

'SOME ASPECTS OF GAME-CAPTAINCY'



We begin where Wodehouse began as a published writer: in his school years and the years straight after, during which he put into print occasional short humorous pieces reporting or reflecting on sport. Here we find him limbering up and trying out his muscles as a humorist, working towards 'the voice' that will see him durably through a seventy-year writing career.

He was nineteen, still at Dulwich in February 1900, when he enjoyed his first paid publication. An essay entitled 'Some Aspects of Game-Captaincy' appeared as a prize-winning contribution to Public School Magazine, for which effort he received ten shillings and sixpence.

This little essay might (at a squint) be granted a modest place in the literature regarding leadership on the sports field, which is an acknowledged art (or science.) You can make out here key elements of later Wodehouse style – the internal rhythms of his sentences, the blithe allusions to the ancients and the Bible ('changed withal'), and the wry view of human foibles – as evidenced in school sports by those who prefer not to play up but, rather, to find out what is the very least they might get away with.

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To the Game-Captain (of the football variety) the world is peopled by three classes, firstly the keen and regular player, next the partial slacker, thirdly, and lastly, the entire, abject and absolute slacker.

Of the first class, the keen and regular player, little need be said. A keen player is a gem of purest rays serene, and when to his keenness he adds regularity and punctuality, life ceases to become the mere hollow blank that it would otherwise become, and joy reigns supreme.

The absolute slacker (to take the worst at once, and have done with it) needs the pen of a Swift before adequate justice can be done to his enormities. He is a blot, an excrescence. All those moments which are not spent in avoiding games (by means of that leave which is unanimously considered the peculiar property of the French nation) he uses in concocting ingenious excuses. Armed with these, he faces with calmness the disgusting curiosity of the Game-Captain, who officiously desires to know the reason of his non-appearance on the preceding day. These excuses are of the 'had-to-go-and-see-a-man-about-a-dog' type, and rarely meet with that success for which their author hopes. In the end he discovers that his chest is weak, or his heart is subject to palpitations, and he forthwith produces a document to this effect, signed by a doctor. This has the desirable result of muzzling the tyrannical Game-Captain, whose sole solace is a look of intense and withering scorn. But this is seldom fatal, and generally, we rejoice to say, ineffectual.

The next type is the partial slacker. He differs from the absolute slacker in that at rare intervals he actually turns up, changed withal into the garb of the game, and thirsting for the fray. At this point begins the time of trouble for the Game-Captain. To begin with, he is forced by stress of ignorance to ask the newcomer his name. This is, of course, an insult of the worst kind. 'A being who does not know my name,' argues the partial slacker, 'must be something

not far from a criminal lunatic.' The name is, however, extracted, and the partial slacker strides to the arena. Now arises insult No. 2. He is wearing his cap. A hint as to the advisability of removing this piece de resistance not being taken, he is ordered to assume a capless state, and by these means a coolness springs up between him and the G.-C. Of this the Game-Captain is made aware when the game commences. The partial slacker, scorning to insert his head in the scrum, assumes a commanding position outside and from this point criticises the Game-Captain's decisions with severity and pith. The last end of the partial slacker is generally a sad one. Stung by some pungent home-thrust, the Game-Captain is fain to try chastisement, and by these means silences the enemy's battery.

Sometimes the classes overlap. As for instance, a keen and regular player may, by some more than usually gross bit of bungling on the part of the G.-C., be moved to a fervour and eloquence worthy of Juvenal. Or, again, even the absolute slacker may for a time emulate the keen player, provided an opponent plant a shrewd kick on a tender spot. But, broadly speaking, there are only three classes.

Authors v. Publishers.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 22.

PUBLISHERS.		First Innings.	Second Innings.
1 W. Cutbush		c Croome, b Doyle	0
2 W. Farquharson		c Selincourt, b Doyle ...	0
3 R. Truslove		b Wodehouse	27
4 A. G. Agnew		b Wodehouse	82
5 A. C. Dene		b Thurston	60
6 L. E. G. Abney		b Wodehouse	19
7 W. Longman		b Wodehouse	5
8 S. S. Pawling		run out	0
9 E. Fagg		c Croome, b Thurston ...	8
10 F. J. Harvey Darton ...		st Croome, b Thurston...	24
11 H. H. Thomas		not out	5
		B 4, l-b 2, w 4, n-b , 10	B , l-b , w , n-b ,
		Total	Total

BOWLING ANALYSIS.		1st Innings.					2nd Innings.					
Name.	O.	M.	R.	W.	Wds.	N-b.	O.	M.	R.	W.	Wds.	N-b.
Doyle	13	4	38	2	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Selincourt	7	1	28	0	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Irwin	7	1	37	0	1	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Croome	9	1	23	0	2	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Wodehouse	20	3	75	4	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Thurston	4.3	0	16	3	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Scott	2	0	13	0	1	..	..	..	..	..	..	..

AUTHORS.		First Innings.	Second Innings.
1 R. B. J. Scott		b Thomas	24
2 A. Worsley		c Pawling, b Cutbush ...	75
3 A. C. M. Croome		c and b Thomas	0
4 P. G. Wodehouse		c Pawling, b Cutbush ...	60
5 Sir A. Conan Doyle		b Pawling	14
6 W. Livingstone Irwin ...		c Cutbush, b Pawling ...	6
7 E. Temple Thurston		c Dene, b Longman	10
8 Hugh de Selincourt		c and b Longman	7
9 Gunby Hadath		not out	5
10 G. C. Ives		not out	1
11 John Barnett		B 11, l-b 5, w , n-b , 16	B , l-b , w , n-b ,
		Total	Total

BOWLING ANALYSIS.		1st Innings.					2nd Innings.					
Name.	O.	M.	R.	W.	Wds.	N-b.	O.	M.	R.	W.	Wds.	N-b.
Longman	19	4	63	2	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Cutbush	10	2	39	2	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Abney	3	0	17	0	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Pawling	11	1	40	2	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Thomas	9	1	29	2	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Farquharson	4	1	14	0	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..

Umpires—Atfield and Whiteside.

Scorers—Storer and Attewell.

Drawn.

'NOW, TALKING ABOUT CRICKET'



After Dulwich, Wodehouse might have gone on to Oxford and won a Blue if his father's business hadn't collapsed, compelling him instead to seek gainful employment at the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, a shift that lasted from September 1900 to September 1902. If the work was a bore, he gained some satisfaction in turning out for the bank's rugby and cricket teams, and often returned to Dulwich to cheer on the school XIs. And, of course, he wrote: in his 'spare' time, avidly, and with growing assurance.

The final verdict on his cricketing accomplishment at Dulwich had been delivered in the July 1900 edition of the college magazine, The Alleynian: 'P.G. Wodehouse – A fast right-hand bowler with a good swing, though he does not use his head enough. As a bat he has very much improved, and he gets extraordinarily well to the pitch of the ball. Has wonderfully improved in the field, though rather hampered by his sight.'

The following piece, again for Public School Magazine, was written when Wodehouse was merely twenty, and yet he adopts the voice of a seasoned old buffer, a little akin to The Oldest Member of his later golfing stories, if lacking the Member's gimlet-eyed powers of analysis. In

other words, the style is done in jest: this narrator 'couldn't play cricket for nuts', but Wodehouse surely could.

(Indeed, come 1903 he would make his debut for the Authors cricket team founded by J.M. Barrie and known as 'The Allahakbarries', who played annual fixtures at Lord's against XIs made up of Actors, Publishers, etc. Wodehouse's teammates included Arthur Conan Doyle, whom he revered, and E.W. Hornung, Conan Doyle's brother-in-law and the creator of the 'gentleman thief' Arthur J. Raffles.)

In the days of yore, when these white hairs were brown – or was it black? At any rate, they were not white – and I was at school, it was always my custom, when Fate obliged me to walk to school with a casual acquaintance, to whom I could not unburden my soul of those profound thoughts which even then occupied my mind, to turn the struggling conversation to the relative merits of cricket and football.

'Do you like cricket better than footer?' was my formula. Now, though at the time, in order to save fruitless argument, I always agreed with my companion, and praised the game he praised, in the innermost depths of my sub-consciousness, cricket ranked a long way in front of all other forms of sport. I may be wrong. More than once in my career it has been represented to me that I couldn't play cricket for nuts. My captain said as much when I ran him out in *the* match of the season after he had made forty-nine and looked like stopping. A bowling acquaintance heartily endorsed his opinion on the occasion of my missing three catches off him in one over. This, however, I attribute to prejudice, for the man I missed ultimately reached his century, mainly off the deliveries of my bowling acquaintance. I pointed out to him that, had I accepted any one of the three chances, we should have missed seeing the prettiest century made on the ground that season; but he was one of those bowlers who sacrifice all that is beautiful in the game to mere wickets. A sordid practice.

Later on, the persistence with which my county ignored my claims to inclusion in the team, convinced me that I must leave cricket fame to others. True, I did figure, rather prominently, too, in one county match. It was at the Oval, Surrey *v.* Middlesex. How well I remember that occasion! Albert Trott was bowling (Bertie we used to call him); I forget who was batting. Suddenly the ball came soaring in my direction. I was not nervous. I put down the sandwich I was eating, rose from my seat, picked the ball up neatly, and returned it with unerring aim to a fieldsman who was waiting for it with becoming deference. Thunders of applause went up from the crowded ring.

That was the highest point I ever reached in practical cricket. But, as the historian says of Mr Winkle, a man may be an excellent sportsman in theory, even if he fail in practice. That's me. Reader (if any), have you ever played cricket in the passage outside your study with a walking-stick and a ball of paper? That's the game, my boy, for testing your skill of wrist and eye. A century *v.* the M.C.C. is well enough in its way, but give me the man who can watch 'em in a narrow passage, lit only by a flickering gas-jet – one for every hit, four if it reaches the end, and six if it goes downstairs full-pitch, any pace bowling allowed. To make double figures in such a match is to taste life. Only you had better do your tasting when the Housemaster is out for the evening.

I like to watch the young cricket idea shooting. I refer to the lower games, where 'next man in' umpires with his pads on, his loins girt, and a bat in his hand. Many people have wondered why it is that no budding umpire can officiate unless he holds a bat. For my part, I think there is little foundation for the theory that it is part of a semi-religious rite, on the analogy of the Freemasons' special handshake and the like. Nor do I altogether agree with the authorities who allege that man, when standing up, needs something as a prop or support. There is a shadow of reason, I grant, in this

supposition, but after years of keen observation I am inclined to think that the umpire keeps his bat by him, firstly, in order that no unlicensed hand shall commandeer it unbeknownst, and secondly, so that he shall be ready to go in directly his predecessor is out. There is an ill-concealed restiveness about his movements, as he watches the batsmen getting set, that betrays an overwrought spirit. Then of a sudden one of them plays a ball on to his pad. ‘*’s that?*’ asks the bowler, with an overdone carelessness. ‘Clean out. Now *I’m* in,’ and already he is rushing up the middle of the pitch to take possession. When he gets to the wicket a short argument ensues. ‘Look here, you idiot, I hit it hard.’ ‘Rot, man, out of the way.’ ‘!?!?’ ‘Look here, Smith, *are* you going to dispute the umpire’s decision?’ Chorus of fieldsmen: ‘Get out, Smith, you ass. You’ve been given out years ago.’ Overwhelmed by popular execration, Smith reluctantly departs, registering in the black depths of his soul a resolution to take on the umpireship at once, with a view to gaining an artistic revenge by giving his enemy run out on the earliest possible occasion. There is a primeval *insouciance* about this sort of thing which is as refreshing to a mind jaded with the stiff formality of professional umpires as a cold shower-bath.

I have made a special study of last-wicket men; they are divided into two classes, the deplorably nervous, or the outrageously confident. The nervous largely outnumber the confident. The launching of a last-wicket man, when there are ten to make to win, or five minutes left to make a draw of a losing game, is fully as impressive a ceremony as the launching of the latest battleship. An interested crowd harasses the poor victim as he is putting on his pads. ‘Feel in a funk?’ asks some tactless friend. ‘N-n-no, norrabit.’ ‘That’s right,’ says the captain encouragingly, ‘bowling’s as easy as anything.’

This cheers the wretch up a little, until he remembers suddenly that the captain himself was distinctly at sea with the despised trundling, and succumbed to his second ball, about which he

obviously had no idea whatever. At this he breaks down utterly, and, if emotional, will sob into his batting glove. He is assisted down the pavilion steps, and reaches the wickets in a state of collapse. Here, very probably, a reaction will set in. The sight of the crease often comes as a positive relief after the vague terrors experienced in the pavilion.

The confident last-wicket man, on the other hand, goes forth to battle with a light quip upon his lips. The lot of a last-wicket batsman, with a good eye and a sense of humour, is a very enviable one. The incredulous disgust of the fast bowler, who thinks that at last he may safely try that slow head-ball of his, and finds it lifted genially over the leg-boundary, is well worth seeing. I remember in one school match, the last man, unfortunately on the opposite side, did this three times in one over, ultimately retiring to a fluky catch in the slips with forty-one to his name. Nervousness at cricket is a curious thing. As the author of *Willow the King*, himself a county cricketer, has said, it is not the fear of getting out that causes funk. It is a sort of intangible *je ne sais quoi*. I trust I make myself clear. Some batsmen are nervous all through a long innings. With others the feeling disappears with the first boundary.

A young lady – it is, of course, not polite to mention her age to the minute, but it ranged somewhere between eight and ten – was taken to see a cricket match once. After watching the game with interest for some time, she gave out this profound truth: ‘They all attend specially to one man.’ It would be difficult to sum up the causes of funk more lucidly and concisely. To be an object of interest is sometimes pleasant, but when ten fieldsmen, a bowler, two umpires, and countless spectators are eagerly watching your every movement, the thing becomes embarrassing.

That is why it is, on the whole, preferable to be a cricket spectator rather than a cricket player. No game affords the spectator such unique opportunities of exerting his critical talents. You may have

noticed that it is always the reporter who knows most about the game. Everyone, moreover, is at heart a critic, whether he represent the majesty of the Press or not. From the lady of Hoxton, who crushes her friend's latest confection with the words, 'My, wot an 'at!' down to that lowest class of all, the persons who call your attention (in print) to the sinister meaning of everything Clytemnestra says in *The Agamemnon*, the whole world enjoys expressing an opinion of its own about something.

In football you are vouchsafed fewer chances. Practically all you can do is to shout 'off-side' whenever an opponent scores, which affords but meagre employment for a really critical mind. In cricket, however, nothing can escape you. Everything must be done in full sight of everybody. There the players stand, without refuge, simply inviting criticism.

It is best, however, not to make one's remarks too loud. If you do, you call down upon yourself the attention of others, and are yourself criticised. I remember once, when I was of tender years, watching a school match, and one of the batsmen lifted a ball clean over the pavilion. This was too much for my sensitive and critical young mind. 'On the carpet, sir,' I shouted sternly, well up in the treble clef, 'keep 'em on the carpet.' I will draw a veil. Suffice it to say that I became a sport and derision, and was careful for the future to criticise in a whisper. But the reverse by no means crushed me. Even now I take a melancholy pleasure in watching school matches, and saying So-and-So will make quite a fair *school-boy* bat in time, but he must get rid of that stroke of his on the off, and that shocking leg-hit, and a few of those *awful* strokes in the slips, but that on the whole, he is by no means lacking in promise. I find it refreshing. If, however, you feel compelled not merely to look on, but to play, as one often does at schools where cricket is compulsory, it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of white boots. The game you play before you get white boots is not cricket,

but a weak imitation. The process of initiation is generally this. One plays in shoes for a few years with the most dire result, running away to square leg from fast balls, and so on, till despair seizes the soul. Then an angel in human form, in the very effective disguise of the man at the school boot-shop, hints that, for an absurdly small sum in cash, you may become the sole managing director of a pair of *white buckskin* boots with real spikes. You try them on. They fit, and the initiation is complete. You no longer run away from fast balls. You turn them neatly off to the boundary. In a word, you begin for the first time to play the game, the whole game, and nothing but the game.

There are misguided people who complain that cricket is becoming a business more than a game, as if that were not the most fortunate thing that could happen. When it ceases to be a mere business and becomes a religious ceremony, it will be a sign that the millennium is at hand. The person who regards cricket as anything less than a business is no fit companion, gentle reader, for the likes of you and me. As long as the game goes in his favour the cloven hoof may not show itself. But give him a good steady spell of leather-hunting, and you will know him for what he is, a mere *dilettante*, a dabbler, in a word, a worm, who ought never to be allowed to play at all. The worst of this species will sometimes take advantage of the fact that the game in which they happen to be playing is only a scratch game, upon the result of which no very great issues hang, to pollute the air they breathe with verbal, and the ground they stand on with physical, buffooneries. Many a time have I, and many a time have you, if you are what I take you for, shed tears of blood, at the sight of such. Careless returns, overthrows – but enough of a painful subject. Let us pass on.

I have always thought it a better fate for a man to be born a bowler than a bat. A batsman certainly gets a considerable amount of innocent fun by nicking good fast balls just off his wicket to

the ropes, and standing stolidly in front against slow leg-breaks. These things are good, and help one to sleep peacefully o' nights, and enjoy one's meals. But no batsman can experience that supreme emotion of 'something attempted, something done', which comes to a bowler when a ball pitches in a hole near point's feet, and whips into the leg stump. It is one crowded second of glorious life. Again, the words 'retired hurt' on the score-sheet are far more pleasant to the bowler than the batsman. The groan of a batsman when a loose ball hits him full pitch in the ribs is genuine. But the 'Awfully-sorry-old-chap-it-slipped' of the bowler is not. Half a loaf is better than no bread, as Mr Chamberlain might say, and if he cannot hit the wicket, he is perfectly contented with hitting the man. In my opinion, therefore, the bowler's lot, in spite of billiard table wickets, red marl, and such like inventions of a degenerate age, is the happier one.

And here, glowing with pride of originality at the thought that I have written of cricket without mentioning Alfred Mynn or Fuller Pilch, I heave a reminiscent sigh, blot my MS., and thrust my pen back into its sheath.

Actors v. Authors.

THURSDAY, JUNE 29.

AUTHORS.		First Innings.	Second Innings.
1 Sir A. Conan Doyle	b Warner	2	
2 P. G. Wodehouse, Esq.	b Smith	0	
3 Cecil Headlam, Esq.	b Smith	9	
4 J. C. Snaith, Esq.	c Denbigh, b O'Connor ..	17	
5 A. Kinross, Esq.	b Smith	5	
6 Horace Bleakley, Esq.	not out	54	
7 C. C. Hoyer Millar, Esq.	b Denbigh	3	
8 Major Philip Trevor	b Warner	44	
9 Leo Trevor, Esq.	b Warner	4	
10 E. W. Hornung, Esq.			
11 P. Graves, Esq.			
12 F. Stayton, Esq.			

[Innings closed.]

B 5, l-b 3, w 2, n-b 1, 11	B , l-b , w , n-b ,
Total .....149	Total

BOWLING ANALYSIS.		1st Innings.					2nd Innings.					
Name.	O.	M.	R.	W.	Wds.	N-b.	O.	M.	R.	W.	Wds.	N-b.
O'Connor	10	5	28	1	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Smith	11	1	39	3	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Warner	9	0	24	3	2	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Denbigh	7	0	23	1	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Evetts	3	0	10	0	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Asche	4	1	14	0	..	1	..	..	..	..	..	..

ACTORS.		First Innings.	Second Innings.
1 V. O'Connor, Esq.	not out	100	
2 H. B. Warner, Esq.	b Wodehouse	6	
3 Reeve Denbigh, Esq.	b Millar	21	
4 C. Aubrey Smith, Esq.	c Wodehouse, b Millar ..	9	
5 Gerald Du Maurier, Esq.	not out	13	
6 A. S. Homewood, Esq.			
7 Oscar Asche, Esq.			
8 Robert Evetts, Esq.			
9 P. F. Knox, Esq.			
10 H. Nye Chart, Esq.			
11 Kenneth Douglas, Esq.			
12 C. Hayden Coffin, Esq.			

B 3, l-b 3, w , n-b 1, 7	B , l-b , w , n-b ,
Total .....156	Total

BOWLING ANALYSIS.		1st Innings.					2nd Innings.					
Name.	O.	M.	R.	W.	Wds.	N-b.	O.	M.	R.	W.	Wds.	N-b.
Snaith	4	1	16	0	..	1	..	..	..	..	..	..
Doyle	8	1	45	0	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Wodehouse	10	0	58	1	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
Millar	6	0	30	2	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..

Umpires—Pougher and Brown.

Scorers—Martin and Atfield.

Actors won by 7 wickets and 7 runs.