



Daily Mail

Nasser Hussain insight: Former England captain takes on the Aussie bowling machine

By Nasser Hussain

Last updated at 11:31 PM on 26th October 2010

It is more than six years since I last picked up a bat in anger and here I am at Loughborough facing Mitchell Johnson, Ben Hilfenhaus, Steve Smith and even Graeme Swann before they do battle in Australia for the biggest prize in cricket.

I always said that, after scoring a century at Lord's to help win a Test against New Zealand in my final match in 2004, I would never play cricket again and, apart from taking part in one club friendly against my better judgment, I have stuck to my word. Until now.

Now I am being beaten outside off-stump time and again by the outswing of Hilfenhaus at the National Cricket Performance Centre and groping to locate my timing and strokeplay while struggling, at least initially, to see the ball at all. I guess the conclusion is that I will not be featuring in this year's Ashes.



Back in the swing: Nasser Hussain donned his pads for the first time in six years at the National Cricket Performance HQ, Loughborough University

This is not an unlikely comeback because of England's batting troubles last summer but my chance to try out Pro-Batter, the ECB's new £50,000 state-of-the-art bowling machine. It is derived from baseball and matches video footage of the bowler to the actual ball bowled at the time with the help of Hawk-Eye technology.

All it needs is an operator who can tweak length, line and the speed of the ball, which appears from a hole in the screen that coincides with the bowler's release point. We have got an Australian in Dene Hills, the ECB's outgoing lead batting coach, who helped devise Pro-Batter, to do the honours.

Hills says he has set Hilfenhaus to bowl at 78 miles per hour but he seems, at least to my 42-year-old eyes, to be bowling faster. Smith, the young leg-spinner, is said to be bowling at 54 mph but to me it is like facing a medium-pacer, reminding me more of Mark Ealham, rather than Shane Warne.



Line of fire: Hussain faced the likes of Mitchell Johnson, Ben Hilfenhaus, Steve Smith and even Graeme Swann

When Swann comes on I remind myself how much he now spins the ball and play for considerable turn but the ball passes harmlessly past my outside edge as it barely turns at all off the indoor surface. I would imagine Swanny might have had a few words with me, too, if I played and missed at him but his image stays silent.

It is only when Johnson comes on and starts bowling inswingers — not that he swung the ball much at all in England last year — that I start feeling a bit more comfortable and begin to enjoy this unusual experience.

'He's not blaming his tools, is he?' says Hills with a smile when I change my bat in a desperate attempt to relocate my missing form, proving conclusively that Aussie sledging is not what it used to be...

This, you would imagine, has been the perfect way for the England batsmen to face a virtual Australian attack in their build-up to the Ashes and, together with the spin bowling machines Merlin and Trackman, should have given Andrew Strauss's team every opportunity to prepare as thoroughly as possible for the challenges ahead.

Or has it been? There is no doubt that this development, which included placing cameras in sightscreens last year to secretly film the Aussies in action, is mightily impressive, especially for an old pro like me, who was able to see the best bowlers of today running in at me from what seems less than 22 yards.

But I must confess I have a few reservations as to whether, at this stage, Pro-Batter is really any better than the old bowling machines that I found such a useful practice tool in my day.

For a start it should be made clear that Pro-Batter is not the finished article and Hills pointed out that a lot more work will be done to refine it over the next year or so.

I know that my eyes and reflexes are not what they were but it is hard to pick the ball up. A red ball comes out of a black hole and, for an all-important split second, it is difficult to see what is coming at you. There is no sightscreen nor white background for the batsman to work with.



Finding his feet: Nasser initially struggled to even see the ball coming from the black hole in the screen

With the old bowling machines the operator's arm would come down so you had more of an accurate idea about the actual point of delivery.

Secondly, each ball comes out at exactly the same height — whether supposedly from a tall bowler like Curtly Ambrose or a slinging one like Lasith Malinga — so you have no sense of the trajectory or the angles of each specific bowler. And you can't set Pro-Batter to bowl wide of the crease, as I would always set up a bowling machine before facing someone like South Africa's Makhaya Ntini.

My concerns would be that Pro-Batter might actually damage confidence because it could prove trickier than facing these same bowlers in the middle in the heat of the battle at Brisbane.

Having said that, visualisation is a key part of a batsman's preparation and this is certainly an improvement on watching videos of the Aussies the night before a Test or standing in the middle half an hour before the start of play and visualising a bowler running in at you. Here they actually do it.



Tough old days: Hussain remembers particularly brutal nets sessions organised by Geoffrey Boycott in the early part of his career

When I became an England player in 1989, Geoff Boycott would conduct the most horrible net sessions at Headingley ahead of our tour of the West Indies, getting young bowlers to hurl it at us from 15 yards to try to take our heads off.

And I have to say that when I actually faced my first ball in Test cricket, a bouncer from Patrick Patterson, it didn't seem quite so bad after what Geoffrey had put me through. So maybe Pro-Batter can be an exercise in reverse psychology and make the Australian bowlers seem more fearsome than they are.

I would have dearly loved to have asked Hills to crank Pro-Batter up to 95 miles per hour so that I could honestly say, as a commentator in Australia, I knew what it was like to face Johnson and Co at their best.

Sadly my body - and probably health and safety regulations - just would not let me do that now so I cannot truly say that I enjoyed strapping on the pads again and having a go.

But Pro-Batter is an amazing toy and one I hope that Strauss and the other England batsmen have been using wisely before their big adventure.