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AM I DREAMING?

Have you ever been somewhere perfect, but wanted to be anywhere else?

I'm lying on my bed in Sydney's Intercontinental Hotel, in a room with one of the most spectacular views on earth, in one of the most stunning cities I've ever been to. The air is clear and there is a beautiful piercing blue sky above as yachts jostle for position on the shimmering turquoise blue water. The workhorse ferries service Circular Quay while massive ocean liners deliver excited tourists into the bustling port. The magnificent Sydney Harbour Bridge dominates the skyline while the Opera House completes my picture postcard view. In so many ways, it's a scene of perfection.

But it's lost on me. I want to go home. My curtains are drawn, the lights are out and my phone is off. I don't want to see anyone, be seen by anyone, and least of all speak to anyone. The walls are closing in. Leave me alone.

The remnants of my room service lunch lie barely touched on a tray on the floor. This can't be happening. Not again. I want to go home.

'I'm not leaving the room,' I think to myself. 'I'm too embarrassed. Were we really that bad?'

Three days earlier, we'd played Bangladesh in Adelaide in the penultimate group game of our Cricket World Cup. In every sense, it was a must-win game. But we lost. Badly. With one match still to play against lowly Afghanistan, we are out of a tournament we'd had hopes of winning. We have no excuses. We've been outplayed and out-thought. And we are getting hammered for it. I feel alone.

None of us who'd boarded the plane from Heathrow so full of optimism just ten weeks earlier could in our worst nightmares have envisaged we'd under-perform so spectacularly. We are ashamed. We've let our country down.

'Cheerio Chaps: Poms are Banged and Mashed,' crowed the front page of the *Sydney Telegraph* the morning after our tournament-ending 15-run loss to Bangladesh.

All the other papers are revelling in our misery too, while the abuse on social media

gets so bad I delete the Twitter app on my phone. We'd lost, and in spectacular fashion, managing one solitary win over Scotland while being thrashed out of sight in every other game.

At times, I'd felt completely helpless to stem the tide. I was fit and bowling pain free for the first time in a year, following major surgery on my knee. But I didn't hit my straps. I had tried my best, but I'd come up way short. We all had. At times, teams found it easy against us. As a proud Englishman, in a country that loves to hate us, that is what hurt the most.

Barely 12 months earlier, I'd flown home from Australia believing we'd hit rock bottom after being whitewashed 5-0 in an Ashes series that had ended the careers of some of England's greatest-ever players and accelerated the end for others. If anyone had told me then that a year later I'd be back here again, feeling just as low, suffering the same abuse, I'd have thought it was a sick joke.

But I'm not laughing. The lights are out. Leave me alone. I want to go home.

I'm not the only one in a dark place. Just across the corridor, my close friend and team-mate for almost a decade, Jimmy Anderson, has the 'do not disturb' sign hanging off his door handle.

Occasionally a team-mate pops his head around the corner of the door. But no one wants to talk. We've been abject and we want to go home.

And it's not just the players. Earlier that morning our assistant coach Paul Farbrace – one of the nicest blokes you could ever meet – had gone out for a brief stroll around Circular Quay on the steps of our hotel.

He made the mistake of wearing an official England tracksuit. Within minutes of leaving the hotel foyer, he was copping abuse from Aussie fans revelling in yet more misery for the England cricket team.

'Losers!' one ungracious local screamed in his face. Farbs about-turned and headed straight back to the hotel. His stroll lasted five minutes. He wanted to go home.

Somehow, we must pick ourselves up and play one more, now meaningless, game against Afghanistan. If losing to Bangladesh had been bad, losing to Afghanistan would be catastrophic.

We drag ourselves to training, but we're flat. Even our coach Peter Moores, normally so full of energy and enthusiasm, looks drained and withdrawn. Our captain Eoin Morgan, appointed in place of Alastair Cook just two weeks before we'd flown out, appears distant and shell-shocked. He talks manfully about pride in the shirt and leaving with our heads held high. But you can tell he's hurting. We're all in shock.

But we're also professional cricketers representing our country and we still have a game to play. Kids dream of doing this. We're privileged to do this, but it feels like a nightmare. It's Friday the 13th, but for once, our luck is in and we produce a decent enough performance to beat Afghanistan by nine wickets.

But there are no celebrations. We fly home the next day. We've got more flak to face. Brace yourselves, boys. It's an Ashes summer.

I'm in my usual spot in the Trent Bridge dressing room. Ian Bell's sitting next to me, where he always does. I'm staring at the red Dukes ball in my hand.

Outside I can hear the crowd chanting my name. I've taken eight for 15 and we've bowled Australia out for 60 before lunch. In the process I claimed my 300th Test

wicket for England. Eight for 15? All out for 60? Three hundred wickets? Did that really just happen? This is surreal. Am I dreaming?

Jimmy Anderson's there, too. He's not playing in this Test after injuring his side in the last game at Edgbaston. But he's done his job. His haul of six for 47 at Edgbaston had helped us win the Test match.

This match is not won yet, but Jimmy and I share a look. We know the little urn is coming home.

'Well done, mate,' Jimmy says. 'I'm proud of you.'

It's a special moment. But I still can't believe it. The surroundings are familiar but the emotions are not. I've never felt like this before. In fact, I've never felt better.

Eight for 15? Sixty all out? Three hundred Test wickets? Is this real?

I'd woken at 6am that morning at my home in West Bridgford. Once I'm awake on Test-match day, I stay awake. I was extremely nervous. With Jimmy not playing, I was feeling the heavy burden of responsibility that comes with leading England's attack in an Ashes Test match.

I was the local boy, playing at my home ground. The pressure was on. And I'd delivered. But eight for 15? Sixty all out? Three hundred Test wickets? Really?

That evening as I walk across a ground I've walked across so many times at the close of play for both England and my county, Nottinghamshire, I glance up at the scoreboard.

England 274 for four, lead Australia by 214 runs.

I've spoken to the media – Sky, *Test Match Special*, Channel Five, daily newspaper reporters, the ECB website – and said the right things, of course: 'This Test match is not won yet. The Australians will come back hard at us in the morning. We've got a long way to go in this Test match. The Ashes are not won yet.'

But inside I know. There is no coming back for Australia. They are dead and buried. We have our feet firmly on their throat. We are 2-1 up already and this fourth Test, and the Ashes, are as good as in the bag.

I float over the ground towards the Radcliffe Road car park where my car is parked. My phone goes. It's my friend Nottinghamshire batsman Michael Lumb.

'All right Lumby?' I ask matter-of-factly, as if it's a normal day.

'All right? What the hell just happened? That was incredible! You just took eight for fifteen in an Ashes Test match. You must be absolutely buzzing!'

We chat briefly and I promise to catch up with Lumby properly after the match has finished. I hang up and continue across the outfield in the warm evening sunshine. The stewards usher me through a crowd of several hundred fans. Normally, at the close of a day's play, there are barely 30 diehards. But this is different. There are hundreds of fans all clamouring for my attention.

'Broady, can you sign my shirt?' One little boy asks, wide-eyed and grinning. 'And can you write eight for fifteen please?'

'Sure,' I say. I was him once.

'Broady, can you sign my programme?' One lady asks. 'Can you write eight for fifteen on it?'

'No problem.'

'Broady, can you sign my ticket?' A young girl asks. 'Can you write eight for fifteen on it?'

‘Of course.’

The Intercontinental Hotel feels a very long way away.

I edge towards my car, but I’m here for an hour. More autographs. More pictures. More selfies.

Finally, I reach my car and gingerly climb in. I start the ignition, and breathe. The journey home takes a little over five minutes.

As I pull in to the driveway, almost three hours after the close of play, my girlfriend Bealey is there to greet me along with our dogs Jackson and Blue.

‘Oh my God!’ she cries. ‘What have you done? That was incredible.’

We go inside and she’s cooked chicken fajitas for me. They’re my favourite. Normally I can eat five after a day’s play. Tonight, I can barely manage one. I’m not hungry. I feel on edge. My head’s spinning. I can’t believe what’s just happened.

The doorbell rings. It’s nine o’clock.

‘What do the neighbours want at this time of night?’ I ask.

But it’s Dad, with a bottle of red.

‘Well done, son,’ he says. ‘I’m proud of you.’

We sit down in the living room and Dad pours me a glass. I take a sip. It’s decent stuff.

‘Eight for fifteen in an Ashes Test match?’ he says. ‘Wow! Who’d have thought that my premature little baby boy who weighed the same as a bag of sugar when he was born would take eight for fifteen in an Ashes Test match and bowl the Australia out before lunch? Unbloodybelievable.’

I smile.

Dad doesn’t stay long. He knows I’m tired. He played Test cricket himself and knows I must rest. Sleep is everything to a professional sportsman. Every day you need to get up and go again. No rest, no recovery. No recovery, no performance. No performance, no win. No win, no point.

I go upstairs and climb into bed. I can’t sleep. My mind is racing. Bealey is there. This is so surreal.

I once took seven for 12 against Kimbolton School Under-15s and remember thinking how ridiculous those figures were. That could only happen in a schoolboy game, couldn’t it?

I begin to drift off.

Eight for 15? Sixty all out? Three hundred Test wickets? Is this really happening?

I am dreaming.

A MEMORABLE YEAR TO FORGET

Of all the 28 years I'd been alive, 2014 had proved to be by far the most difficult I'd faced so far.

It started off abysmally with a crushing Ashes whitewash Down Under, briefly improved with a backs-to-the-wall Test series win against India, before ending in pretty ordinary fashion when a former team-mate published a book seemingly intent on tarnishing the most successful period in English cricket history.

Add to that being hit full in the face so hard by a cricket ball travelling at 88mph I needed corrective surgery to fix a double fracture of my nose, seeing my friend and captain Alastair Cook almost resign the Test captaincy, before undergoing major surgery on my knee after nearly a year of agonising pain caused by repeatedly crunching my front foot into rock-hard pitches while delivering the ball.

Then, just as things started to settle down, Cooky was sacked as one-day captain in December only a fortnight before we were due to leave for a lengthy build-up to the World Cup in Australia.

It's a sporting cliché to describe a year as a roller coaster, but I genuinely cannot recall a year where my emotions on and off the field had been pulled in so many different directions. From desperation Down Under, hope at home against India, agony at Old Trafford, exasperation at Kevin Pietersen, to sorrow for Cooky, the year had it all.

At least I was settled at home. My girlfriend Bealey moved in to the house I'd bought just up the road from Trent Bridge in the leafy Nottingham suburb of West Bridgford, and my off-field affairs were being well managed by my agent, Neil Fairbrother at ISM, after a turbulent time with a previous management company.

Perhaps most importantly, I was fit. My knee had been causing me problems for more than a year and I'd been diagnosed with patella tendonitis – or 'jumper's knee' – in early 2014 but, as is the case with so many professionals, I'd put off having surgery until there was a gap in the busy fixture schedule which would allow me to recover

without feeling I needed to rush back to play.

Very few people knew the extent of the discomfort I'd been experiencing. As a professional sportsman in the public eye, you will naturally be asked questions about your form and fitness, but you often have to play a bit of a game with the media in order to hide any sign of weakness or vulnerability from opponents.

The last thing I wanted was to hand an opposition batsman a needless competitive advantage by letting him know that pretty much all I was thinking about at the top of my run was how much pain I was going to be in when I delivered the ball at him.

I didn't want opponents knowing I had to get up sometimes in the middle of the night during Test matches to sit in a near boiling hot bath just to try to numb the pain enough to get up the next morning and bowl again.

I didn't want them knowing I was only able to drive my car for about ten minutes before the pain got so bad I had to pull over and stretch my leg out.

So I hid it. The media knew I had a problem, but very few knew just how bad it was. Ultimately, if you declare yourself fit to play in a Test match, or any match for that matter, you are judged on your output. Cricket is unique in that the results of your day's work are published for the whole world to see at the close of play. No matter how much pain you might be in, the only thing that counts is your figures.

Mine were decent in 2014 – 30 wickets in eight Tests at 26.70, including six for 25 as we took control of the series against India at Old Trafford – but I knew I could bowl even better if freed from the shooting pain which caused my knee to swell up grotesquely by the end of each day's play.

On top of that, I had to contend with the fallout of top-edging a bouncer from Indian fast bowler Varun Aaron which had left me with a double fracture of my nose, two of the worst black eyes I had ever seen, and a strange clicking at the back of my jaw which I still experience to this day.

Fortunately, the long-overdue knee surgery, carried out in early September a few days after the final Test at The Oval by Hakan Alfredson, the world-leading specialist from Sweden who had previously operated on football star Zlatan Ibrahimovic and others, was a resounding success.

During the surgery, which involved them opening the knee up and taking blood vessels out of the tendon which had been causing the pain, they also noticed I had a sharp piece of bone which was partially rupturing the tendon. Over time that was going to cause damage, so they had to slice that piece of bone off. I was in immense pain afterwards – so much so that I'd bitten into the inside of my mouth. The surgery caused extensive swelling immediately afterwards, but it didn't take long for me to feel the benefits of going under the knife.

As a professional sportsman, you are required to put your body through an extraordinary level of exertion on an almost daily basis, with packed international fixture schedules making it incredibly hard to find enough time to recover properly during a calendar year.

But the flip side of that, playing for England at least, is that the medical care you're afforded is absolutely world-class. It's in the ECB's interests to look after their players and there were a couple of occasions in 2014 – with the other being when I was struck in the face – when I had cause to be thankful for the highly skilled medical care I received.

After several weeks of extensive physiotherapy and rehabilitation with the England medical team in the UK, I joined up with the England Performance Programme in Potchefstroom, South Africa, in December for a couple of weeks of sunshine training that did me the world of good. I travelled with Jimmy – who was also recovering from a knee injury which meant he missed the seven-match ODI series in Sri Lanka that would ultimately lead to Cooky being sacked – and I was able to start bowling properly under the watchful eye of my former England coach Andy Flower, who was now in charge of the Performance Programme.

Andy, without doubt the finest coach I'd ever worked with and the most successful in English cricket history, had stepped down from the top job following the Ashes whitewash in January before being on the receiving end of some appallingly uninformed and personal abuse from people outside cricket who didn't even know him.

I always found Andy to be tough but fair and a man of the utmost integrity. He was never afraid to tell you exactly what he thought of your performance – good and bad – but that meant you always knew where you stood with him. He was a hard task-master, but I never doubted his motives for one second. He wanted England to win, and to achieve that he needed tough cricketers to survive in a hostile environment. Towards the end of his time in charge, perhaps he did get a little too prescriptive, too bogged down in the fine detail. But what coach wouldn't when his players were letting him down as badly as we did in Australia? Some of the things that have been said of him since he stood down have been beneath contempt, and I'm certainly not about to re-open old wounds by dignifying them with airtime here.

I hold Andy Flower in the very highest regard as a coach and as a man. He'd stood up to Robert Mugabe's dictatorship with his black-armband protest alongside Henry Longa in 2003 and shown loyalty, leadership and vision during his five-year tenure as England coach. Those who'd spent much of the previous 12 months abusing him weren't fit to lace his boots in my view, and it was good to catch up with him in Potchefstroom away from the glare of the media and other prying eyes.

The facilities in Potchefstroom were excellent and the boys in the Performance Programme were a really good bunch of lads. We trained hard and it was interesting to see a few of them batting and bowling close up. When you're on a central contract with England, you don't get to see or play a great deal of county cricket, but I'd heard some good things about a young Durham fast bowler called Mark Wood and it was good to see him bowl in the nets and out in the middle.

He was definitely sharp, with a slightly unusual run-up which culminated in an explosive delivery stride and skiddy pace off the pitch that gave several batsmen the hurry-up.

I liked him off the field as well, where it became evident pretty quickly he was as mad as a March hare. One afternoon I was resting in my room after training and I heard this banging on my door. It was absolutely hammering it down with rain outside – one of those thunderstorms you seem to get only in South Africa – and I opened the door to see Woody stood outside with this great big wheelie bin next to him.

'Will you push me?' he asked.

'You what, mate?' I replied, before he climbed inside and directed me around the corner. We were staying on the university campus and the rooms were arranged along

corridors close to the playing fields and world-class training facilities. There were a number of different athletes and sportsmen staying on the campus, training for a variety of sports and disciplines.

One of the athletes was the former Olympic, World and Commonwealth 400-metre champion Christine Ohuruogu, who also happened to be fast asleep in her room when Woody ordered me to stop pushing him when we ended up outside her door.

Woody didn't know her from Adam, but that didn't stop him shooing me away before knocking loudly on her door and flipping the lid of the wheelie bin back down with him still inside. After what seemed like an age, a clearly sleepy Ohuruogu opened her door, only to be greeted with the unexpected sight of a large green wheelie bin sitting immediately in front of her. With heavy rain and thunder hammering on the roof above, she clearly didn't know what on earth was going on.

Then, without warning, Woody burst out of the bin and started wailing like a banshee in Ohuruogu's face. She physically leapt in the air. To say she was shocked would be something of an understatement. I thought she was going to have a heart attack as this crazed Geordie cricketer who she'd never met before screamed in her face from out of a soaking-wet wheelie bin. She spent several moments trying to work out if she was still dreaming, before bursting into fits of giggles.

I couldn't believe Woody's front. Luckily for us Ohuruogu, once she'd gathered her senses, saw the funny side as she realised she'd been the victim of a practical joke. But it was a first taste for me of Woody's infectious sense of humour and willingness to act the fool. It was refreshing and I loved it.

On a personal level, the camp proved incredibly helpful as I started bowling at close to full tilt for the first time since surgery. It was so nice to be able to bowl without the pain I'd been in before and to get back to concentrating on how to get individual batsmen out rather than worrying about how much each delivery would hurt.

Crucially, I was able to get miles in my legs after a lengthy lay-off which had seen me lose a lot of what little muscle I previously had on my right leg. Getting some definition back was important and I was able to report back to coach Peter Moores after the trip declaring myself fully on track to be fit for the upcoming World Cup.

I'd obviously kept an eye on events in Sri Lanka while I was working on my rehabilitation. The seven-match series had been designed, along with the 6 January departure for Australia, to give us the best possible preparation for a tournament for which, historically, England had been accused of not being properly prepared. The aim was to provide a no-excuse environment which would see us leave no stone unturned in our bid to go one better than Graham Gooch's team had done in 1992, when they lost in the World Cup final to Pakistan.

Unfortunately, things didn't go to plan in Sri Lanka, which is one of the toughest places in the world to try to win cricket matches. The 5-2 series defeat wasn't a disgrace, but Cooky's captaincy and batting, which had come under intense scrutiny the previous summer, were once again under the microscope for all the wrong reasons.

I genuinely believed his one-day and Test captaincy had come on leaps and bounds the previous summer against India, when he'd shown a willingness to take a few risks and come up with some clever and imaginative field placings. He'd also batted his way out of a slump and back to form with a superb 95 in the third Test at the Rose Bowl, where he received the most incredible ovation I'd ever heard just for passing 50.

I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up at the same time the crowd did, as they gave the clearest indication possible of their support for a man who had been through the emotional and psychological mincer following the Ashes whitewash and our embarrassing second Test capitulation to India at Lord's.

I was worried he was going to give up the captaincy after that defeat when some spineless second-innings batting saw us bowled out for 223 as Ishant Sharma bounced us out to finish with seven for 74. Cooky was taking a kicking left, right and centre and there was no doubt he was very close to resigning the captaincy. He was struggling badly with the bat and his captaincy was coming in for sustained criticism. It was totally out of order, and it was wearing a good man down.

Allied to the personal abuse, Cooky was struggling badly with the bat, and with our ever-present wicket-keeper Matt Prior requiring surgery on his Achilles, which would eventually force him to retire from cricket altogether, he faced the prospect of losing another close friend and star performer from his squad. The year before in Sydney, after we'd lost the Ashes 5-0, I'd spoken at length with him and persuaded him not to resign. I told him the team believed in him and that his form would turn around. I felt the same now. He was a world-class cricketer, arguably England's greatest-ever batsman, who was going through a dip in form that any player who is in the team long enough will inevitably go through. He'd been in a similar slump against Pakistan in 2010 and batted his way out of it with a hard-fought hundred at The Oval. A player of his calibre would inevitably come good and, as soon as we started winning again, the barrage of criticism he was currently facing would disappear into background noise. The team needed him to carry on. England needed him to carry on.

In the end, to the relief of everybody in the dressing room, Cooky agreed to stay on and fight another day. But it was touch and go.

After our abject showing at Lord's, we turned the series, and the summer, around in spectacular fashion to run out comprehensive 3-1 winners courtesy of some of the most aggressive, attacking cricket we'd played for several years. Cooky finished the series with almost 300 runs at 49.66, while newcomers Gary Ballance, Moeen Ali, Jos Buttler and Chris Jordan all made important contributions. Joe Root also batted superbly following a difficult winter Down Under which had seen him dropped for the fifth Test, while Jimmy Anderson was at his imperious best, taking 25 wickets in the series. Personally, I was pretty happy with a haul of 19 wickets at 23 considering I was being severely restricted by the pain in my dodgy right knee every time I bowled.

All of a sudden, things were looking much brighter for the team and for Cooky, who no longer carried the weight of the world on his shoulders and began to look forward to leading England into his first World Cup as captain.

But it wasn't to be. Despite him regaining form in the Test arena, one-day runs continued to elude him. Sri Lanka in December proved the final straw for England's selectors, who took the drastic decision to leave him out of the World Cup squad after more than two years in charge of that team. Eoin Morgan – consistently our best one-day batsman over the past few years – was appointed less than three weeks before our departure for Australia, and Cooky had to accept he would not be part of the one-day side.

It was incredibly tough on him being sacked so soon before a World Cup. As a friend, I felt for him. He was absolutely gutted when he heard the announcement of the

15-man squad.

But, as harsh as it was, he knew as well as anyone that professional sport can be ruthless. The only thing that really matters is scoring runs, taking wickets and winning. He'd managed just 119 runs in six knocks in Sri Lanka at an average of less than 20. The thing that probably counted against him most, though, was a strike-rate of just 67.23, which was at least 20 below what most one-day openers would require for their team to stand a chance of winning the World Cup. One half-century in his last 22 innings left him without much room for manoeuvre, or runs to change the selectors' minds.

It was a sad end to what had already been incredibly tough year for him, but he took it on the chin like the great man that he is, wished us luck, and stepped aside for Morgs to take over.

I hadn't felt any adverse reaction to the surgery on my knee while in Potchefstroom and, although well short of being fully match fit, I felt the lengthy warm-up spell in the build-up to the World Cup would give me ample time to get up to speed. The plan had always been for me to have the surgery, take my time with the rehab, and get myself ready in time for the World Cup. Mooresy had stressed to me from a very early stage that he had no intention of rushing me back and he didn't want me to feel under any pressure to do so. I appreciated that. Not all coaches would have been so sympathetic.

On 6 January, we flew out from Heathrow for the beginning of what would be, if all went to plan, a 12-week trip that would see us play 12 warm-up games, including a tri-series tournament involving India and Australia, immediately before the World Cup began in earnest on 14 February, when we would take on hosts Australia in front of 84,000 at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

From a planning point of view, it was clearly not ideal changing captain less than three weeks before we left for Australia, but when we met up at Heathrow we felt confident, energised and there was a real sense we could prove our many doubters wrong.

Predictably, and perhaps understandably, we'd been widely written off before our departure by the media. Our one-day results had been far from impressive over the previous 12 months, with only 15 wins from our last 37 matches. But despite that, I sat on the plane, looked around the squad and saw players such as Alex Hales, Jos Buttler, Joe Root, Mo Ali, Belly and Morgs himself who were all more than capable of clearing the ropes with the kind of power hitting needed in one-day cricket these days. On the bowling front, I felt excited about the prospect of being able to run in pain free for the first time in more than a year, while Jimmy Anderson was as good as anyone in the world and Steve Finn was showing signs of getting back to his devilish best. Chris Woakes and Chris Jordan were both talented bowling all-rounders and there appeared to be plenty of depth to our bowling resources.

There was a freshness around the squad which I found exciting. In hindsight, it might have been naïve, but there was genuine collective belief we could make a significant and telling impact on the tournament. How wrong could we be?

When we landed in Sydney, there was a huge amount of excitement and energy in the group. I don't think anyone knew what our best team was, so the training was intense, competitive and enjoyable. We put in strong performances in some of the warm-up games and some players started to emerge as stand-out contenders. Finn in

particular impressed, bowling with real pace and hostility barely a year after he was last in Australia, when he was a shell of his former self and returned home early in a terrible state after being described as ‘unselectable’ by our one-day coach Ashley Giles.

Finny had gone back to Middlesex, worked incredibly hard with their coaches Richard Johnson and Angus Fraser, and literally broken his action down to its most basic form before building himself back up again. He’d spent hours and hours in the nets bowling off one or two paces, sometimes just into the side of the net in a bid to groove his action and prevent his fragile confidence falling apart completely. Gradually, he built himself back up again and began to rediscover the confidence that had been so badly eroded over previous years of tinkering with his run-up, action and delivery stride.

It was great to see him returning to something close to his best. When on song, there are few more unpleasant bowlers to face and few more amiable and decent blokes to have in the dressing room. It was good to have him back.

After a string of relatively meaningless warm-up games which enabled us to acclimatise and work on fitness and tactics, it felt like the business was really beginning when we kicked off the snappily named Carlton Mid One-Day International Tri Series against Australia in Sydney. I’d bowled OK in the non-international warm-ups, but still felt the control I possess when at the top of my game was missing. My knee, at least, felt very strong.

We lost by three wickets to Australia with 61 balls to spare after being bowled out for 234. It didn’t look good on paper. But there were some encouraging signs, with captain Morgs scoring a superb 121 from 136 balls while Woakesy impressed with the new ball by taking four for 40.

A few people questioned why I’d come on first change, but I was comfortable with letting Woakesy and Finny open up, the idea being that I’d come on and keep things tight while posing a wicket-taking threat at first change. Besides, I’d never really settled on opening the bowling in one-day internationals. I’d switched between opening and first change, which I admit I have found a bit odd. But I knew what I was trying to do now. However, that day the plan didn’t quite work out as I was flogged for 49 off 6.5 overs as David Warner hit a match-winning 127.

We bounced back to beat India twice – once by a crushing nine wickets in Brisbane and then again ten days later by a less convincing three wickets – although Australia got the better of us again with a nail-biting three-wicket victory in Hobart after a superb Ian Bell hundred had seen us set them a challenging 304-run victory target.

Despite not really hitting our straps with either bat or ball, we managed to reach the final of the tri-series, where we played Australia at the WACA in Perth. We were really good in the field, limiting them to 278 for eight. I was pleased with the way I bowled, taking three for 55 off ten overs, although poor old Chris Woakes didn’t fare quite as well with his ten overs going for a whopping 89 runs.

But, in a pattern which would soon become boringly familiar, we threw the final away by buckling under the pressure of the chase. We’d had Australia in quite a bit of trouble at Perth at 60 for four, when Mo Ali had Steve Smith stumped by Jos Buttler. But we allowed them off the hook as Glenn Maxwell and James Faulkner gave it a bit of a whack. With a target of 279 and with the fielding restrictions in place, we’d

expect to chase that total nine times out of ten, but they blew us away at the top of the order. It was a disappointing way to end the series before the real business began.

I had mixed feelings about my own form. While on the one hand I was delighted with the way my knee was continuing to respond to the extensive surgery I'd undergone a few months earlier, I was disappointed at a return of just five wickets at 50.8 while leaking almost six runs an over.

With a serious lack of time in the middle, my batting – which had inevitably suffered after the shattering blow to my face I'd received playing against India at Old Trafford the previous summer – seemed to have regressed. Mooresy reassured me he was happy with the way I was bowling, but I knew I needed to contribute more with both bat and ball. The serious business was about to begin.

FROM HIGH HOPE TO NO HOPE

WORLD CUP MELTDOWN 6 JANUARY–14 MARCH

I had left the UK with every intention of letting my bowling do the talking over the coming weeks. I was feeling fit and raring to go after four months without any competitive cricket following the surgery on my knee. It was exciting that, for the first time in more than a year, I was potentially going to be able to bowl without experiencing the awful burning pain I had felt every time I'd delivered the ball ever since patella tendonitis was diagnosed in Australia the previous winter.

The schedule for the year ahead was unprecedented. With 17 Tests, 28 one-day internationals (31 if we reached the World Cup final) and five Twenty20 internationals awaiting us over the course of the next 12 months, game time certainly wasn't going to be an issue.

If all went to plan and we reached the World Cup final on 29 March, the players involved in all three formats could potentially expect to spend more than 300 nights away from home. In the past that amount of time away from home might have daunted me, and believe me life on the road is not as glamorous as it sounds, but with so little cricket under my belt in recent months, a group of young and hungry new team-mates and a recently operated-on knee to test out in the international arena, I felt invigorated by what lay ahead.

Every time I pull on an England shirt I feel as if I have something to prove, but the fact I'd been sidelined for so long and missed the seven-match one-day series in Sri Lanka, which had been factored in as a major part of our World Cup preparation jigsaw, made that desire even more acute when I got on the plane to Australia.

Aside from regaining form and fitness, I was also determined to recapture that sense of enjoyment and camaraderie I'd felt playing for England for the overwhelming majority of the eight years I'd been lucky enough to do so. I was convinced all the negativity swirling around could be confined to history if only we could get back to

doing what we did best: winning.

I was focused on getting myself fully fit, reclaiming my place in the one-day side after a long injury lay-off, and helping to win matches for England by taking my share of wickets. It was clear from an early stage there was a very different dynamic within the squad compared with previous England one-day sides I'd been involved in. The boys were very chilled, very calm and, on the whole, very quiet. Players like Jos Buttler, Moeen Ali and Gary Ballance had come into the side in recent times. They are all lovely lads who were good fun to be around but very quiet and unassuming. They were certainly not big characters like Graeme Swann, Matty Prior or Kevin Pietersen. These were young guys finding their way in international cricket, and they were loving the experience of being involved. The group felt harmonious, together and focused.

While I hadn't been in Sri Lanka a month or so earlier, it was clear the boys all got on well. There was a nice, relaxed vibe. If anything, I was worried we might just be a bit too nice as a squad.

There had been a great deal of nonsense spoken towards the tail end of 2014 – much of it on social media by people who'd never been near the England dressing room – with completely over-the-top claims of cliques, disharmony and even, most bizarrely, bullying. It felt as if people were trying to sully what, for the vast majority of the England players involved, had been the most enjoyable and successful period of our careers. It was really disappointing. I will always look back with huge affection on the time I spent in the England dressing room under Andy Flower and Andrew Strauss between 2009 and 2012, when the team rose from the low of being bowled out for 51 by the West Indies in Jamaica to winning three Ashes series in succession, as well as beating India 4-0 at home to reach the top of the ICC's world rankings. I just didn't recognise the picture that had been painted by a tiny group of people seemingly intent on stirring up trouble.

Yes, we were a tough, determined group of professional cricketers who set consistently high standards and possessed a burning desire to win games of cricket for England. Honesty was an important part of the team culture, and it was important that we could be open with each other if things needed putting right. Just like any of the world's top sports teams, there weren't too many shrinking violets in the dressing room, but that didn't mean it was an unpleasant place to be around. It was certainly a successful place to be around for much of the time Flower and Strauss were in charge.

Having spoken to a lot of guys since, they were as disappointed as I was about the way the team dynamic had been so unfairly misrepresented. For those of us who had loved and treasured pretty much every minute of representing our country – while forging lasting friendships in the process – we weren't going to allow it to tarnish everyone else's memories.

While much of what had been said was complete nonsense, it was fascinating to see how the story had developed in the media. I've always been interested in how the media work – who knows, one day I might try to follow some of the many former players who've gone into it – but it was clear that people were increasingly moving away from the traditional media for their news.

Rather than print newspapers setting the agenda every morning, it was online where people seemed to be going for their information. Twitter seemed to be the platform of choice where people could shout the loudest. Whether the old establishment