first over, especially if there's a food van nearby, it could be a long day.

On the train up to Leeds I read their wonderfully idiosyncratic and often very funny diary of the 2006 season. From it, I get a picture of three men united by a passion for watching cricket but also of a

sort of hidden cricketing life itself, away from all the glitz and glamour of the Test arena. All three prefer to eschew Test and county cricket for 2nd XIs, club and village cricket – which, as I'm to learn, is big news round these parts.

I also get to appreciate what really makes for a good day's cricket: good teas and good toilet facilities (Todmorden has the best tea, apparently; and

Victoria Park the worst toilets or, as the fellas have it: "one glance at the abject state of the single uni-toilet and I turned away quickly: I was eating an apple tart at the time.")

I meet up with the chaps at Wetherby where Yorkshire under-19s are taking on Durham under-19s. And it's not even lunchtime before Brian is worrying about another game he could fit in over at York.

So how many games have they watched so far this year? "Well it's been a bad summer with all the rain..." apologises Mick. "Still, Brian managed to rack up 100 games before May..."

A hundred games! "Well, he can never stay in. He has to go out. He went to see a cricket match the other day, it was cancelled but there was a frisbee competition going on in the park. Now he knows all the rules of frisbee!"

"I've seen 20 games in a day," Brian tells me with a beam.

"I don't count games, though," continues Mick. "I only count grounds. So far this year I've been to 124."

Can there really be that many? I ask, slightly aghast.

"Oh there are 700 grounds in Yorkshire, at least," he replies.

I get a dread feeling that I'm not going to get away until we've ticked each one off.



In fact, the guys are modest about their achievement; they reckon that the champion watcher of cricket in Yorkshire may even be a fella called Wigan Ted. Not only does he see games every day as they do, but he puts in the extra miles, quite literally, by – as his name suggests – travelling over the Pennines before he's even started.

Even so, two or three games a day seems pretty good going. But what, exactly, counts as watching a game? Presumably, they don't always stay to the bitter end... "We have a rule," says Tony. "You must see six overs or three wickets for it to

up," Tony tells me. "They treat you like you've come from the moon! 'You've come all the way from Leeds to watch us?' You normally get a good tea then."

It's time for us to leave and catch another game. But before we go, this ground suddenly starts to look familiar to me... of course! Once upon a time, Kemp was a fit, virile younger man and anything (as opposed to nothing) seemed

and gleefully recount how, during the 2006 football World Cup they would only go to grounds without electricity so there wouldn't be any games being shown. They even took the fuse out of one of the televisions they found.

Everyone at each ground along the way seems to know them. At one ground near Harrogate there's only one old man watching, resting over

"Brian racked up 100 games before May..."

count. And there must be two umpires for it to count as a proper match. And they can't be from the batting side."

"Although there was that game in Sowerby," Mick recalls "where we got there with 11 overs and two wickets left. First ball edged to slip. Last batsman: out, middle stump."

"We still counted that one though," nods Brian. "It wasn't our fault. They should have waited for us."

So how do you get to all these grounds then? "Brian's our navigator. Though he always gets us lost. He usually navigates by pie shops he knows along the route."

"I've gone to villages where I've heard that a game is due to be played," Mick tells me, his voice hushed. "And no-one could tell me where the cricket ground is! Brian once had to go and ask at a whist drive in the community centre."

I soon begin to feel as if I have entered some parallel universe. Or, possibly, a forewarning of my own future.

"Some of the clubs seem very surprised when we turn

possible. I actually played right here for Middlesex schoolboys against Yorkshire! I wonder if the chaps remember? "Was it 1991?" reflects Tony "Yes, we would have been down there for that game. Middlesex used to come up and play here every year. We always came."

So you would have seen me bowl then? "Yes, I remember you running in, all arms and legs with your long flowing locks..." hoots Mick, rather too enthusiastically for my liking, eyeing the shell of a man before him.

And then we're off to grounds at Blackley and East Kirsey, the chaps telling me how they've seen the likes of Darren Gough and Matthew Hoggard come up through club cricket. Mick remembers Michael Vaughan scoring 85 for Sheffield as a young lad.

As cricket fanatics, they feel it their duty to be anti-football

a gate. Suddenly he springs into life, saying to Brian "I know you! You were at Derby yesterday!" And there does seem real community between the professional cricket watchers. I feel rather jealous not to be part of the gang. But by the time we get to our fifth ground (or is it sixth?) I'm seriously flagging.

I feel gorged of cricket. Then I make the mistake of telling them that my step-father used to play Yorkshire league cricket for Woodhouse, and we're off again. I feel like I'm trapped in one of the later series of Last of the Summer Wine. And I realise that, against my better judgement, I'm starting to rather like it.

Three Men and a Cricket Season is published by Cricket Heritage Publications at £6. For details, see www.ckcricketheritage.org.uk, or contact p.j.davies@hud.ac.uk



Four men on the fringes: Mick, Tony, Brian, Kemp

Brasso tacks

Friend or foe? The trophy



Durham won their first major trophy after just 16 seasons of first-class competition. Here's how many seasons it took the others...

- 1 **Surrey** Champions in first three years of Championship 1890-92
- 4 **Yorkshire** Champions 1893
- 8 **Lancashire** Champions 1897
- 14 **Middlesex** Champions, 1903
- 17 **Kent** Champions, 1906
- 18 **Nottinghamshire** Champions, 1907
- 17 **Warwickshire** Champions 1911
- 28 **Glamorgan** Champions 1948
- 41 **Gloucestershire** Champions, 1980
- 42 **Derbyshire** Champions, 1936
- 66 **Worcestershire** Champions 1964
- 67 **Hampshire** Champions, 1961
- 72 **Northamptonshire** Gillette Cup, 1976
- 74 **Sussex** Gillette Cup 1963
- 78 **Leicestershire** B & H Cup, 1972
- 85 **Essex** B & H Cup, 1979
- 89 **Somerset** Gillette Cup and Sunday League, 1979