

Women's Cricket - Raf Nicholson

Of all the bizarre ideas the cricketing authorities have come up with over the years, the ICC's new "nine-player rule" – in place during the current Women's World Cup in New Zealand – must be one of the strangest. As outlined in the tournament Playing Conditions:

"In exceptional circumstances a team may participate in a match with less than eleven players. However, in such circumstances there must be a minimum of nine players in each team that are eligible to participate for the team who are official squad members. In addition, in circumstances where there are less than eleven eligible players available to play in a team, a female member of the relevant team's management will be permitted to act as a substitute fielder(s)."

Cue collective bewilderment as teams tried to understand the implications. Could England coach Lisa Keightley, Australian by birth and passport, take to the field for Heather Knight's team? Under what circumstances might a team prefer to go ahead with a match with just 9 fit players, given that the ICC have also said that they are open to rescheduling fixtures? Of course Covid has created the need for flexibility, but there is surely a balance between trying to get the tournament on and making the whole thing a laughing stock.

Let's just hope that Covid doesn't rear its ugly head too high (although as I write, it has already hit the Australian camp, with Ash Gardner set to miss her team's opening two fixtures after returning a positive test on the eve of the tournament). It's been four and a half years since that remarkable day at Lord's in July 2017 when, in front of a sell-out crowd, England snatched victory from the jaws of defeat and beat India by a mere 9 runs. (Perhaps some Cricket Society members were there and have memories of their own? I would love to hear them.) As defending champions, England are expected to reach the final on 3 April. Unfortunately, the prediction I made in my last column came true, and they lost the Women's Ashes rather badly (4-12 on points); they will need to dust themselves off pretty quickly from that defeat if they are to stand any chance of retaining their title. And as we all know, anything can happen in a World Cup!

I'll be following from my sofa once again – the logistics of entering New Zealand as a freelancer, with the borders still not fully open, proved too much of a headache to contemplate – which means more sleepless nights (good thing I love my job!) Increasingly I find myself looking forward to the English season getting underway in April; it will be busier, but at least the hours will be friendlier...

On that note, we finally have confirmation of the international fixtures which will be played in summer 2022. I'm delighted that England Women will be hosting South Africa for a Test match – the first England v South Africa Women's Test since 2003 (!!!) It's scheduled for Taunton between 27 and 30 June, and we are hoping to have a Cricket Society Day at the Women's Cricket on one of those days (TBC), so keep an eye out for more information about that. I hope to meet some of you then.