

## **Domestic Schedule Members' Open Discussion Summary**

Location: UA92

Date: 04.06.25

Time: 17:00-18:15

Attendance: approx. 60

Subject: Domestic Schedule

Panel: Rob Andrews (ECB - Managing Director – Professional Game), Daniel Gidney (CEO of Lancashire Cricket), Mark Chilton (Director of Cricket), George Balderson (Lancashire Cricket player)

Daniel Gidney welcomed Members and introduced the panel.

Following the Members' Forum on the domestic schedule, in April, it was confirmed that an engagement process is currently in progress.

### **Domestic schedule update (Daniel Gidney):**

Historically, it's been very difficult to reach a consensus. The ECB are currently facilitating an engagement process with the Professional Game Committee. Lancashire Cricket have been involved in one engagement session so far. The domestic schedule essentially presents a mathematical puzzle. The Club does not have an ideological position on the structure that should be adopted.

The Players' Cricket Association survey results suggest that 80% of players do not think the domestic schedule is fit for purpose. A balance is required between commercial opportunities, player wellbeing and other stakeholders. At the end of the engagement process, a series of options will be presented. The Club have committed to offering all Members with voting rights an electronic vote.

### **Panel discussion:**

DG invited George Balderson to share his experience of the current domestic schedule from a player perspective. There have been seven County Championship games on the bounce, and you have played in every one of them. In the Members' Forum in April, I discussed how demanding this can be, especially for fast bowlers. How have you found it playing the seven games?

GB: to be completely honest by the seventh game, I didn't feel best placed to perform at my optimum level as a player- physically or mentally. Towards the end I was struggling with sore feet, ankles, knees and back. Although this is typical for cricketers, it is intensified when there are few gaps between games to offer some respite. One of the downsides of back-to-back games is that there is little opportunity to practice. We've had a poor start to the season and the impact is perhaps heightened when the games are back-to-back. On a personal level, I've felt like I've been in a bit of a rut. The schedule also means there are limited opportunities to work on elements of your game you'd like to in order to elevate your performance. I love the County Championship and it's my favourite format. I wouldn't want to see a huge reduction in the format. But ideally, I'd like recovery days to be incorporated in places.

DG: mathematically can you see a way of retaining the 14 game County Championship games without playing some games alongside The Hundred?

GB: it probably does require some County Championship cricket to be played alongside The Hundred. I'd like to retain the 14 County Championship games, but it will be challenging to manage this without opening up the opportunity to play the format in August. That's also from a personal perspective as I'm not always involved in the T20 campaign.

DG: another pinch point with the domestic schedule is the travel factor. This has been raised as a potential safety issue.

GB: all players want to give the best version of themselves and give 100%. But back-to-back games, with players expected to play the next morning after extensive or late-night travel isn't conducive to high performance.

DG invited Rob Andrews to share his perspective, as Managing Director of the professional game, who is heavily involved in the engagement process. He was also CEO at Sussex for seven years previously.

RA: my role involves managing the relationship between the 18 counties and the ECB. The domestic schedule is not really fit for purpose. This is a common theme that surfaces from surveys with players on a yearly basis. Yet the challenge is finding a compromise that suits all stakeholders in the game. The ECB are working with those involved in the game to understand the key issues. We're reviewing the domestic structure from a broader perspective to achieve success where previous reviews and attempts to resolve this issue have failed. Each of the 18 counties have their own perspective and their own solution. So, listening to viewpoints from representatives at different counties is essential to gauging the consensus. It is important to learn lessons from the High Performance Review, which was a very top-down approach and focused almost exclusively through an England performance lens. As it didn't take into any other considerations, it ultimately failed. There needs to be a much broader outlook to balance fairness for players, the Member/ supporter experience as well as other stakeholders. Cricket performance is an important element, but the revenue from broadcast is critical to sustaining the game. All stakeholders including Members, the players, the Players' Cricket Association and Directors of Cricket need to be considered. We are working hard to develop some options, and we are confident that we can collectively deliver. There are rumours that the outcome is already pre-determined, but nothing is set in stone. For example, there is no agreement on how many games should be played and when.

Last month, we spent time with small groups composed of three counties to enable views to be aired. We are sifting through the findings from these meetings which took place across the county. In June, we are planning to conduct meetings with larger groups (of six counties). Following this, a review will take place to measure consensus. This will inform the development of the options that will be presented. It is a professional committee, which is county led, that is driving the process. The ECB cannot and will not dictate the outcome. Hopefully, by the end of June, we will have a clear idea of the common themes and requirements across the 18 counties. Any changes to the domestic schedule require a two-thirds majority vote. It has been established that the domestic schedule is not fit for purpose. But unless 12 out of the 18 counties vote in favour of a change, then no change will take place. Although devilishly difficult to achieve, the goal is to ultimately reach a place where everybody is pretty content with the schedule.

DG thanked RA for his insight.

DG: Mark, you attended an engagement session. Where do you think the conversation is currently at? There may be some that argue that it was "all good in Brian Statham's day".

MC: we rallied as a group to ensure that we were involved in these discussions, as there has been a lack of consultation previously. We've been round the table to canvas opinion. It is considered fairly unanimously that the men's domestic schedule is not fit for purpose. Yet there isn't an appetite for a huge reduction in the schedule. There is strong support for red ball cricket and 50 over cricket in particular. But there is a requirement to consider the domestic schedule primarily through a performance lens. Although Members' views are considered very important. It's also critical to factor in the needs and welfare of staff, as they're supporting players 365 days a year.

Rob Key will be a key figure in this process. Player performance in the domestic structure is not currently supported with national selection. Every player should know that if they perform well in the domestic game then they have a chance to play at the highest level. With this element currently missing, it can be a demotivating factor. At this stage, it's a case of listening to everyone's opinion and respecting their perspective. There are many views on what shape this could take, and a collaborative approach is required.

With regards to the second question, I am respectful of the past. But the demands on the players are different and this needs to be recognised. Behind the scenes, we try to get players such as George on the field as much as possible. At the end of a County Championship block, some players are burnt out. This can limit or even eliminate their involvement in the Blast. This is why squads are increasingly managed through formats. In this way, it is important to review the pinch points. There is no strong view among the Directors of Cricket. However, a more nuanced approach is required.

RA: we need a domestic structure that protect men's and women's cricketers. The focus is on securing the long-term future of the 18 first counties and their players in the next phase of the game's development. Modern day sport has changed. This review presents an opportunity to implement a structure that protects all formats of the games. We're also in a strong position to be able to build into the recreational game.

### **Members' Q&A with the panel.**

**Member question:** which are the important competitions? If you're devising a schedule, then I think you have to choose what your priority is and build around it. Have you got a priority in mind?

RA: that is a great question. As a governing body, we must consider the priorities of the 18 first class counties. One of the challenges is that each county has slightly different priorities; the stance on the Blast is a prime example. Feeding the Test Match team is important. Nevertheless, we can't get away from white ball cricket which is driving finance. However, it is not for the ECB to dictate this process. Prioritising all domestic competitions is important. We want three domestic competitions that are entertaining, as well as delivering commercially and in terms of player performance. The Hundred is here to stay and it is necessary to accept this as we seek to devise a solution.

**Member question:** is that a barrier?

RA: Daniel highlighted a debate that is important in this discussion. What do we play alongside The Hundred? There are 11 counties that don't host Hundred games in August: for example, Sussex. How do we serve these counties in August. There is a debate over whether we start to play some County Championship games alongside The Hundred. But the counter argument is that some counties would object as they lose some of their top players to The Hundred tournament.

**Lancashire comment:** it is difficult. If we want to continue playing 14 County Championship games, then logically I think we need to be able to play some games alongside The Hundred. I think it's more a question of maths than priority. A combination of logic, safety and performance considerations need to be applied when reviewing the domestic schedule. White ball cricket funds the game. However, the Club fundamentally believes in County Championship cricket and remains committed to it. Lancashire Cricket recognises the importance of the format for the future of Test Match cricket. Every County Championship game costs the Club money so it is not a question of priority. That's why other elements of the Club are key for generating a sustainable income.

**Member question:** following on from Mark's comments on the pathways of domestic cricket to international team selection. I don't feel that it's an accident that England's international 50 over cricket performance has suffered at the same time that the 50 over domestic competition has been marginalised. Franchise cricket has altered things. What is the view of players not playing the equivalent format at domestic level (to prove their worth for international selection)?

**GB:** in terms of the pathway to international selection, I went on the England Lions tour 18 months ago. I felt that I was further away from England selection after the tour than before I went. There is a certain brand of cricket that selectors are looking for at an international level. Personally, I have felt at a crossroads as I've been faced with the conundrum of whether I change who I am as a player to increase my chances of playing for England. Or stick to my game and hope that there will be opportunities in the future.

I'm not the best person to comment on franchise cricket as I've not been involved.

**Member question:** do you need to have played 50 over cricket at a domestic level to play the format internationally?

**GB:** I think so as every format has become so niche. Formats are moving further away from each other; they're increasingly becoming separate entities.

**RA:** Rob Key and Brendon McCullum have their vision on the shape of the England Cricket team. There has been some disconnect with domestic performance and England selection. This is being discussed at the ECB. At the start of this season, Charlotte Edwards has actively encouraged women's players to go and play for their counties, suggesting that good performances domestically will be rewarded with England selection.

**Member question:** what if they eliminated the Blast and 50 Over and brought back the Sunday league?

**RA:** thank you for your feedback.

**Member question:** how many countries run the equivalent a domestic T20 and a franchise?

**Lancashire cricket:** India run the IPL and a domestic T20 tournament but they have a vastly reduced four day game schedule. This is what we are trying to avoid. Other countries reduce the four day format to squeeze in more short format cricket, such as in the West Indies. Australia have the Big Bash but they don't have 18 counties.

**Member question:** you've suggested that nothing is off the table. Does it mean that the ECB is seriously considering giving August back to County Championship cricket?

**RA:** it is a live discussion. There are conversations surrounding whether County Championship cricket is played alongside The Hundred in August. This is not an ECB decision.

**Member question:** if this review leads to a reduction in the county cricket, is there any guarantee that there won't be an extension of The Hundred?

**Lancashire response:** there are some discussions surrounding the potential expansion of The Hundred. Firstly, the prospect of increasing the number of Hundred teams. But this would require a significant increase in broadcast revenue. However, there is a lock on the timetable of The Hundred. The Hundred investors are not in control of this. Any expansion on the Hundred schedule cannot be implemented in isolation because any change to the tournament would require a two thirds majority among the 18 first class counties.

**Member question:** you've explained that 12 out of the 18 counties would have to approve a change to the domestic structure. But would they have to approve an overlap?

**Lancashire response:** the Blast is separate from The Hundred. I don't believe that's possible because it would entail a change to the domestic schedule that would require a two thirds majority among the counties to approve.

**Member question:** I thought the ECB had a veto?

**Lancashire response:** counties have a veto, rather than the ECB. The key issue is that you can't increase the number of days of The Hundred tournament without impacting on the domestic schedule. This would require a change of articles. And for any change in articles, a two thirds majority is necessary. If it's a case of changing the way that The Hundred is played within the existing structures, then it will be a matter for The Hundred committee.

**Member comment:** perhaps there needs to be a change in the way counties view the game due to franchise cricket. We're going to see our best players taking part in the IPL and The Hundred. County cricket is going to have to adapt to missing some of the best players in these tournaments. Should we retain the 14 county games and accept the changes? This might benefit young players too.

**Lancashire response:** the cricket landscape has already changed significantly. Some of our top players partake in franchise cricket. It is great experience for individuals and the Club don't begrudge players for taking advantage of the opportunities. We have to re-evaluate the way that we look at the game in order to adapt. This isn't the future, it's now. The Hundred and T20 franchises are opportunities that are very enticing to players.

Following the Members' cricket forum at the end of last season, it was clear that the focus was on playing better cricket. This was the main criticism among the membership. The Club have committed to younger players and squad development has been strong. We haven't enjoyed the results that we would have hoped for. We must work to overcome these challenges. There's still an appetite to develop the best product possible. There are a lot of factors involved in this, including pitch preparation. Yet we need to recognise where County Championship is in the pecking order of the players' ambitions.

**Member question:** the lifeblood of the game is the players. How many days can they effectively play in a year? Who's going to manage this and what is the role of the PCA in this debate?

**GB:** I'm not sure that I can put a figure on this. Players discuss it with the PCA regularly. I don't know definitively what the role of the PCA is in this.

MC offered an example to illustrate this point. Phil Salt played in the Indian Premier League, returned home for the birth of his son and then flew back out for the IPL final. This is why it is necessary to review the context. Players care about the Club but it is not always in the best interests of the individual nor the team for them to play. Managing the dynamics can be difficult and the welfare of the player must be the number one priority. In this way, it is difficult to answer your question definitively.

**Member question:** I have less sympathy for the players who play less for Lancashire Cricket; it feels like they're taking advantage of the Club. In what way are there more demands on the players nowadays? Someone still wins the County Championship, the Vitality Blast and the MB50 over tournaments regardless.

**Lancashire response:** on the pitch they are similar; it is still a battle between batter and bowler. But the opportunities and the physicality is different. For instance, T20 cricket is a different game to its inception.

MC offered to discuss the matter in more detail on a one-to-one basis.

DG encouraged Members to email the MRG to share any specific feedback.

Thanked all in attendance.